



Political Notebook: Castro housing projects limp along

by **Matthew S. Bajko**

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What had looked like a rush to build new Castro housing projects along upper Market Street three years ago has instead turned into a waiting game to see when the economy will rebound and financing for projects can be secured.

As developers with approved proposals scramble to find investors, others continue to work their way through the city's laborious planning process to gain needed approvals. A controversial new mixed-use housing and retail development slated for the 76 gas station below the Mint building will go before planning commissioners today (Thursday, April 16).

The project, being pushed by local developer **Brian Spiers**, would replace the service station with an 85-foot-tall mixed-use building totaling approximately 146,800 square feet. The plan calls for 115 condominium units, 83 off-street parking spaces located in a below-grade garage, and three ground-floor commercial spaces totaling 8,150 square feet.

Spiers has been working on his plans for the corner lot for the past three years. He has faced opposition from the get-go from Mint Hill residents who live in apartments above the lot and complain about lost views and the size of the development.

In order to appease his neighbors, Spiers dropped his parking request from 75 percent to 63 percent; wants to increase car share spots from one to six; and plans to build the required 17 affordable units on site.

"We have done some considerable changes to it," he said of the design. "I am hopefully optimistic after three years of working on this building, I will be able to move forward."

Design blog Socketsite posted architectural renderings of the project by the firm Arquitectonica over the weekend, and many commentators hailed it as "bold" and "a really nice start to a solid, modern building."

But reaction has been harsh from some quarters. On his District 5 Diary blog, **Rob Anderson** called the building a "monstrosity" that "is higher and glaringly incompatible with everything behind it, i.e., old

Victorian houses and apartment buildings in Edwardian/deco styles."

One online commentator likened the glass-encased apartments to "new fangled prison cells stacked on top of each other."

Neighbors are appealing the planning department's finding that the building would have no negative impacts on the area and doesn't need an environmental impact report.

Bill Rusconi, 65, owns a home inside the 12-unit building located on top of the hill behind the site. The retired violinist with San Francisco Opera fears the new construction would block his views and sunlight.

"It would block our direct light. Our units are warmed by the sun now. We would be living in a very dark, cold environment," said the openly gay Rusconi. "We would also be losing some privacy as the development as proposed comes within a few feet of at least half of the windows in our building."

While they favor seeing housing built on the site, the neighbors object to the project being granted rear-yard, useable open space and exposure variances.

"We are not against creation of new housing in San Francisco. We recognize the value of this site for that purpose," stressed Rusconi. "We just think the current design presented is inappropriate because of the impact on an historic neighborhood and the immediate existing neighbors."

Both sides will be out in force at the commission's meeting, which begins at 1:30 p.m. in Room 400 in City Hall. As of now, the project is the last item on the agenda.

Should Spiers receive the signoffs he needs, he said it would another year or more until construction could begin. And even then, it would depend on if he can secure the funds necessary to build the project.

"The financing is not on board yet. We all know the financial markets are in flux right now, so it would depend on that," said Spiers, who added that also unresolved is whether the condos will be for sale or for rent.

Financing issues have already delayed the start of a mixed-use apartment building set to go in next door to the LGBT Community Center a block north of Spier's project. Further south along Market Street at Sanchez and 15th streets, the project slated to replace the building housing a Thai restaurant has also been postponed due to fiscal reasons.

According to architect **Reza Khoshnevisan**, with Sia Consulting, the owner of the site, **Leticia Luna**, is struggling to come up with the \$300,000 needed to pay community development fees prior to securing final approval for the 22-unit building with underground parking and two ground-floor retail spaces.

"We have started the construction documents and the mechanical engineer is working on the plans. It is a matter of the owner's scrambling to come up with the funding," said Khoshnevisan.

The architects worked closely with the Duboce Triangle Neighborhood Association to fine-tune their design. A sticking point had been the 15th Street facade, but the two sides recently reached a compromise.

"That was a model of a partnership between the developer and the neighborhood. They worked with us

and were open to our suggestions," said DTNA President **Dennis Richards** .

Like several other upper Market neighborhood groups, DTNA is opposing Spier's project. While Richards said his group welcomes more housing being built, it objects to the design.

"It is more appropriate for South Beach. It just doesn't quite fit," he said.

Another long-stalled project off Market Street on Dolores Street has been caught up in arguments over the historical significance of two warehouse structures slated to be demolished in order to build a 40-foot-tall building with 47 residential units above an underground garage for 40 parking spaces.

A report issued April 1 by environmental review officer **Bill Wycko** determined that the plan "may have a significant effect" that requires an EIR to be completed. He also concluded that the two one-story garages are historic resources.

The 25 Dolores Street building was constructed in 1917 and the 35 Dolores Street building was constructed in 1918, states the report. While the 35 Dolores structure is not listed on any historical surveys, the 25 Dolores Street garage is found in the Unreinforced Masonry Building Survey and is eligible for local listing or designation under the California State Historical Resource Status Code.

"The proposed project's demolition of the 25 and 35 Dolores Street buildings would not be consistent with the secretary of interior's Standards and Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties. Given the buildings' status as historical resources, demolition of the buildings, as proposed, has the potential to cause a significant adverse affect to a historical architectural resource," concluded Wycko in his report.

Developer **Bill Lightner** said it is not economically feasible to save the current white with blue trim brick facades or incorporate them into the design of the new building.

"If you look at that block, what we proposed to do repairs the fabric of the neighborhood. Right now it is torn by two commercial buildings in the middle of a residential block," he said. "What is now an eyesore is going to disappear and blend into the neighborhood with a nice new project."

Lightner said he is in no hurry to begin construction. He has already spent the last two and half years working with the immediate neighbors to resolve their complaints with the project. He is hopeful that, by the fall, he will have a design ready to put forth to the public.

"We can afford to wait this one out. It is a matter of being patient," he said. "We will talk to others as soon as we have resolved the issues with our direct neighbors."

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Got a tip on LGBT politics? Call Matthew S. Bajko at (415) 861-5019 or e-mail <mailto:>.

