

La Bahia plan falters

Hotel and Boarding Houses

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■ **Santa Cruz:** Doubts raised about turning vintage hotel into beachfront conference center.

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Hopes of turning Santa Cruz's classic but crumbling La Bahia apartments into a beachfront hotel conference center dimmed Tuesday as city officials voiced grave doubts about the plan.

While the city council, acting as the redevelop-

ment agency, voted unanimously to continue talks with a developer, a new slow-growth majority left the project's future uncertain after expressing concerns about traffic.

"I'm convinced it really will transform this area," Mayor Katherine Beiers said. "I'm not sure we're ready for that.

"What Santa Cruz has done in the last five

years is grow like mad. I'm just not that excited about changing the whole beach area."

City officials have been discussing the possibility of bringing a hotel conference center to Santa Cruz for more than seven years. Plans call for a 250-room, 200,000 square-foot project.

Supporters say it could bring year-round commerce to Santa Cruz's seasonal beach district, boosting the local economy by millions.

City-sponsored studies have indicated such a project could tap the corporate and high-

tech conference market from Silicon Valley and beyond. They pegged the Roaring '20s-era La Bahia, with its distinctive Spanish Mediterranean architecture, ocean views and beach access, as the ideal site.

The proposal, wrapped into last year's ambitious plan to redevelop the entire beach district, was among the few commercial elements to survive in the trimmed-down version ultimately approved under heated community protest.

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Council raises doubts about conference center

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Voter outrage over that plan later swept a slow-growth majority onto the city council, and that voting bloc made its reservations clear Tuesday.

"Do we really want year-round tourism?" asked Councilman Christopher Krohn, who was elected in November. "The council really needs to think about that."

Such comments brought bitter responses from council members who support the conference center plan.

"I think the soul of the whole progressive movement is at stake," Councilman Mike Rotkin said. "Are we going to be an elitist, slow-

growth town?"

Today, the 45-room La Bahia serves as living quarters for the Boardwalk amusement park's summer employees and as low-cost housing during the off-season.

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