

Downtown residents plan cohousing condos

Condominiums
Walnut Commons owners
looking for the very neighborly

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — The creators of a new and unusual downtown condominium project have only the very neighborly in mind.

The co-owners of Walnut Commons aren't looking for neighbors interested in just borrowing a cup of sugar or waving "hello" as they pull out of their driveways.

Walnut Commons is a proposed cohousing community that would include 19-21 private units in a three-story, green-certified building centered around a common living space, where neighbors would gather regularly for communal dinners, lectures, children's activities and other programs. Professionals, artists, seniors and children are welcome.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

SEE COHOUSING ON A2 Among those who hope to make the Walnut Commons Cohousing project a reality are, from left, Lex Flint, Jeff Major, Sandy Lansdale, Lee Slaff and John Kane.

COHOUSING

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"We have the vision of what we want to do," said Jeff Major, project manager for the group's financial partner and architect, Barry Swenson Builder. "You get community when you want it, but privacy, too. This allows people to pool their resources."

The private units, to be designed by the individual owners, would have amenities expected in a condo — kitchen, bedroom, bathroom and living space. But for the price of a regular condo — about \$400,000 on average — owners would also stretch their housing dollar by getting access to at least 3,000 square feet of joint-use space for cooking, dining, gardening and accommodating overnight guests.

"This is much more affordable housing," said downtown

resident Sandy Lansdale, an administrative assistant at Pacific Collegiate School and one of the project's owners. "Buying a house by myself was a lonely option. Here, I have my own place and at the same time, I'm in an intentional community that helps each other out."

Walnut Commons owners and Barry Swenson Builder will host a presentation and slide show for prospective buyers at 7 p.m. Sept. 14 at the Museum of Art and History. The guest speaker will be Charles Durrett, a California architect who has been involved in more than 50 cohousing projects in the San Francisco Bay Area, Colorado and elsewhere.

Cohousing, a concept that dates back 20 years to the first such community in Davis, is similar to traditional condo communities, except they are designed by residents by reaching consensus on overall

format and operation. Rather than having a typical homeowners association manage the property, residents work together to handle maintenance and other issues.

There is another cohousing community in Santa Cruz, called Coyote Crossing. The 16-unit neighborhood situated on Western Drive opened in 1998.

The buyers and Barry Swenson closed escrow in July on two parcels at Walnut Avenue and Center Street that comprise 14,000 square feet. They bought the property for nearly \$900,000 from 207 Church Street LLC, the group made up of Cruzio, Ecology Action and Joe Appenrodt, who bought and renovated the nearby Sentinel Building.

For now, Walnut Commons owners are leasing part of the property to the city as a lot for its parking operations. They would like to identify own-

ers for at least half the units before proceeding with building, which must be approved by the city.

The city's planning department has discussed the idea with the owners, but can't formally evaluate the proposal until an application to build is submitted, Planning Director Juliana Rebagliati said. However, she said the plans seem to address the city's mission to create different kinds of housing options in the urban core.

"It's an interesting product that we don't have downtown," she said.

One of Walnut Commons participants, Lex Flint, a freelance Web designer, said he lived in a similar community in Redwood City and was interested in the idea of creating a neighborhood that would exist right outside his front door.

"I like the idea of starting from scratch," he said.