

La Bahia Reincarnate, An Overview

Note: Since this article was published the City's Historical Preservation Commission approved the project by a 4-2 vote

On Thursday, August 7th, the City of Santa Cruz Planning Commission voted 5-0 to recommend to the City Council that they certify the environmental impact report (EIR), and grant the permits required to begin development of a 165 room, full service hotel at the current site of the La Bahia Apartments on Beach Street. This is the third proposed development of this site since 2003, which was outlined in the City's Beach/South of Laurel Comprehensive Plan (BSOL) in 1998. While previous projects have differed in size, scope and uses, the major tenets of this project include the maintenance and restoration of the southeastern bell tower, a conference center, restaurant, floor level commercial space, a pool courtyard overlooking the ocean, and 210 on site parking spaces located underground. As proposed the project constitutes a 7.5% increase to the city's hotel stock, and would generate roughly \$1.4 million dollars in Transient Occupancy Taxes (TOT) annually. Additionally, the project will be required to pay substantial transportation impact fees to offset the projected traffic increases.

Comparison of La Bahia Project Proposals

	Current Proposed Project	2009 Project	2003 Approved Project
Project Size			
▪ Total Number of Rooms	165	125	118
▪ Total Square Footage	198,327 sf	177,040 sf	109,875 sf
▪ Parking Spaces	210 including 49 valet	195 including 62 valet	144 with valet
▪ Building Heights	36-42 ft.-Beach 43 ft.-First Street	32-35 ft.-Beach St. 68-70 ft.-First St.	38 ft.-Maximum 22-31 ft.-Beach St 29-35 ft.-First Street
Amenities			
▪ Meeting / Banquet Prefunction/Banquet Prep	4,350 sf 3,325 sf	5,353 sf	3,000 sf
▪ Restaurant(s) Kitchen	2,500 sf 2,300 sf	2,942 sf	No
▪ Day Spa	750 sf	1,125 sf	Yes
▪ Retail Space	2,500 sf	No	No
▪ Swimming Pool	Yes	Yes	Yes
Other			
▪ Units Sold as Commercial Condominiums	No	Yes	Yes
▪ Retention of Existing Buildings	Retain building with bell tower at southeast corner.	Demolish all buildings.	Retain all buildings, except for demolition of one building and partial demolition of another, both in rear of site.
▪ Development Agreement	Yes	Yes	Yes

A summary of the the previous two developments and their relative characteristics, compared to this iteration, is shown in the table (provided by the Planning Commission) below:

Unavoidable Impacts

A number of potential impacts were evaluated as part of the environmental analysis, however, it was found that only two impacts are considered unavoidable while still meeting the goals outlined in the project, and potential alternatives.¹ Through this analysis it was found that significant impacts on traffic flow and the historical characteristics of the building are unavoidable, though measures have been identified to lessen the degree to which these impacts will take effect.

In terms of traffic flow, while the project impacts on the surrounding intersections will be significant by increasing the total daily and peak hour trips, it will not impair these corridors to an extent that will cause them to perform at unacceptable Levels of Service (LOS), as specified by Caltrans. However, the project will further impair traffic flow at the major intersections of Bay and Mission Streets, and the Highway 1/9 intersection, although these intersections are already operating at an unacceptable LOS. To lessen the burden of these impacts, the project developer will be required to pay substantial transportation impact fees that will be put towards existing city projects aimed at addressing the problems faced at these intersections.

In terms of impacts to the historical characteristics of the building, the project will result in the demolition of most of the existing structures making up the La Bahia Apartments, which is considered an historical resource under CEQA. Under the evaluated alternatives in the EIR, various levels of restoration were considered, however, none were able to completely avoid substantial impacts to the historical characteristics of the facility, while not undermining core project goals, and suggested scope of development outlined in the BSOL plan. As stated by the developer, Craig French, during the Planning Commission meeting, “the loss of those apartments is a prerequisite for achieving what the community has said they want to see at this property.”

To address the loss of historical character, the developer will be required to document the existing building and architectural style through photography and written narrative, as specified under state law concerning historical documentation. Additionally, as recommended in the BSOL plan, the project has been designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival and Victorian Styles to maintain consistency with the historical character of the site.

Next the project will be heard before the City’s Historical Preservation Commission on August 13th. From there, it is scheduled to go to the City Council on September 9th. SCCBC will continue to monitor the progress of La Bahia and provide updates as appropriate.

¹ As specified in the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), proposed projects must be evaluated alongside alternative versions that attempt to mitigate potential project impacts.

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