

Mayor: Belmont, business in tune

■ In annual address, Lieberman points to 4 planned projects

By Will Oremus

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

BELMONT — The city is back in business, Mayor Warren Lieberman told residents and officials Friday in his State of the City address.

Long criticized as being inhospitable to development, the city is moving forward with four big projects that could help transform its reputation, Lieberman said. He pointed to renderings of an attractive "Village Center" along Ralston Avenue and a mixed-use "Firehouse Square" near O'Neill Avenue and Broadway as examples of the future he and other city leaders have in mind.

"There's a lot more to do, but Belmont clearly is on the move," Lieberman said. "Economic development in Belmont is no longer wishful thinking, it's a reality."



LIEBERMAN

Business-friendly initiatives headlined the lengthy address, in which the first-term mayor also called for improved sports fields, a more user-friendly City Hall, and better town-gown relations with Notre Dame de Namur University — which happened to be the site of his speech.

Lieberman also pointed to other, smaller ways in which the city could become a better place to do business.

He gave a nod to a facade-improvement program that awards business owners who spruce up their shops, including the owners of Cologne Auto Body and the Persian restaurant Shalazaar. And he called for a round of applause for two developers, Parviz Kamangar and Scott Bohannon, who have cooperated with the city on redevelopment plans for their respective properties.

Vice Mayor Bill Dickenson said he believes the city's anti-business reputation these days is "more perception than reality," and said he's noticed signs of progress.

"We wouldn't have had two

2. developers in the audience half a dozen years ago," Dickenson said.

Ron Denman, president of the Belmont Chamber of Commerce, said he appreciates city leaders reaching out to his constituents.

"It really helps when the attitude from the top is one of cooperation and working together, rather than just, 'This is the way it is,'" Denman said. "I see really a forward movement in the city."

Moving from business to open space, Lieberman plugged a sales tax measure on park funding that will appear on San Mateo County ballots in June, saying it would bring Belmont \$270,000 annually for 25 years. He also reiterated an idea for a private foundation to help fund sports field improvements.

He segued into the city's relationship with Notre Dame de Namur, the 1,500-student Catholic university.

"It's frequently taken for granted that Notre Dame de Namur and its campus

are an asset to the city," Lieberman said. "But do we really treat them as assets?"

He floated an idea for a "community day" celebration at the university and encouraged Belmont residents to become fans of the college's sports teams. While the university's fields and other resources could help the city, he said, the city must also do its part to be "more than just a thoroughfare for students on their way to campus."

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Belmont mayor wants to build a community

By Dana Yates
DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

There's a lot building in Belmont — from an economic development plan to a fields foundation, but the most important project on Mayor Warren Lieberman's mind is relationship building.

That's the theme for Friday's State of the City address.

The City Council has already improved its relationship with the



Warren Lieberman

Chamber of Commerce and the sports community. It is also making strides in improving its relationships among its own members. The council is still working on

Residents, university administration and city officials continue to meet as a special task force to address noise concerns, but Lieberman is hopeful the dispute will be resolved quieter than so far.

Meanwhile, the city continues to work on its relationship with the large group of sports parents in Belmont who unified to fight City Hall's initial discussion of selling the Sports Complex last year. The council quickly dropped the idea and has since seen a positive response from field users about an increase of sports fees — raising an additional \$50,000 annually for field maintenance.

Volunteers recently spent approximately \$600 to \$700 on materials and equipment to improve the fields at Fox Elementary over a recent weekend, Lieberman said.

"We have a limited window of time to act on that energy that was generated [from the Sports Complex proposal]," Lieberman said. "The volunteer efforts are wonderful, but the city has to be the primary on this. The volunteer efforts must truly be supplemental."

Following a suggestion made by Lieberman, the council agreed the city should examine ways the city could fund field

improvements. Suggestions include a fields foundation, Lieberman said.

While Lieberman works his position as mayor to improve relationships in the city, City Hall staff continue to pursue physical changes in the city that could one day create a true downtown with a tax base to support the city coffers, Lieberman said.

Visions for downtown are only limited by one's imagination at this point, he said.

Lieberman can envision a downtown where the shopping center at Ralston and Sixth avenues has underground parking, Emmett Street is closed to vehicle traffic, the old Emmett House property is redeveloped and the vacant buildings that once housed offices are rebuilt to something more attractive and useful.

It is a reality that's not that far off base. City staff is already working to make some of that happen.

Other areas of the city are already moving forward on redevelopment plans. The council recently approved a plan that would let property owners east of Highway 101 and south of Ralston Avenue assemble parcels to create a large development. It could contain a nice

hotel that brings additional money to the city, Lieberman said.

The amount of development may catch some residents off guard, but if the council does its job correctly it should not come as a surprise to anyone, Lieberman said.

However, it's not all good news.

The city will have to pay for part of the necessary \$300 million of improvements to the South Bayside Waste Authority Shoreline center. The city will likely have to increase fees and probably ask residents to pass a special tax. The money it raises will pay for improvements to city infrastructure, including an eight-mile pipe that runs under the city to the waste center. That repair alone will cost approximately \$150 million, Lieberman said.

