

LOCAL

Backers unveil SC plaza plan

Pacific Ave
 Owner again affirms that downtown parcel is not for sale

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SANTA CRUZ — A new-look downtown plaza at the vacant lot on Pacific Avenue and Church Street was unveiled at Tuesday's City Council meeting, but the property owner again reaffirmed his unwillingness to sell.

From an architect's rendering, the plaza could include a small retail/cafe operation in a two-story structure at one end, palm trees, small bandstand used by permit only, lighting and a public bathroom.

Supporters presented their plan to the council and residents in the packed Council Chamber, with colored drawings and a slide show.

Bruce Bratton, a columnist for Metro Santa Cruz, and a leading supporter of a downtown plaza, said the time is now and an "unwilling seller" shouldn't deter the council from pre-

serving this last area of downtown's heart as a public place.

But in a Tuesday letter to the City Council from Louis Rittenhouse, who owns the property with other family members, said he won't sell and will soon present a plan to the city Planning Department.

"Speaking for myself as well as the other members of the Rittenhouse family," he said. "We wish to be crystal clear. The property has great historic significance to our family and is not, and will not be for sale."

Regardless, there are some members of the council who support a plaza at that site. Councilman Keith Sugar was impressed with the newest drawing.

"It's wonderful," Sugar said. "I'm very impressed by this concept and if it's not enough to get people excited about this, I don't know what

is."

Because Rittenhouse would be unwilling to sell, the city could attempt to take it by a legal process called eminent domain, where a government can take property if it is for a public good. A park would be such a public good.

However, even if there were a majority — four votes — on council who wanted the Rittenhouse property, it would take five votes under state law to take it by eminent domain — which doesn't seem likely.

By 10 p.m., residents were still talking and the council had made no decisions about pursuing the idea. Other property acquisition possibilities before the council included buying more property on either side of the city's old depot site, including Lighthouse Liquors and a parking lot at Pacific Avenue across the street from the Municipal Wharf.

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 The 21,000-square-foot liquor store parcel and the 14,767-square-foot parking area would allow the city to add a natural history museum and a larger park area to the six-acre depot site. Owners of the liquor store property have told the city they would sell, but owners of the nearby parking area, formerly the Fun Spot, have other plans to develop a hotel/condominium.

The majority of speakers said they favored the council buying property that would help connect Neary Lagoon Park and the future depot park and transportation area.

Regardless of which project people liked, the common theme the council heard is buy, buy, buy, buy.

It's not clear how much money the city can actually spend, but the council can use a \$4.4 million Public Trust Fund at its own discretion.