

**'Uptown' makeover may fail glitzy goal**  
**Residents fear for fate of Oakland's old buildings in plans to restore city's former affluence, vitality**

Monday, September 29, 2003  
By Cecily Burt  
Staff Writer

OAKLAND -- Oakland residents and city officials yearn for the glory days of "uptown" Oakland, when patrons flocked to the Fox and Paramount theaters at night, and crowded elbow to elbow in department stores such as I.Magnin, J.J. Newberry's and Capwells. No one will know for sure whether the planned Forest City development can restore a measure of vitality to the once-thriving uptown neighborhood until the project is finished and new residents move in.

The project's draft environmental report, released last week, reveals few new details and confirms a few key elements are still up in the air.

But some aspects of the report have alarmed project-watchers who worry about the fate of historic buildings and wonder whether the project will ever happen. Still others say despite the questions, the project has the potential to transform the neglected area.

Forest City's \$204 million uptown project is the centerpiece of Mayor Jerry Brown's plan to bring 10,000 new residents downtown, and the city has committed \$59 million in subsidies to make it happen. The proposed development is spread over several blocks between 18th and 21st streets and San Pablo and Telegraph avenues. It will add 1,000 apartments, 270 condominiums, a new city park, cafes and other retail space to the area over several years.

Forest City will build 770 of the apartments in low-rise buildings. Other developers are being sought to build a high-rise condominium tower on San Pablo Avenue and a 350-unit tower for college student housing on Telegraph Avenue. Two additional blocks are listed in the report as possible sites for relocating Sears Auto Center. One is a parking lot adjacent to the Paramount Theater at 20th Street and Telegraph. The other, listed as the preferred site, is the Quarter Pound Giant Burger restaurant at 22nd Street and Telegraph Avenue.

The environmental report identifies significant, unavoidable impacts in three areas: transportation, air quality and historic architectural resources. However, some of the affects won't be known until the exact size and design of the buildings are completed, said Claudia Cappio, city development director.

## **Backlash from businesses expected**

Aside from city subsidies and arguments over affordable housing within the project, the fate of historical resources and uprooting of businesses within the uptown development have the most potential for controversy.

The project area is dotted with older historic buildings. All save one -- the Great Western Power Company on 20th Street -- are slated for demolition. The Beaux Arts power company building, more recently known as Navlet's Florist and Nursery, was constructed in 1924 and represents the "City Beautiful" movement to beautify utilitarian structures.

It was designed by Ashley and Evers, the architects of the old Capwell's -- which became the Emporium and now is Sears -- and the Oakland Floral Depot. The report lists three potential outcomes for the building: complete demolition, partial demolition or preservation.

According to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), any new development must not detract from a historical resource. Cappio acknowledged the shape of the block and the historic structure pose challenges, especially since the developers plan to build high-rise student housing next door. Impacts to the building were listed as significant and unavoidable to make people aware of the worst-case scenario, she said.

"The plans are not developed enough to know what the impacts will be, so we're ready to call it significant and unavoidable," Cappio said. "In the event they need to take a driveway or come close to the building, it is identified. Taking it down is an option, but with CEQA, they would really have to demonstrate that they can't incorporate that building into the design in any other way."

That did little to appease preservationists who decry the wholesale demolition of potentially historic buildings and the bland designs that could replace them. "We are deeply disturbed at the suggestion that demolition of the historic Great Western power plant on 20th Street would be required for this massive project," said Naomi Schiff, vice president of Oakland Heritage Association (OHA). "We note that it has recently changed hands, that a new owner is interested in rehabilitating the building and wonder why it might be necessary to include or even consider any such demolition in the project."

## **Whimsical architecture**

OHA also wants to preserve several Victorian and Italianate store fronts on San Pablo Avenue near Thomas L. Berkley Way (20th Street). And although not nearly as old, the Giant Burger stand at 22nd Street and Telegraph Avenue, is a great example of a whimsical, post-World War II architectural style known as "Googie," Schiff said.

The city has purchased much of the uptown property, but some key parcels are under negotiation, including the Sears Auto Center and some businesses on 20th Street, the first block slated for development.

John Revelli, 63, owner of Revelli Tire and Auto on 20th Street, said his business will suffer if he has to move. He said his location is perfect, a block from BART and within walking distance of City Hall. His father bought the building in 1949, and Revelli has been working there full time since 1959, a one man operation

and Revelli has been working there full-time since 1959, a one-man operation since his uncle Charles died in 1972.

Revelli said he has built a loyal customer base by offering the kind of personal service chain stores don't. But location is the key, he said.

"I am in a very difficult situation," he said. "I am absolutely happy here, it's so perfect for me. I don't want to move, don't want to quit, I want to stay where I am." He said the city's first offer was not enough to allow him to move and start over. He suggested to the city that the new residents would need services like his, and asked if they couldn't build around him.

"It was like I didn't say anything at all," he said.

Despite the report's lack of detail about how the project will benefit the environment and further the city's goals of sustainable development, it has the potential to jump start development in an area that has resisted years of efforts, said **Diana Williams**, executive director of the nonprofit **Urban Ecology**.

### **Potential to be great project**

"I do feel like it's a little frustrating because we don't know what the buildings are going to look like," she said. "I do feel like this project has the potential to be a great project, even though the EIR is vague."

The environmental impact report requires the developer hire experts to come up with design solutions to reduce gusty, 36-plus mph winds that would be created by the two new towers.

The report also addressed the handling of contaminated soils, building materials and groundwater, which in some areas is contaminated with chlorinated solvents, metals, petroleum products and volatile hydrocarbons.

Some blocks have not been tested, but are expected to reveal the same results. A soil and groundwater management plan must be created before any grading, demolition or building permit is issued.

Several intersections in the area will experience increased traffic congestion once residents move in. The report outlines improvements, such as changing signal times and adding traffic lanes and turn lanes on some thoroughfares. But the intersection at West Grand Avenue and Frontage Road is an elevated roadway and would be too expensive to reconfigure, so it is listed as a significant, unavoidable impact.

Also more residents and more shoppers mean more cars and more auto emissions and negative impacts on air quality. Locating stores and housing at transit hubs will reduce it, but not nearly enough, so it is also listed as a significant, unavoidable impact.

A Forest City official said the comments would be reviewed and considered for their potential.

The Oakland Landmark Preservation Advisory Board is holding a public hearing on the project at 4 p.m. Oct. 6 in Hearing Room 1, City Hall. The Planning Commission will conduct a public hearing on the draft environmental report and zoning permits for the project at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 15, also in Hearing Room 1, City Hall. Comments on the report are due no later than 4 p.m. Nov. 2.

Hall. Comments on the report are due no later than 4 p.m. Nov. 3.

(c) 2003 The Oakland Tribune. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.