"It's not easy, but there's no alternative," Lieberman said.

The city should have a better understanding of what fees it must pass on to residents in the coming months, Lieberman said.

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building communication and trust with residents, but Lieberman calls it the first step in completing long-talked about projects.

"A lot of things we are preparing for won't happen because the City Council wants them to happen. It will only happen if the community wants it to happen," he said.

Lieberman is keenly aware of residents' desire for parks and meeting places and wants to improve relationships with Notre Dame de Namur University, Notre Dame High School and the parent sports community, he said.

NDNU and some neighboring residents have been at odds over field use activity and noise over the past year. Shying away from the controversy of the conflict, Lieberman said most people are unaware of the quality of sports teams at NDNU and the facilities it contains. A better relationship would allow the city to possibly utilize facilities at the university, Lieberman said.

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City of Belmont
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Belmont may delay sewer fee

■ Officials, citing poor economy, say they might wait two years to implement levy

By Mike Rosenberg
MEDIANEWS STAFF

The federal government is not alone in laying out an economic stimulus package to break the recession — Belmont may be getting in on the act, too.

City officials are proposing to wait two years before making residents and businesses start paying a new sewer fee that has triggered considerable protest since its approval in January.

The sewer treatment facility charge, originally set to take effect in July, will cost the average homeowner \$250 per year, apartment dwellers \$175 and many businesses more than \$1,000. The City Council approved the new fee to fully cover Belmont's \$45.2 million share of the South Bayside System Authority's \$404 million sewer improvement project, un-

veiled in May.

At the request of city officials, the Belmont Finance Commission decided Thursday to recommend that the council, at its April 14 meeting, delay implementing the new fee for two years.

Officials had discussed giving a break to residents or businesses that could show the fee would be a hardship, as well as other options, but ultimately decided everyone should be spared the next two years, Deputy Finance Director Brooke Lazzari said.

In the past two months, the city received about 50 letters protesting the fee, and officials were met with stiff opposition from business and apartment complex owners during outreach meetings, Lazzari said.

"The primary response has been that the timing is very poor," she said. "Given the economic times, this was kind of what we could do to try to accommodate that as best we could."

Lazzari said the city does

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Sewer

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not expect to be punished by the South Bayside System Authority for deferring payments. She said the city will

continue to issue its share of bonds to pay for the \$404 million plan but will begin paying them back two years later than originally planned. The city would use a different method of financing, perhaps capital appreciation bonds, to account for the de-

ferred payments, she said.

Authority manager Dan Child confirmed that Belmont's payment deferral would not hurt his agency's plan, which involves 131 sewer improvement projects in the area between Belmont and northern Santa Clara County.

Child said he had not heard of any other cities or agencies within the authority that are putting off payments to help residents and businesses.

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Package may ease Belmont traffic woes

■ Council does not restore lane converted for bicycle use

By Mike Rosenberg
MEDIANEWS STAFF

Drivers still won't be zipping to school and work through the area near Carlmont High School, but their anger over stop-and-go traffic in the region should soon subside a bit following upgrades approved Tuesday, officials said.

The package of short-term traffic improvements authorized by the Belmont City Council comes in response to outrage from commuters, students and parents after the board eliminated a traffic lane on Alameda de las Pulgas during winter break.

The northbound lane removal at the San Carlos border allowed Belmont officials to install bike lanes in both directions, but left drivers with one traffic lane.

The traffic enhancement that motorists have lobbied most intensely for — the restoration of the lane — was not part of the improvements approved Tuesday.

With Mayor David Braustein absent, the four remaining council members made it clear during the meeting that they were not in favor of restoring the lane and likely never will be.

Instead, the council moved to eliminate 15 diagonal parking spaces on Alameda in order to install a left-turn lane from the street into the school at Chula Vista Drive. The council also decided to work with San Carlos officials on the topic and to lobby SamTrans to move a bus stop in the area to a less congested area.

Another short-term solution proposed by officials, the elimination of a crosswalk on Alameda, was shot down by council members.

The council also went along with a recommendation to study

Traffic

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long-term options on improving traffic in the area, including the possibility of moving the bike lane onto Carlmont property and off the street. Council members also expressed the desire to launch a long-term traffic plan with Carlmont officials.

It remains unclear how much traffic will improve in the short term as a result of these maneuvers, whether officials can implement them before the current school year ends or if the long-term solutions discussed will ever come to fruition. Other long-term solutions include adding a roundabout at Cranfield Avenue, increasing parking on the Carlmont campus or providing one-way circulation through the school.

But what was clear from the meeting is that those hoping that the lane would be restored shouldn't hold their breaths.

"This stretch of road has had way too many resources" put into it, Council Member Bill Dickenson said. "Let's be done with it."

Council Member Coralin Feierbach agreed, saying "It's nice to see Alameda (as) one lane going and one lane coming. Share the road, please."

