

More high-density housing planned for SOFA

City Council to study proposal Monday that could benefit working families

by Bill D'Agostino

An in-the-works 52-unit apartment-building plan for low-income families could be as tall and as dense as 800 High St. in the South of Forest Area (SOFA) — but won't be as controversial as that

condominium complex, according to the project organizers.

In 2003, opponents to 800 High St. placed the proposal on the November ballot in an ultimately futile attempt to block construction of the

four-story project, which is mostly market-rate units, with a few in the affordable-housing bracket.

By contrast, all of the apartments in the new project, planned for 801-841 High St., would be subsidized and qualify as affordable housing.

"I don't expect a referendum," said Don Barr of the Community Housing Alliance, one of two nonprofits working on the new project.

Barr said he's already begun meeting with some of the leaders of the earlier opposition.

Asked if the new development would look like 800 High St., which some critics have dubbed "a row of Popsicles," Barr responded: "If it does, I think we'll be shot out of the water."

On Monday night, the City Council will hold a study session to re-

view the new project. The city is being asked to help finance it, possibly requiring \$3 million from its housing fund.

The apartment building would replace an electrical substation on Alma Street and Ole's Car Shop, on the corner of Homer Avenue. The city owns the substation's land, but would need to acquire the 20-year-

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Michael Mulady

Catching the wind

Mordechai Feinberg and his sons David and Yosef take advantage of the cool evening breeze at Greer Park Wednesday afternoon by casting their biplane kite into the air.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

It's not easy being green...

But renters of historic Baylands building want it to be environmentally correct

by Bill D'Agostino

If you add solar panels to a historic building, does it ruin its historical integrity?

That's one of many questions the leaders of the nonprofit Environmental Volunteers are grappling with as they work towards restoring Palo Alto's 65-year-old Sea Scout Building, located at the city's Baylands Nature Preserve.

"We'd like this to be a model project that combines historic renovation and green building," Environmental Volunteers Executive Director Allan Berkowitz said.

The nonprofit, which teaches schoolchildren about the environment, has raised \$1.67 million out of \$2.25 million needed to restore the unique boat-shaped building and

turn it into its "EcoCenter" headquarters, according to Berkowitz.

Another green-versus-historic design issue they're facing: "On the one hand, the windows have to replicate the original design," Berkowitz said. "On the other hand, we would like energy efficiency."

The group has yet to submit an application or even informal designs to the city, so city planners could only speak in the abstract about the project.

"The general principle of historic preservation is always the same regardless of what program you are following, like a green building," noted Dennis Backlund, the city's historic preservation planner. "That is that the character of the building

is preserved."

There are certain ideas that must be considered, Backlund added, such as, "Anything you add should be as inconspicuous as possible."

The nonprofit hopes to begin renovations in two years and relocate its headquarters to the Baylands building a year later.

The city is offering the group a free 30-year lease in exchange for the building's restoration and ongoing care. The structure has been vacant since 1991.

On Tuesday, July 18, the nonprofit is hosting a community meeting to present the project and gather ideas and concerns from the public. The get-together will be held from 7 to

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PEOPLE

Better than spell check

Palo Alto man triumphs at National Senior Spelling Bee

by Anabel Lee

During the 2006 National Senior Spelling Bee, Hal Prince seemed to heed the words Thomas Jefferson once spoke to his daughter: "Take care that you never spell a word wrong. Always before you write a word, consider how it is spelled, and, if you do not remember, turn to a dictionary."

Prince, however, had little use for the last bit of presidential advice since he had memorized the dictionary in preparation for the bee. He correctly spelled "piezometer" to win the championship title on June 17 in Cheyenne, Wyo. A piezometer is an instrument that is used for measuring the magnitude of pressure. Prince received \$100 for his spelling victory.

"I went page by page in the dictionary. It took quite a long time. I'd always do a little more and tell myself that I didn't have to finish the whole thing. Eventually I was far enough along that I could get to the end," said Prince, a 54-year-old software engineer.

