

# Toll House plans bog down

Felton-1990  
County planners balk at adding up to 14 cabins

By KAREN CLARK  
Sentinel staff writer

FELTON — The historic Toll Road Collection House building on the southern fringe of Felton has been remaking itself for the past 128 years.

Owner Larry Noon hopes the old site can manage one more reincarnation.

"We know we can put some kind of commercial use in it, but we don't know if it's enough to support the money we'll have to borrow to do it," said Noon, who bought what's now known as the Toll House Resort with his brother, Trey, just before the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Noon is finding the going tough, however, in large part because of county planning regulations that may restrict what he can do with the site.

"The problems all along centered on the uses for the whole site, but the Planning Department finally loosened up on the building itself, but has not loosened up on the site itself," said Terri Fisher, chairwoman of the county Historic Resources Commission.

The Toll House building at 4700 Highway 9 is part of a nine-acre resort area that includes a handful of cabins, a two-story duplex, bathhouse and campsites. Noon would like to turn the area into a rustic bed and breakfast.

County officials now appear ready to accept Noon's plan to turn the Toll House building into a cafe/wine-tasting room, but they are not as eager to allow him to build as many as 14 cabins on the site.

"It's been frustrating," said Noon, who, like his brother, is a San Jose city firefighter. "But it's getting better."

The Toll House was built in 1867 to collect tolls to help maintain the newly completed Felton Road (now Highway 9). The toll was reasonable for man and beast alike: 15 cents each way for one horse and carriage; 10 cents each way for saddle animals; and 6½ cents each way for loose animals.

According to Susan Collins Lehmann, a historical resources consultant in Santa Cruz, by the early 1880s there no longer was a need to charge travelers, and the Toll House became a saloon and brothel.

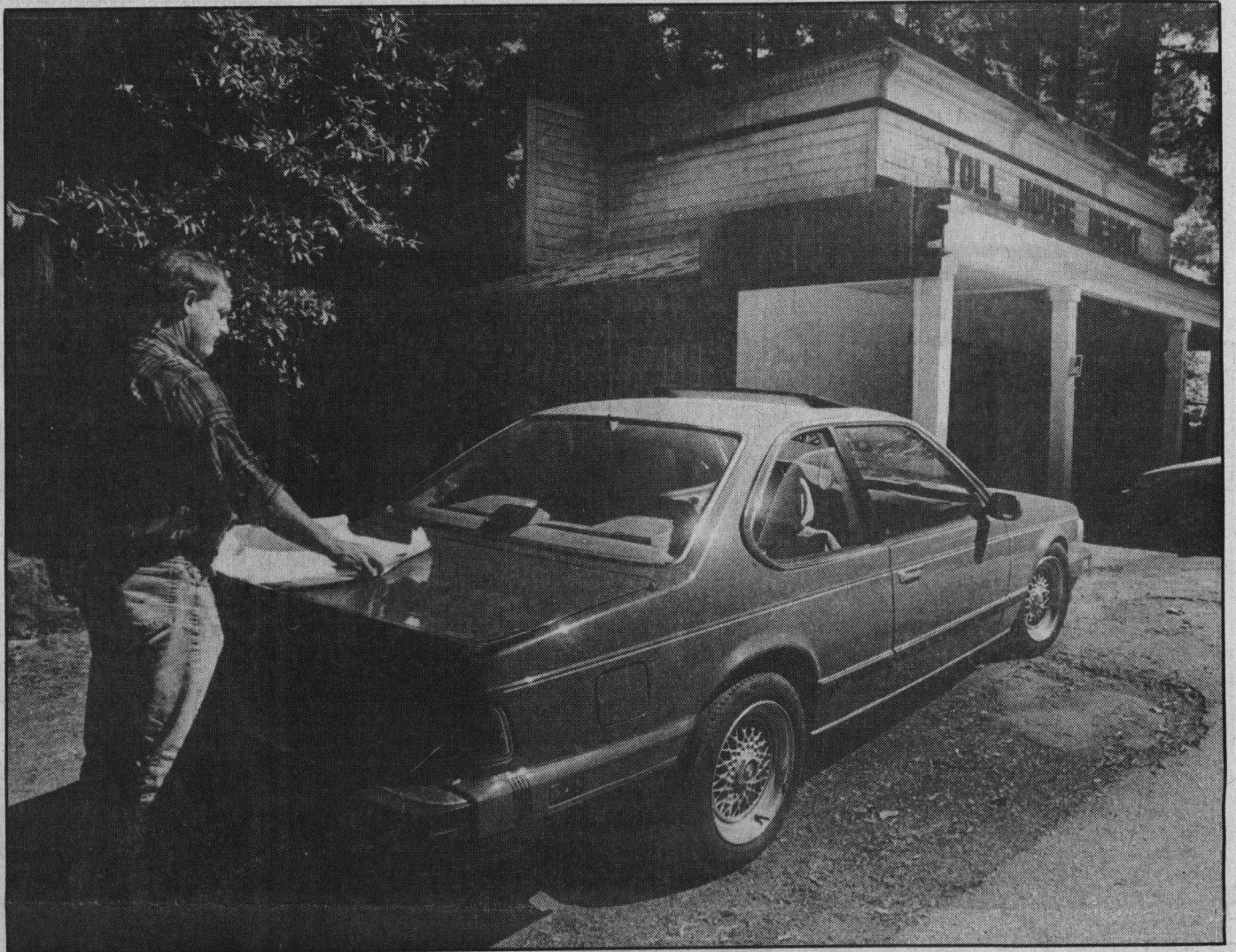
"The rent (\$25 a year) included everything needed to run a bar, including whiskey glasses, spittoons, trays, shakers and a cribbage board," Lehmann wrote in a history of the site she prepared in 1992.