Although they didn't get their lane back, drivers have been pleased with the council's willingness to improve traffic. The thoroughfare is used for visitors to four nearby schools, including Carlmont and Tierra Linda Middle School in San Carlos. The road also provides access to Interstate 280 and Highway 101, and abuts the Carlmont Shopping Center.

The lane removal has also come under fire by San Carlos officials, who received more than 100 e-mails on the topic in the weeks following the change.

San Carlos Mayor Bob Grassilli said he was pleased to hear his city would be involved in the long-term traffic planning at the site.

The council's vote follows a report released Friday by city officials that recommended approval of the traffic-mitigating measures. The report was written following three community meetings on the topic.

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High-density housing to meet state's goals

Belmont focuses on El Camino development

By Dana Yates

DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

Belmont will need to be ready for nearly 400 new residential units by 2014 to meet state housing requirements, according to a recent report commissioned by the city.

The city plans on meeting that requirement by focusing on plans for high-density housing along El Camino Real and the Belmont Village area near Ralston Avenue. The city has long considered building in the El Camino corridor and is continuing to encourage development despite the slow economy, said Community Development Director Carlos de Melo.

Cities must develop a Housing Element plan every five years as required by state law, however the process usually happens every seven and a half years. The plan must identify sites for possible housing by a private developer. It does not require the city to build housing, said consultants from Dyett and Bhatia Urban and Regional Planners, the company commissioned by the city to analyze housing issues.

A total of 245 housing units were built in Belmont from 2000 to 2008 — an average of 31 units per year. It will now have to build 399 units — an average of 80 units a year, to meet state requirements, according to the housing assessment report conducted by Dyett and Bhatia.

Belmont is considered a bedroom community with only 10 percent of its residents working within the city and 37 percent commuting out of San Mateo County.

Belmont, however, has a higher population of senior citizens when compared to the state and county averages. More than 70 percent of elderly households who pay rent are spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. Of the elderly homeowners, 25 percent are overpaying for housing. The aging population raises questions about whether those residents will stay in their homes or move to smaller residential or assisted living units. The majority of Belmont residents — 31 percent — are married without children and 27 percent are single. Less than 25 percent of Belmont's population is married with children, according to the report.

The ratio of owners to renters has remained steady over the years and currently stands at 60 percent owners and 40 percent renters, according to the report.

Belmont consists primarily of single-family detached homes, but multi-family units increased between 2000 and 2007, according to the report.

Belmont has ample rental units for families. There are 606 rental units with three or more bedrooms and approximately 471 rental households with four or more people, according to the report.

More than 30 percent of Belmont households earn less than \$25,000 a year and 15 per-

cent earn less than \$25,000. Thirty percent of the community is considered low income and 13 percent is considered very low or extremely low income, according to the report.

Meanwhile, housing costs have increased dramatically in Belmont over the last eight years. The median price for a single family home increased 57 percent since 2000, from \$469,000 to \$920,000 in 2008 and apartments rent range from \$1,200 to \$1,400 for a one-bedroom and \$1,600 and \$1,800 for a two-bedroom.

Most middle-class professionals cannot afford housing in Belmont and many residents go to Samaritan House for food, according to the report.

The report indicates that the city must build 166 units for households with incomes above \$114,000, 77 units for households that make between \$90,501 and \$114,000, 65 units for households that make between \$56,551 and \$90,500 and 91 units for households with income under \$56,550, according to the report.

The city approved at least nine new units at the Belmont View project, located at 1300 El Camino Real. It still needs to build 390. There are currently more than 85 vacant resident parcels that could support approximately 50 new single-family homes. There are another 32 lots zoned for multi-family units but hillside constraints would likely keep development to single-family homes, according to the report.

The city is focusing on a new downtown development dubbed the Belmont Village project. It will likely construct a mixed-use, high-density development on the block cornered by El Camino Real and Ralston and Sixth avenues. That development is anticipated to bring an additional 150 to 180 residential units to the city.

"There's a potential in the Firehouse Square and Belmont Village areas to be about 100 units if all goes as planned," Community Development Director Carlos de Melo told the Planning Commission at a Tuesday night discussion about the plan.

The city is also considering high-density developments on El Camino Real. There is only 1.7 acres of available land on El Camino Real. However, there is approximately 16 acres of underdeveloped smaller parcels. The most could be made of the properties if parcel owners combined their land for larger developments, according to the report.

The Belmont City Council is set to discuss the plan Tuesday night and vote on the Housing Element in June.

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City may pull plug on PG&E

■ Belmont councilman aims for green self-sufficiency

By Michael Manekin
STAFF WRITER

BELMONT — Most cities in the Bay Area are powered by PG&E, but a Belmont city councilman thinks that his city could cut costs on “greener” technology by forming a municipal utility district to maintain and operate its power and utility needs.

Councilman Bill Dickenson has spearheaded an initiative for Belmont

to form its own municipal electric utility district because he thinks PG&E has been shortchanging customers.

The giant utility company has an infrastructure that is “broken down and poorly maintained,” Dickenson said. The councilman added that PG&E’s Belmont customers experience too many outages and suffer unjustified increases in their utility rates.

