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SC City Council Nearly Forecloses On Old Town Clock

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The Santa Cruz City Council Tuesday came within a tick of foreclosing on the Old Town Clock at the head of the Pacific Avenue Garden Mall.

Then someone asked what would the city do with the timepiece and structure if it were snatched away from the Town Clock Committee.

And now the Town Clock Committee headed by Robert Darrow will be allowed to go ahead and complete the project while trying to raise enough money to pay off the sort of mortgage owed the city.

What happened Tuesday is that Darrow came to the council to ask its approval of the color and design of brick tiles that will be placed on the structure to honor major donors. Darrow also sought approval of the order in which the tiles will be installed and approval of a volume entitled "Record Your Roots" to provide a permanent historical record of contributors.

Darrow got all that, but not before the financing of the project as a whole came under close scrutiny and many-worded analysis by various council members.

With Councilman Bert Muhly banging away on the theme of a \$50,000 loan from the city that has to be repaid, it was suggested by several council members that the project should perhaps be put under the public works department and be finished.

Darrow, the man who organized the project and got the work and financial support of hundreds who saw in it as ideal Bicentennial Year memento, was equal to the threat of foreclosure.

"I will be very happy to turn the clock project over to the city at any time," Darrow said.

The talk of foreclosure came with the project nearing completion after more than a year and a half of work by volunteers to restore the historic clock and get it mounted over the Morris Memorial Fountain.

An electric winder will be installed soon in the clock, according to a report by Darrow. This will allow the clock to operate automatically and to use its loud bell to strike the hours.

The council in general was irked, however, that Darrow may have to spend some money on the tiles if he cannot get them made and lettered appropriately for installation to honor the big donors to the project.

Councilman John Mahaney said after Darrow had discussed the tiles: "I feel we have to put a stop to the growing costs. I don't want to keep coming back and allotting more money for this."

Darrow reported: "I don't spend money unless it is committed or in hand."

Muhly pointed out that the city had loaned \$50,000 for the project and had donated \$15,000 more in cash or in services.

Mayor Joseph Ghio said: "We elected to go ahead with this project. But nothing like this happens elsewhere in the city, we don't give money to other independent groups. I think the time has come to put this under the control of the city."

Darrow replied that in that case "the sooner the better. Technically, at that point our job is done."

Councilwoman Carole DePalma backed the concept of a city takeover to finish the job.

But the foreclosure proceedings screeched to a halt a couple of minutes later when the subject of city liability for the project was raised.

City Attorney Rod Atchison said that the Town Clock Committee was allowed as a private group to construct a town clock on city property. Because the clock is a private project, the city has no liability, Atchison said. He said the council has the power to take the structure and to take control of the project.

But, he said, if that is done the city's position on liability might not be sound.

Muhly almost pleaded with Darrow to give some assurance the city will get its money back, that it will not be obligated to "eat" its \$50,000.

Darrow said every effort is being made by the committee to raise money and he got back to the tiles, predicting that when they start going onto the clock structure to honor donors others will be encouraged to contribute.

Muhly finally said Darrow must have donated \$30,000 worth of time to coordinate the project and that he would rather Darrow continue with the project, but under restraints.

So Darrow remains head of the project, the Old Town Clock will be ringing the hours pretty soon just as it did in the waning moments of the 19th Century, and maybe a few kind souls will save it from foreclosure by sending a contribution to the Town Clock Project, the City Finance Office, 809 Center St.

The committee has collected \$45,514 of its \$60,000 goal.

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