

Tuesday, July 6, 2004

Opinion

THESE are exciting times for downtown Oakland. A new development planned for the Uptown district will create a downtown everybody wants -- alive with retail, restaurants and entertainment. It will catalyze spin-off developments that could make Uptown a premiere destination throughout the Bay Area. Sound familiar?

Those optimistic statements weren't made about Forest City's current proposal for a mixed-use residential district in Uptown. Rather, they refer to former plans for Uptown. Some called for an entertainment complex, others a grand mall, and a baseball stadium. All lavishly proposed, all ultimately shelved. The market couldn't support them, or Oakland couldn't pay for them.

The most recent proposal for Uptown, however, deserves to succeed. Not because it will create a dazzling shopping mall or a retro ballpark, but because it will build a sustainable neighborhood.

The simple fact is Oakland, like every Bay Area city, needs more neighborhoods with housing that is affordable, relatively dense, and close to transit and jobs. This is what Uptown will provide.

On Tuesday, the City Council will vote on a deal for Forest City to build 700 apartments in low-rise buildings. Initial phases of the project will revitalize four blocks north of City Hall, between Telegraph and San Pablo avenues, with a new park and ground-floor retail.

As part of the agreement, Forest City plans to include green building elements that -- if realized -- promise to make apartments better for residents and the environment.

Is the plan perfect? No. But for five years, Forest City has been working with Oakland to create a realistic proposal. The original plan called for a gated residential community. The City Council rightly said no.

After determined negotiations, Forest City increased affordable housing from the original 20 percent; in addition, Uptown will include another 70 units of below-market apartments, to be developed by separate, affordable-housing developers. This is all good stuff.

But what really sets the current Uptown development apart is that it rejects the magic bullet theory of city planning. Instead of pouring public dollars into a

magic bullet theory of city planning. Instead of pouring public dollars into a destination spot that relies on out-of-town shoppers and visitors, this mixed-use plan invests in the local economy.

Residents will shop at stores that cater to local needs, parks will serve residents, and new retail will add activity to existing corridors.

It's true that Uptown relies on a significant public subsidy. Unfortunately, that is what it takes to develop in many cities. Revitalizing old neighborhoods often starts with cleaning up contaminated land, retrofitting old buildings and negotiating with multiple land owners.

Subsidies offset such expenses. And overall, they are a bargain compared to the social, environmental and economic costs of sprawl development, which is where most housing construction would otherwise go.

If the City Council approves Forest City's development and disposition agreement this week, the planning process will continue. Several community meetings have been held, and this dialogue should continue, particularly as designs become finalized.

More than 25 years of planning have been invested in Uptown. We believe Forest City's proposal should be approved -- not because it's the first one to get this far, but because it's the first that stands a good chance of being done right.

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