But the thing that makes Dickenson want to pull the plug on PG&E alto-

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Belmont

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gether is the fact that the company is discouraging the city from ambitious plans to create its own green power source and become energy self-sufficient, the councilman said.

Dickenson has spent the past three years in office speaking with PG&E about a plan for Belmont to create its own power by installing a “field” of solar panels. The idea is for the city to achieve energy self-sufficiency by using the fields to produce more power than it needs and trade the excess power to PG&E.

But the utility doesn’t want cities such as Belmont to create their own power, Dickenson said.

“They basically laughed in my face and said ‘good luck,’” the councilman said of PG&E’s reaction to his plans to amend state legislation to allow cities to create their own power through solar farms.

Now Dickenson is pushing his fellow council members and city officials to consider various alternatives to PG&E that would give Belmont autonomy over its energy needs.

The Belmont City Council discussed a report last week that outlines four ways the city could break away from PG&E: creating a city-run municipal utility advised by a utilities commission and governed by the City Council; developing a municipal utility district with at least one other public agency that would provide power for residents of Belmont and beyond; requesting to join a pre-existing municipal utility in the region; or creating a “joint powers authority” with at least one other city to provide power for their residents.

The four-page report, which was submitted by the city manager’s office, briefly lists some advantages and risks of forming a public utility. Among the advantages: A municipal utility could reduce cost and improve reliability of service. The risks include the economic and managerial challenges of creating and maintaining a new municipal bureaucracy from scratch.

While Dickenson is clearly the champion for a municipal utility, Councilwoman Christine Wozniak is not averse to exploring the option.

“I’m not fooling myself that it would be an easy thing to do, but through exploring setting up a district, we could find out more about what PG&E can do to work with us to achieve our goals down the road,” said Wozniak.

“There’s nothing wrong with talking about it,” said Councilwoman Coralin Feierbach, who suggested at last week’s council meeting that Belmont’s Citizens’ Green Advisory Committee further evaluate the issue and report back to the council.

Nonetheless, Feierbach acknowledged that “setting up our own district would be expensive, and we don’t have the staff.”

Councilman Warren Lieberman was more outspoken about his reservations, saying “the risks laid out in the staff report don’t seem to justify expending significant city time or dollars toward the analysis and development of a municipal utilities district ... regardless of how I feel about PG&E service.”

Mayor David Braunstein did not immediately return calls for comment on the issue.

The city of Palo Alto, which developed its municipal utility district in 1896, is the closest city-run electric utility district in the region. The utility is the only one in the state to maintain

and operate its own electric, fiber-optic, natural gas, water and wastewater services, according to the city’s Web site.

The cities of San Francisco and Brisbane nearly created a joint municipal utility district for both cities in 2001, but residents opposed a ballot measure to create the district by a narrow vote. PG&E spent more than \$1 million to defeat the measure, according to news reports.

The cities of Davis, West Sacramento and Woodland attempted to annex into the city of Sacramento’s municipal utility district in 2006, but the effort was soundly defeated at the polls. PG&E spent more than \$10 million to defeat that measure, according to Belmont’s staff report on municipal utility districts.

PG&E is opposed to Belmont setting up its own district, said company spokesman Joe Molica.

“We consider it an honor to serve Belmont, and we want to continue this partnership,” Molica said. “We have more than 100 years of experience in delivering energy to the communities we serve, and we’ve proven our commitment to delivering environmentally responsible resources.”

PG&E officials have already contacted Belmont officials about the city’s exploration into a municipal utility district, Molica confirmed.

Representatives from PG&E have not yet spoken with City Council members, but the utility is planning to contact the city’s elected officials to speak about green initiatives and other issues that council members would like to discuss, the spokesman added.

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Municipal
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*City of Belmont
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AT&T to offer TV

Concerns about metal cabinets on sidewalks

BY JOSH WOLF
Daily Post Staff Writer

Belmont residents will soon be able to pay for TV service through AT&T — the company is looking to expand its U-Verse service to the city, but Belmont has expressed concerns that the new infrastructure will create visual blight.

AT&T's U-Verse service uses fiber optic cable to provide customers with high speed Internet and television. While standard DSL tops out at 6 megabits-per-second, U-Verse provides service at up to 10 megabits-per-second, said AT&T spokesman John Britton.

In order to bring the service to the

city, AT&T would have to install about 43 cabinets around town to house the electronic equipment.

These metal cabinets would be located near ones the company is currently using, often on sidewalks. The city has drafted guidelines to determine where AT&T can place the cabinets.

AT&T said the cabinets are treated with a graffiti-resistant coating, and it would clean up any graffiti.

The company said the location of the new cabinets would be determined on a case-by-case basis and that it would install planters to improve the view.

But Public Works Director Ray Davis told the Post that it will still be a while before the new AT&T service is available.

"We have a lot of question marks," said Davis, "There are a lot of questions that need to be addressed before this goes forward."

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FRUSTRATING WAY

Bike lane slogs Belmont, San Carlos traffic

By Mike Rosenberg
MEDIANEWS STAFF

The simple elimination of a traffic lane has unleashed an outpouring of frustration among Belmont and San Carlos students and their parents as well as other inconvenienced commuters, but officials are standing their ground and asking drivers to adjust their daily routines.