By the 1920s, the building housed both a saloon and a restaurant. Then, because of the increasing tourist trade in the San Lorenzo Valley, the Toll House Resort was born.

"The resort boasted nine small cabins that were rented to summer tourists," said Lehmann. "Prohibition brought an end to the bar part of the business, but, according to local residents, Toll House became a well-known drop-off point for illegal liquor brought up the highway from the docks of Santa Cruz."

The resort continued to operate until the 1989 earthquake, which damaged the cabins. The Noons have sunk nearly \$1 million into the property, including their effort to restore and rebuild the cabins.

The Toll House building itself remains virtually unchanged from the day it was built, and continues to be one of the first structures visitors see as they drive north on Highway 9 into Felton.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Toll House Resort owner Larry Noon looks over plans for restoring the Highway 9 resort.



The building has been a toll house, brothel, saloon and drop-off point for illegal liquor.

In fact, the gateway building has been designated a historical point of interest by the state Historic Preservation Commission. It also is on the Santa Cruz County register of historic buildings.

"I grew up on the East Coast and got a lot of Virginia history," said Larry Noon, a native of Arlington. "That's what they wean you on there."

Noon's interest in history extends to the whole town of Felton, which he believes could do more to accentuate its roots. "You need this town to be an old historic town that's tourist oriented."

The county Historic Resources Commission is supporting Noon's restoration not only the Toll House building, but also the entire resort area.

"We believe it's a continued historic use," said Fisher. "It only stopped because of the earthquake. ... At this point, he should be able to continue the historic use," including the cabins.

Don Bussey, a county project manager who staffs the commission, said restoration is going to be costly, which is one reason the Noons want to restore as much of the site as possible.

"I wish that the economy was stronger so money was available ... to put together something to save the building," said Bussey.

Noon estimated it will cost as much as \$500,000 to restore the Toll House building. He hopes to restore the historic facade, build decks and put a wine-tasting room in the basement to show-

case vintages produced in Santa Cruz County. The old toll booth will be recreated.

"I really do feel like at this point they (county officials) are trying to work with us and they really do want it saved," said Noon about the building. "Anytime you have an institution or a bureaucracy and they're caught between a rock and a hard place ... somebody has to make a decision."

Just saving the building, however, isn't enough, said Noon, who needs the income from the cabins to help support the project.

"There's a lot of problems with the property and I think they figured no one was crazy enough to try to save the place," said Noon. "Then I showed up."

The county Historic Resources panel supports restoring the entire resort area.