Prince first learned of the senior spelling bee while surfing the Web one day last summer. Growing up in Atlanta he had never participated in spelling bees as a child, and the chance to finally be able to be in one sparked his interest. "I just looked at it and thought, 'You know, I could do that,'" he said.

The National Senior Spelling Bee, which is open to anyone 50 years old or older, except for previous winners, is sponsored by the AARP and was started 12 years ago by the organization's Wyoming chapter. AARP Wyoming director Rita Inoway said that the chapter "liked the idea of being sharp, and they thought a bee was a good way to do that."

According to Joanne Bowlby, the

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Upfront

Spelling

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organization's associate director for communications, only three states — Ohio, Oregon and Pennsylvania — hold a state senior bee.

Over the course of the nine months leading up to the bee, Prince submerged himself in 17,000 words, which he recorded onto 23 audiotapes. He stopped reading books, going to the movies, listening to the radio and attending his guitar lessons in order to make more time for studying. He would listen to his tapes for an hour or two each day for six months while commuting to and from work and exercising.

"I had my eye on the calendar all the time. I tried to finish with three months to spare so I could review," he said.

Prince even wrote himself a computer program that gave him the words in random order and kept track of the ones he missed so he could go back and pay particular attention to them.

"He was unusual. I don't think we've ever had a contestant like Mr. Prince who claimed to memorize the dictionary," said Inoway. "He was very intent on really knowing the words well. I think a lot of other people came on a much more casual basis."

Prince went into the bee brimming with confidence: "I felt like I was really, really well prepared so I basically thought that maybe someone else could be as well prepared as me, but probably not." He also practiced being very cautious and deliberate about speaking; he said it was important to go slowly and think carefully about each syl-

lable since the combination of being watched by an audience and the risk of misspeaking can cause spellers to flub their words.

This year, the bee drew 29 participants ranging in age from 52 to 86. The participants hailed from 15 states, from California to Pennsylvania, from Texas to Alaska.



Hal Prince

In the morning, an elimination round was held where contestants were given 100 words to spell on paper in four rounds of 25 words. Usually, the top 15 spellers get to advance to the final oral rounds in the afternoon,

but this year 16 made the cut due to a tie. During the oral portion, contestants can miss three words before being knocked out of the competition. Prince missed none.

Some of the words that pushed Prince's competitors to the sidelines were zucchetto (an ecclesiastic's skull-cap), komatik (an Eskimo dogsled), hamantaschen (a Yiddish pastry) and ayurveda (a form of traditional medicine practiced on the Indian subcontinent).

Prince remained undaunted throughout the 20 rounds of spelling.

"I knew all the words they asked me and the words they asked everyone else, except for souk," which was asked of another contestant. The trouble was that souk — a marketplace found in Muslim countries — has a second spelling, suq. Since the bee is not supposed to ask con-

testants to spell words with multiple spellings, Prince had ignored all such words when studying.

He added, "I didn't really think any of [the words] were all that hard. I knew there were tricky words lurking around, but the ones I got were pretty straightforward."

The longest word Prince had to spell was triskaidekaphobia, meaning an abnormal fear of the number 13.

"The commonality between the top three finishers is that they all have curious minds. They are people who just want to learn different things and try different things," said Bowlby.

Prince originally went to school to study musicology, a field that required him to learn some Romance languages, as well as Medieval Latin. He later switched to computer science.

Due to Prince's diverse background of knowledge, Inoway considered him to be among the finalists who "were familiar with a lot of the words because they had been involved in so many occupations."

She said that contestants who travel, enjoy certain hobbies and are educated in more than one discipline often have a leg up on the competition because they are exposed to a more extensive vocabulary.

When asked if he has any new challenges lined up for the near future, Prince said, "I don't have anything else in the wings right now." For the time being, the spelling-bee champ plans on reading books about odd vocabulary and the roots of words — and getting back into guitar. ■

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Housing

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old shop.