The Belmont City Council's

decision to eliminate one of two lanes on northbound Alameda de las Pulgas — against San Carlos' wishes — has increased traffic congestion on the already busy corridor through the border of both cities. The road is traveled by students at Carlmont High, Tierra Linda Middle and Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic schools — all located within a half-mile radius — plus commuters headed

to both Interstate 280 and Highway 101, and drivers who work and live in the area.

"It just takes longer to do anything," said Amy Brooks, who lives in San Carlos and uses the road to drop her daughter off at Immaculate Heart and drive to work in Belmont in the morning. "It's a 10-minute drive usually,

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JOSHUA MELVIN/MEDIANEWS

VEHICLES INCH PAST Carlmont High School on Alameda de las Pulgas in Belmont on Wednesday morning. The road, which also passes in front of Tierra Linda Middle School in San Carlos, had one of its traffic lanes removed by the city of Belmont against San Carlos' wishes.

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Belmont backpedals on bike lane

No proposal to restore it

BY MIKE ROSENBERG
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Belmont city leaders admitted Tuesday they made mistakes in a controversial lane removal project near Carlmont High School and vowed to review the decision, but there remains no proposal to restore the lane.

The removal of a northbound traffic lane in favor of bike lanes on Alameda de las Pulgas near the San Carlos border in early January has sparked outrage from both communities, particularly residents and city leaders of San Carlos.

The Belmont council Tuesday discussed the traffic changes for the first time since the reconfiguration and ultimately decided to re-explore the lane changes through its council infrastructure subcommittee. The council also expressed regrets for not informing the public of

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the changes ahead of time; Council Member Bill Dickenson called it a "half-baked project."

"I don't think we got it right," said Mayor David Braunstein.

Neither the council nor the infrastructure subcommittee has a proposal, however, to restore the lane. Subcommittee meetings happen about once per month but there is no indication yet when the next meeting will be, or whether it will include a discussion on the lane removal, said Belmont Public Works Director Ray Davis. The subcommittee consists of Vice Mayor Christine Wozniak and Council Member Warren Lieberman.

The day after a Jan. 22 Daily News article exploring the traffic problems, San Carlos officials set up a city-sponsored e-mail address, belmontlaneremoval@san-carlos.org, devoted to the topic and put up a form soliciting comments on the city's Web site. In the days that followed, the Daily News obtained copies of 60 e-mails

sent to the address, and as of Wednesday the city estimated it had received about 80 messages, which were overwhelmingly against the lane removal.

San Carlos officials also forwarded the comments to Belmont, and council members and public works officials expressed they had read them prior to Tuesday's meeting.

"I think the lane removal has now replaced artificial turf as the top issue in San Carlos," said San Carlos Assistant City Manager Brian Moura, who has been sifting through the e-mails. "I don't think we've seen this outpouring of interest in probably a year or two. This is now the reigning champ in terms of feedback."

Belmont Council Member Coralin Feierbach said San Carlos' decision to set up an e-mail and post it on its Web site knowing most of the comments would be negative toward Belmont was "just not a very nice thing to do."

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Traffic backs up in front of Carlmont High School on Alameda De Las Pulgas in Belmont.

Joshua Melvin / Daily News file

Belmont takes step to improve downtown

By Dana Yates
DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

Belmont property owners are not asking for financial help to improve their downtown buildings because the city's application process is too complicated, according to a city report issued Friday.

The council wants to change that and will vote Tuesday on changes that will make it easier for property owners to apply for some of the \$150,000 available in the Facade Improvement Program. The proposal is one of many steps the city is taking to improve and

expand its downtown.

The program was established in 1991 to provide assistance to downtown commercial tenants and property owners for facade improvements. The program was intended to help business while improving the look and feel of downtown Belmont. However, a complex application process yielded only a handful of grants in the last 17 years, according to the report.

The council hired a consultant to revamp the marketing and application process last July. Now, it will review those suggested proposed changes, according to the report.

Under the old guidelines, almost any property close to Ralston Avenue between South Road and Highway 101 could apply for a grant for any amount. The city wants to focus that area on its downtown core near El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue. The program will also look to fund major improvement valued at no less than \$5,000, according to the report.

The new guidelines will offer grants for exterior cosmetic upgrades. Landscaping and interior improvements will not be considered, according to the report.

Property owners currently have

to coordinate with both the city and Chamber of Commerce. The new program will require an application with only the city, according to the report.

Meanwhile, the city is considering plans to redevelop Ralston Avenue at, and east of, El Camino Real. The city is considering a consultant's suggestion for raising tax revenue through development in four major areas — Firehouse Square, Village Center, Belmont Station, Shoreway Place and Island Park. The plan could rake in up to \$5 million a year in sales and hotel taxes.

Preliminary ideas included high-

er buildings on Ralston Avenue east of El Camino Real that includes housing and ground floor retail.

