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Hahn mulls new offer from McCowans site developers

By Chris Yang

Following an outburst of community concern that had over 100 local residents show up at the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council (CSPNC) meeting on January 28, the prospective developer of the recently closed McCowans Market site is actively seeking a compromise.

On the heels of a meeting between owner/developer Michael Rosenthal and members of Council-woman Janice Hahn's staff, a new proposal has been floated that seeks to avoid any nasty legal entanglements. When contacted by Random Lengths News the following week, Rosenthal confirmed that he has pitched a new plan to Hahn's office that calls for a new project with no condominiums. Instead of three single-family homes and 18 condominiums that would be built on the six lots comprising the former market, Rosenthal indicated that he and developer Mike Popa would be willing to build a project made up of 12 homes.

"We're going from 21 units to 12 units," said Rosenthal. "That would be single family homes, two on each lot."

Rosenthal's original plan to build 18 condominiums and three single-family homes on the site was beset by overwhelming opposition from within the community. Hahn's office confirmed receiving approximately 150 letters and 100 emails and phone calls opposing any proposal to build condos on the Walker Avenue site.

More than 100 people attended a neighborhood council meeting last month seeking its help to fight Rosenthal's plan. The scenario was not an unfamiliar one: an out-of-town developer who seeks to turn a quick profit by building condominiums is met with unequivocal opposition within the community. One by one, residents filed into the room that night seeking the help of the CSPNC to halt the potential development of condominiums in their neighborhood.

Rosenthal, a resident of Los Alamitos, had done nothing to ingratiate himself to the community after closing the market, telling the *My Breeze*, "If it's 18 units, big deal." Since then, his public comments have changed to reflect an awareness of public opposition to the project. In a subsequent report, Rosenthal stated that he would "fight for a public park" to be built on the property. The key caveat was that the city of Los Angeles needed to purchase the property, first.

The CSPNC crowd though, wasn't buying it.

"It's just beyond me to think of condos at that spot," said local resident Rico Lauro. "If there's anything you folks can do to stop it, we would really appreciate it."

Another resident urged city officials to impose an obscure condition on the property that would legally prohibit Rosenthal from building 18 condominiums. "Let's have this Q-condition passed," said Charlie Pallares.

Short for "qualified condition," the restriction could potentially see Rosenthal's property revert back from its current C1-XL zoning designation to one allowing only low-density residential usage. The XL indicates the property has a 30-foot height limit.

Saying that he was "offended" and "hung out to dry" at the CSPNC meeting, Rosenthal, who did not attend the meeting, stressed that the new offer was prompted by frustration.

"We did hear what was said, and it was very derogatory," he said, "What people [need to] understand is we have a right to build what is zoned for that lot."

Currently, three of Rosenthal's six lots are zoned "C1" and may be converted to the equivalent of an R3 designation, which allows one dwelling unit per 800 square feet. The remaining three lots are zoned "R1," which allow one dwelling unit per 5,000 square feet. Any proposal to build two single-family units per lot would therefore require a zone change.

In the meantime, Hahn's office has requested the city's Planning Department to implement a Q-condition on the property, it will take us two to three months to get this enacted," said Hahn's Labor and Planning Director, Frank Hong, one of several Hahn staffers who attended the CSPNC meeting.

If enacted, the condition would prohibit the construction of 18 condominiums and become effective in two or three months. Rosenthal is aware of the city's plan and warned that the city may face litigation if it follows through with the maneuver.

"We have the right to build," he said. "The Q-condition I heard mentioned would take a very long time and the liability to the city would be huge."

As a result, Rosenthal's latest proposal is something of a quandary for Hahn. To date, her comments have indicated she believes this is the "wrong place for increased density." When asked about Rosenthal's latest proposal, her office issued a statement stating she "continues to support the neighbors in their effort to preserve the character of their neighborhood by building single family homes."

So, while the new plan would result in something that Hahn supports (single-family homes), it would result in "increased density" (more single-family homes than the current R1 zone allows) something she opposes. What remains yet to be seen is just how much liability Hahn may be willing to incur should Rosenthal's latest offer to build 12 homes not fly.