

S.F. may allow taller buildings on Cesar Chavez

BY J.K. DINEEN

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The San Francisco Planning Department is considering rezoning a number of large Mission District parcels along Cesar Chavez Street to allow denser housing.

The plan came into focus this year as a less controversial alternative to raising height limits near BART stations along Mission Street. While the fate of the Mission Street parcels is still up in the air, momentum is growing for a "focus growth area" along Cesar Chavez between Mission and Guerrero streets. Properties that could be in play under the new zoning include the 2.5-acre Salvation Army property at 1500 Valencia St., which is bordered by Cesar Chavez and 26th St.; the McMillian Electric Co. warehouse and former Hollywood Video at 1515 and 1575 South Van Ness Ave.; and the parking lot behind the old Sears building at 3435 Cesar Chavez St. The properties are currently zoned for 55-foot buildings; new zoning would likely raise that to 85 feet or as high as 105 feet.

The possible upzoning comes at a time when St. Luke's Hospital, which sits in the center of all the parcels under consideration, is planning to build a new medical facility. Gillian Gillett, a Guerrero Street resident and transit-oriented housing advocate, argues that the new St. Luke's redevelopment should be planned in conjunction with the rezoning of adjacent land. All told, the possible development sites total 16 acres, Gillett said.

"We are not thinking big enough," said



Draconian fees and requirements will scare away potential builders, says Tom Rocca.

Gillett. "This is ground zero for transit-oriented development in San Francisco. This is where Mission, Noe, and Bernal meet, close to regional transit, and look at it — it's a disaster."

The evolution of Cesar Chavez, formerly known as Army Street, has been marred by poor planning and redevelopment efforts for 60 years. For decades the city worked toward replacing the street with a highway that was to lead to a second Bay bridge, the so-called "southern crossing." Between 1940 and 1956, to make way for the highway, the city demolished 147 buildings along San Jose and Cesar Chavez

streets, apartment buildings and Victorian homes that were consistent with the medium-density scale found in Noe Valley and much of the Mission. Neighborhood activists eventually shot down the proposed highway and the city sold off the cleared lots in a hodgepodge fashion.

Already, some developers have been drawn to the area. San Francisco-based Seven Hill Properties recently finished 555 Bartlett St., a 60-unit condo building on the northwest corner of Mission and Cesar Chavez. Seven Hills Properties Principal Tom Rocca said he supports the rezoning. But he cautioned that the city can do all

the upzoning they want, but that nobody will build any housing if it's accompanied by Draconian fees and affordable housing requirements. In addition, he said the changes should activate the ground floor for retailers, which he argues will require some parking. "Everybody would like to think that nobody drives in San Francisco, but businesses understand that they do," he said.

Land use attorney Brett Gladstone said he represents a property owner who owns several of the sites under consideration. While he declined to make his client available, he said the property owner is closely tracking the debate as well as the sales at 555 Bartlett St.

"People are looking to (555 Bartlett St.) to see how sales go and at what prices before taking great interest in acquiring some of the other large lots in the area," said Gladstone.

Gabriel Metcalf, executive director of the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, is disappointed that the city is backing off from efforts to jack up height limits on Mission Street. "It's political planning rather than environmental planning," he said. "Instead of putting high density closest to transit, we're putting it where there is the least opposition."

Housing Action Coalition Executive Director Tim Colen said both Cesar Chavez and Mission streets should allow for more density.

"The planning department has a low threshold for political heat and Mission Street is extremely political," said Colen.