The quest for a better downtown started in the mid 1970s. By developing downtown, the city can attract small retail business. By creating transit-oriented housing or hotels, Belmont can attract the kind of development revenue its neighbors San Mateo and Redwood City have built the last few years.

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Belmont to examine limiting timelines of construction projects

By Dana Yates
DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

Property owners taking too long to complete construction in Belmont may soon be hit with fees as a way to prompt them to finish overdue projects.

However, after consideration at a January meeting, the Belmont City Council is considering a plan that will require property owners to file for a costly extension instead of facing daily fines, as proposed by a previous plan.

The Belmont City Council will discuss Tuesday the proposed ordinance that seeks to charge overdue projects up to \$2,000 for construction extensions. The longer a project sits uncompleted, the higher the fee. The proposal is supposed to encourage property owners to complete projects in a timely manner. The council previously split on whether the fines were the best way to

encourage quick completion of sometimes expensive projects.

The original draft ordinance presented to council on Jan. 8 was fashioned after construction time limit ordinances already in place in nearby cities. The original ordinance established a firm time limit for construction and imposed daily fines after the deadline until a final inspection is passed.

The time limits are determined by the value of construction. Projects valued up to \$50,000 are allowed nine months, up to \$100,000 are allowed 12 months, up to \$500,000 are allowed 18 months and anything greater than \$500,000 is allowed 24 months, according to a city report released Friday.

At its January meeting, some of the council felt uncomfortable with imposing fines on residents who experienced delays for reasons

in writing 30 days prior to the expiration of the building permit.

The first extension costs \$1,000 and lasts six months.

Further extensions can cost up to \$2,000, according to the report.

The council meets 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at City Hall, 1 Twin Pines Lane.

beyond their own control.

The new ordinance defines what reasons allows extensions. To defray the cost of inspection and administering an ongoing building permit, a fee will be charged for each extension.

The request for an extension must be made

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City of Belmont
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You better finish construction in Belmont quick

By Katie Worth
Examiner Staff Writer

BELMONT – More and more, San Mateo County residents who want to expand their homes are under a time crunch to make changes or they'll find themselves owing money to the cities in which they reside.

Belmont is the most recent city in the county to begin penalizing homeowners and developers who don't complete construction projects within strict time limits. Tuesday night, the Belmont City Council voted 5-0 to adopt an ordinance that would require projects that aren't completed on time to pay \$1,000 for a 60-day extension and up to \$2,000 for later extensions.

The idea is to give the city a way to nudge along projects that "never seem to end," said Mark Nolfi, a Belmont building official. Such projects are not the norm, he said. But those few cause misery for neighbors and increase costs for the city, he said.

"We spend 90 percent of our time on 10 percent of the applicants," he said.

In 2005, Hillsborough was the first Peninsula city to adopt a penalizing policy, Nolfi said. It fines property owners between \$200 and \$1,000 a day for projects that drag on, said Liz Cullinan, Hillsborough's building and planning director. She said it's been effective in keeping construction projects on time.

But not everyone agrees that penalizing lengthy projects is reasonable.

Jason Born, a mortgage broker and realtor who has spoken out against the ordinance, said it's not clear that long-term projects are even a problem in Belmont.

"They're closing the door for the working-class owners who are trying to do work himself or herself," he said.

Councilmember Coralin Feierbach disagrees.

"This is fair. It gives the building department the opportunity to give [landowners] latitude in case there's illness, and it rewards people who obey time limits," she said.

Mayor Warren Lieberman said Belmont's approach is less punitive than other cities' measures have been.

"I hope we see this in other communities," Lieberman said. "I would love for Belmont to be taking the lead and setting the example that others follow because I think we are doing a very good and, I hope, a very effective thing."



Lieberman



Feierbach

City of Belmont
Examiner
April 23, 2008

TODAY'S TOP STORY » COURTS

Road repair proving uphill battle

Marburger Road residents in standoff with Belmont as to who is responsible for fixes

By Katie Worth
Examiner Staff Writer

BELMONT — Every time Carol Schoening wants to leave her house, she must carefully reverse her car 300 feet up her road, inch by inch. She has no choice: two-thirds of Marburger Road is washed out, and the city says the street is not its responsibility to fix.

After living with this situation for more than two years, the Schoenings and three other property owners on Marburger Road in the Belmont hills have filed a claim against the city in an attempt to finally repair the road that washed out in a landslide in 2005. Heavy rains in January of this year have worsened road conditions, Schoening said, and a section of it has been reduced from a width of 30 feet to 10.

Though the road is unquestionably within city limits, a 1927 agreement incorporating the street into the jurisdiction included a caveat that the city would be absolved from maintaining the road, Schoening said. More than 80 years later, Belmont says it still is exonerated.

City Attorney Marc Zafferano said there are "a lot of legal issues associated with who is respon-



The Schoenings are one of four families that filed a claim against Belmont. — Juan Carlos Pometta Betancourt/Special to The Examiner

sible for maintaining the road." He declined to elaborate on those issues.

"I don't think it would help the problem to air all of the differences between the parties in the press," he said.

