



# Castro housing projects inch forward

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Several housing projects slated for the Castro's upper Market Street area inched a bit closer to realization in recent weeks, but it will still be years before any new residents move into the buildings.

Initial construction work has begun for the building slated to rise next door to the LGBT Community Center but the developer has yet to secure financing to complete the project. Nearby, a developer won the backing of the city's Planning Commission last week to transform a vacant gas station into a modernistic apartment complex near the federal Mint building.

Yet it will be another 12 months before the design phase is completed, and a fight over parking spaces and opposition from next door homeowners could still derail the building from being built.

A third development slated to transform the now closed S&C Ford dealership at Market and Dolores streets into a multi-building apartment complex with a Whole Foods grocery store won the backing of Castro merchants this month. The developers hope to seek city approval sometime in the fall.

Closer to the heart of the Castro, developer Angus McCarthy has hired San Francisco-based architects Ian Birchall and Associates to design a building for 2299 Market Street, known as the "hole in the ground" lot. Located at the corner of Market, Noe, and 16th streets, the site has been vacant for nearly three decades ever since an arsonist set fire to the church that was once housed there.

This spring the design team began meeting with Castro neighborhood groups to present their plans for the five-story, 50-foot tall building. It will include 18 residential units, two ground-floor retail spaces and underground parking for 19 vehicles.

A rendering of the building appears to show an Apple store as one of the retail tenants, but those who have heard the design team's presentation said there was no indication given that a lease with the retailer had been signed.

William Duncanson, director of urban housing for Ian Birchall and Associates, did not return a call seeking comment this week.

Floating the idea of the computer giant moving into the Castro could be a shrewd move by McCarthy to

land backing from nearby residents and Supervisor Bevan Duffy. Initial negotiations to see a new home for the GLBT Historical Society included in McCarthy's building fell apart more than a year ago, souring some on the transformation of the vacant eyesore.

Duffy has long wanted to see an Apple store open in his district and had even pushed the Silicon Valley retailer to take over the vacant retail space where Tower Records once had a store kitty corner to McCarthy's site. Last month he said he had not seen the latest plans for the hole in the ground lot but was still pressing Apple to expand into the Castro.

Initial reaction to the design has not been kind. According to the Duboce Triangle Neighborhood Association newsletter, the proposal calls for using a mix of clear and channel glass, fiber-cement board and composite wood panels, with "vertically aligned bay windows, balconies, and trellises creat[ing] a repetitive pattern for the building."

Castro florist Gary Weiss, whose Ixia Fine Flowers is located nearby, described the design as "hideous," adding, "I don't like fake bays coming out from a smooth surface," though he said he would welcome seeing Apple open at the site.

J.D. Petras, owner of Café Flore across the street from the site, said the design is "basic" and that for such a prominent intersection "it should be stunning."

"I really want to have that be an art piece and something lovely to look at," said Petras.

DTNA President Dennis Richards said that he believed the architects have listened to the community's concerns and that the design "is getting a little bit more acceptable. It's not perfect."

While the project as currently proposed meets the city's design guidelines for that parcel, it by no means guarantees that it will receive approval from the planning department. Planning officials summarily dismissed a project slated to replace the Arco gas station at the corner of Castro and Market streets for not being worthy of such a high profile location.

#### Mint neighbor receives approval

Design concerns led the Planning Commission to initially delay its approval of the project slated to replace the now-closed 76 gas station at Market and Buchanan streets across from the Mint. But after architecture firm Arquitectonica tweaked its design, the commission, with just five members present, voted unanimously at its Thursday, June 4 meeting to sign off on the project.

The 85-foot-tall mixed-use U-shaped building totals approximately 146,800 square feet. The plan calls for 115 condominium units, 91 off-street parking spaces located in a below-grade garage, and three ground-floor commercial spaces totaling 8,150 square feet.

The architects increased the building's setbacks in the rear and added a light well on the Buchanan side in an effort to appease complaints from neighbors that the project would impose on their light and privacy. The facade on Buchanan was also given more detail to better match the verticality of the buildings next-door and now steps down in height toward Market Street.

While the changes mollified commissioners and neighborhood groups, they were still not enough for

homeowners living adjacent to the project, who once again asked the oversight panel to reject the proposal. They could opt to now appeal the commission's decision.

Brian Spiers, the developer of the site, said he tried to meet with neighbors over recent weeks to reach a compromise but to no avail.

"It was a real challenge to do this retool of the design while keeping the building's iconic design intact," he said at the hearing. "I as much as anybody else want a building we can be proud of at this corner."

John Rahaim, the city's openly gay planning director, said the building's backyard patio is a tradeoff that will benefit most of the adjacent neighbors. He told the commissioners that he felt the reworked design had addressed their concerns.

"We want to embrace contemporary design in the city," he said. "We don't want to design by committee. We were getting to that place where the building was becoming banal at one point."

In the end Spiers did win approval for his design but was unable to convince those commissioners present to allow him to include 14 more parking spaces than what is called for under the zoning guidelines for the lot. He argued that because access to the parking would be through elevators and not ramps it would act more as car storage than as a garage.

But several commissioners said they were unwilling to go beyond what city rules dictate in fear of setting a precedent on parking for other projects under the Market-Octavia Plan, since Spiers's project was the first to be heard under the newly adopted zoning guideline. He can still petition the commission to increase his parking allotment at a later date.

Following the vote Spiers wrote in an e-mail that, "The best case scenario would be to start some of the below grade work on approximately 12 months which is after all the structural drawings are done and approved."

As for the parking, he wrote that, "It may make it tougher to get the financing in place to start the project. That is why I stressed that it is really only car storage as all residential spaces are accessed by elevator."

He added that the parking is partly why he has had trouble securing financial backing to build the project.

"It is the hurdle of finding 58 buyers who will purchase without any ability to store their vehicle that are giving banks and investors uneasiness," he wrote. "I'm cautiously optimistic that I will be able to request the addition 14 spaces at a later date after planning and neighborhood groups look at the car storage ratios as other projects get approved."

### Other projects move forward

Initial work to begin laying the foundation of a mixed-use condominium project next door to the LGBT Community Center began last week. Workers are prepping the lot in hopes that developer Joe Cassidy can begin construction on the long awaited project this summer.

Approved three years ago and sold by the initial developer of the site, the project calls for constructing 113 rental units with a rooftop pool and spa at the site. Cassidy said this week he is hopeful he will soon have

the financing he needs to build out the project. In the meantime, he said workers will spend the next two months excavating and shoring up the lot.

"My fingers are crossed in a month the loan will be finalized. I just feel like it is the right time to start. I think things are getting better," he said. "I think high-rises are over in San Francisco. You are not going to see any high-rises for a long time.

"Buildings with 100 units or less, that is what will get built," added Cassidy. "You will see builders back in the neighborhoods. Market Street is going to be hot. There are a lot of projects planned."

One project moving along the pipeline is the Prado Group's Whole Foods and housing proposal. Dan Safier, a principal of the firm, told the Merchants of Upper Market and Castro at its June 4 meeting that there were only a few design issues left to work out with community groups prior to seeking city approval.

"We hope to get through those in the next month," he said.

Along with the national organic grocer, the project includes 80 residential units and separate garages for the residents and the grocery store. It won MUMC's backing last week.

One switch being looked at is moving the entrance to the store from along Market Street to the corner with Dolores. Another issue being addressed is the Dolores Street facade.

The developers hope to line up more local groups' support in the coming months and present before the Planning Commission this September. Construction could start next spring or early summer, with Whole Foods opening in the spring or summer of 2012 and the living quarters to follow thereafter.

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