Owner Ole Christensen confirmed he was negotiating to sell his property, but offered few details.

"I don't know if the deal's ever going to happen," he said.

The project's leaders, from Eden Housing and the Community Housing Alliance, said they hope to take over the land in summer 2008 — when Christensen reportedly announced he would like to close the shop — and begin construction later that year.

The new housing project is also contingent upon Palo Alto consolidating the substation with one on Quarry Road, on Stanford University's land.

The city and Stanford are working on a new lease for the Quarry Road substation.

Such an agreement might allow the university to forgo required contributions to the city's stock of af-

fordable housing for its future developments, in lieu of having the city pay rent on the Quarry Road land.

"It has the same economic benefit to us," said Jean McCown, Stanford's Director of Community Relations.

The new housing project had originally been planned for seniors and only on the substation land. Last September, in an earlier study session, the council asked Eden Housing to refocus the project on working families. But to do so, the nonprofit needed additional land.

Enter the Community Housing Alliance, made up of five board members from the Community Working Group, which is constructing the Opportunity Center for homeless and at-risk people across the train tracks.

Talks then began with Christensen.

If all goes well, monthly rents for the apartments are expected to range from \$566 for a one-bedroom unit to \$910 for a three-bedroom unit.

One of the principals of the firm, Monty Anderson, was an intern for Birge Clark, who designed the Sea Scout building.

The Environmental Volunteers is currently located on East Bayshore Road. The new building would allow the group greater access to the public on a regular basis at the Baylands, Berkowitz said.

That could lead to partnerships

(The exact rents will depend on the family's income and the project's financing.)

Families will need to make 30 to 33 percent of the area's average income to qualify, calculated currently at approximately \$35,000 to \$40,000 per year. The units will be between 576 square feet for a one-bedroom unit and 1,100 square feet for the three-bedroom units.

The new project could face opposition from neighborhood activists who fear Palo Alto's recent growth in housing will overwhelm schools, parks and streets.

"My sense is," Barr argued, "we need the richness of the economic diversity as much as we need to protect our schools and parks." ■

Should the city welcome a dense yet affordable housing complex near downtown? Give your opinion about it on Town Square at www.PaloAltoOnline.com.

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with the city to offer educational tours of the nature area.

"The more people available to teach people about the importance of wetlands is a big help," City Naturalist Deborah Bartens said. "I'm going to wait and see how things progress." ■

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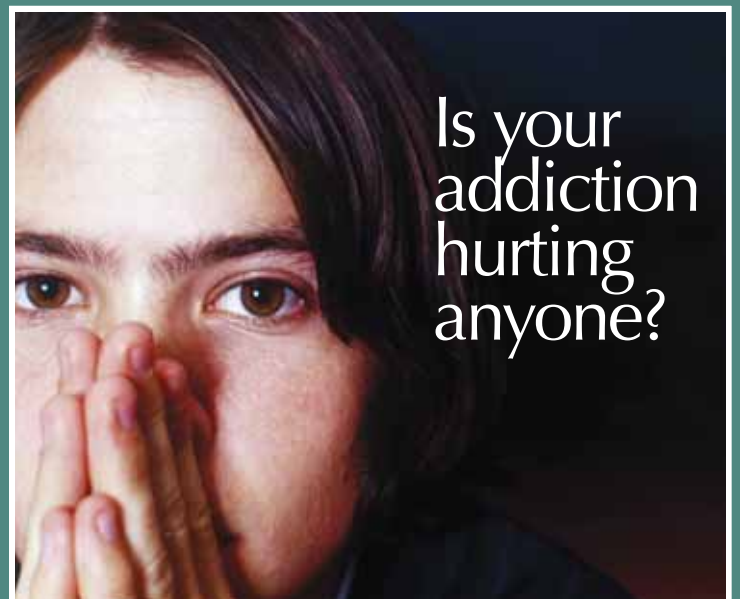
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