In 2006, the city received a \$52,000 federal grant to fix the damaged road, but they returned that money, Zafferano confirmed. Jeff Marshall, one of the residents who filed the claim against the city, said he was told the city returned

the money because it would imply responsibility for maintaining Marburger Road.

Zafferano countered by saying the city sent the money back because the city's geotechnical engineers said the fix proposed at the time would have caused more damage to the street.

The residents blame the wash-out on drainage and sewage leak problems on the street above them — problems the city has also declined to fix, they say.

Zafferano declined to comment on those allegations, again stating that "back-and-forth" discussion in the press would not solve the problem.

If the current negotiations with the city fall through, the four families will have to decide whether to take their claim to court, which is not a cheap prospect, Marshall said. They've already invested \$40,000 in the battle with the city, and going to court could cost \$150,000 more, he said.

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Belmont tables construction plan

■ Time limits to be discussed in future; meeting is first for City Council's two new members

By Will Oremus

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

BELMONT — The newly reconstituted city council split — very politely — on a thorny ordinance imposing time limits on construction projects. However, the five-member council decided unanimously to continue working on the issue at a future meeting.

Tuesday night marked the first substantive meeting for new council members David Braunstein and Chris Wozniak, who were elected in November to replace Dave Warden and Phil Mathewson.

Mayor Warren Lieberman and Braunstein weren't entirely comfortable with the ordinance, which would have fined property owners for construction projects that dragged on past certain time limits. They sympathized with two residents who spoke against it, saying it might penalize people unfairly and discourage construction in the city.

Three fellow council members favored the ordinance. They said it's needed to protect residents from the hassle and blight of living next to a construction zone for years on end.

In recent years, Belmont's council has earned a reputation for contentious 3-2 votes that leave feelings hurt and relationships ruptured. Tuesday night, however, one of the ordinance's three supporters — Vice Mayor Bill Dickenson — bowed to his colleagues. He voted against the ordinance and proposed instead to revisit the wording before coming back to it at a Feb. 12 meeting.

The ordinance would set deadlines for the completion of construction projects based on their estimated value. A project that costs \$45,000, for instance, would have to be completed within nine months once the building permits were issued.

Speaking against the ordinance were Jason Born, who ran unsuccessfully for council in November, and Adele Della Santina, a real estate agent who has served on both the council and the planning commission in the past.

Della Santina argued the proposed limits would hurt homeowners who had trouble getting loans to finance their projects. Banks these days won't grant loans until permits are secured, she said, and the city's time limits could make them even more wary.

Born, whose company grants construction loans, agreed. He asked rhetorically whether Belmont's own city projects — such as moving the Emmett House or revamping the Alameda kiosk — would meet the deadlines outlined in the ordinance.

"You already have some contractors who won't do business in Belmont" because of the perceived difficulty in working with the city, Born said. He argued that construction time limits would further hurt the city's reputation and raise the price of housing there.

Dickenson said he thought there would be enough leeway in the rule — including exceptions for circumstances beyond the homeowner's control — that no one would be unfairly penalized. He and other council members proposed various amendments to soften the ordinance in order to pass it Tuesday night.

When it became clear Lieberman and Braunstein still weren't comfortable with it, Dickenson changed his stance and called for a continuance of the issue to a later meeting.

Belmont reaches deal for redevelopment

■ Underground garage will allow for new 'walking village,' planners say

By Will Oremus

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

BELMONT — Rumored, plotted and planned for years, Belmont's economic development program is finally getting going.

This week the city unanimously approved its first agreement with a property owner to build a project within one of the four sites targeted for development. The deal calls for up to eight condominiums and 5,500 square feet of commercial space at 1300 El Camino Real, near O'Neill Avenue.

It's the first step in Belmont's plan to turn the entire block into Firehouse Square, a miniature "walking village" of shops and condos arrayed around Belmont Creek, which is invisible underground there.

Property owner Parviz Kamangar first came forward with his plan to redevelop the former site of Ross Lighting before he knew about Belmont's big ideas for the area. The Planning Commission last year approved his application to build six condos and 4,500 square feet of office space, plus an underground parking garage with space for six cars.

But the city held off on final approval as plans began to take shape for the surrounding area. Instead, staff negotiated with Kamangar an agreement to sell him part of Civic Lane, an alleyway that bisects the block, to allow for the construction of a larger underground parking ga-

rage that could someday hold 60 cars or more.

It's that garage, planners say, that will allow the block to morph from its current nondescript state into a spiffed-up shopping attraction.

Under the deal approved Monday, Kamangar will pay the city about \$40,000 for his portion of the alley and get permission to build two extra condos and about 1,000 extra feet of commercial space.

Councilman Bill Dickenson praised Kamangar's plans as "a nice infill project" that will "move Belmont forward."

The city has already begun talking with the other property owners on the block bounded by El Camino Real, O'Neill Avenue, Broadway and Fifth Avenue about the rest of its Firehouse Square plan, said Finance Director Thomas Fil. Once they're on board, it will request bids from master developers for the entire site.

Belmont's economic development plan is designed to broaden the sales tax base in a largely residential city that continues to face budget constraints. City leaders also hope it will make Belmont a more appealing place to shop and stroll.

Along with Firehouse Square, the city hopes to redevelop Village Center at El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue, and Belmont Station at Ralston Avenue and Old County Road. An idea to redevelop the Belmont Sports Complex east of Highway 101 never got off the ground, to the relief of youth sports advocates.

E-mail Will Oremus at woremus@dailynewsgroup.com.

*City of Belmont
D. MET
Jan 10, 08*

City of Belmont
San Mateo Co Times

Belmont seeks developer for 9-acre site

■ Officials hoping Shoreway Place project can generate tax revenue

By Will Oremus
MEDIANEWS STAFF

Belmont is searching for a big-thinking developer to take an interest in an unloved 9-acre swath of land just east of Highway 101.

Officials envision "higher and better uses" for parcels along Shoreway Road that include a Motel 6, Hobe's restaurant, Empire Lumber and the city's own corporation yard.

They are particularly interested in businesses such as a

major hotel or car dealership that would draw customers from the freeway and generate much-needed tax revenue.

"We think there's potential in this large block of land," said Community Development Director Carlos de Melo. "Ultimately, we'd like to see something cohesive."

On Tuesday, the City Council will consider a plan to assemble the parcels into a unified development area and seek proposals from a master developer. The area, called Shoreway Place, is by far the largest of four the city has targeted as part of its economic development plan.

The other three are clustered near the city's center at El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue.

How long the redevelopment takes depends on who steps forward with a plan, de Melo said. "We would prefer to let the private sector dictate the development. We're just trying to give them a little nudge."

The city already has begun exploring alternate sites for its corporation yard — preferably not on land that is made highly valuable by its proximity to Highway 101, officials said.

E-mail Will Oremus at woremus@dailynewsgroup.com.

If you go

WHAT: Belmont City Council meeting

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

WHERE: City Hall, 1 Twin Pines Lane, Belmont

WHY: Meeting as the city's redevelopment agency, the council will consider a resolution to assemble several parcels east of Highway 101 into a unified, nine-acre development area called Shoreway Place.

Belmont impatient with construction

■ Leaders set to pass \$100 per day penalties for stalled projects

By Will Oremus
MEDIANEWS STAFF

Attention, delayed construction projects: Belmont will only pardon your dust for so long.

The City Council on Tuesday expects to pass an ordinance placing strict time limits on construction projects. Renovations that aren't finished by the deadline, which ranges from nine to 24 months depending on the project's value, could be whacked with fines of \$100 a day or more.

Officials say the rule is meant to encourage homeowners to hire responsible contractors for big projects rather than trying to do the work in fits and starts over the course of years.

"There are times when construction projects can get out of hand and seemingly drag on forever," said Mayor Warren Lieberman. "They can be a real disruption to the lives of the folks that live in that neighborhood."

Noise, the loss of on-street parking and the aesthetic blight of scaffolds and papered-over walls are among the hassles from which the city hopes to defend residents, according to a report by Chief Building Official Mark Nolfi.

The report shows that never-ending construction projects aren't just a figment of over-sensitive neighbors' imagina-

Please see **DUST**, Local 3

Belmont impatient with slow builders

► **DUST**, from Local 1

tion. Nineteen projects in the city remain incomplete three years after permits were issued, and nine are still in progress after six years or more.

Belmont isn't the first city to consider such an ordinance. It's following the lead of Atherton, Hillsborough and San Bruno, among others.

Councilman Coralin Feierbach, who pitched the idea to Nolfi last year, said he responded with enthusiasm. He has worked for the city of Belvedere in the past and said a similar ordinance was largely successful there.

In his report, Nolfi suggested a somewhat less rigid ordinance in Belmont because of some key differences in the two cities' demographics. "Lengthy Belvedere projects may be a result of esoteric or imported building products, while in Belmont, delays may be attributed to an owner-builder's learning curve or financial considerations."

One other potential difference: Belvedere's wealthy inhabitants actually paid fines in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, while Belmont anticipates its residents will simply finish the work on time instead.

Under the ordinance, owners could apply for extensions in the case of delays that are beyond their control, such as a third-party appeal, labor stoppage or discovery of archeological remains. But winter rains, city-issued "stop work" orders or design changes won't qualify as excuses.

The council will discuss the ordinance and consider adopting it at its Tuesday meeting. The meeting starts at 7:30 p.m. at City Hall, 1 Twin Pines Lane, Belmont.

City of Redmond
DMC Times
1/16/08

San Carlos needs millions for upgrades

■ City Council discusses fixes proposed for wastewater facility

By Mark Abramson

MEDIA NEWS STAFF

SAN CARLOS — City Council members on Monday night discussed the daunting task of coming up with millions of dollars to improve the aging wastewater treatment plant the city shares with other towns and the West Bay Sanitary District.

Nearly \$200 million in improvements and repairs are needed at the South Bayside Systems Authority plant in Redwood Shores. San Carlos shares the plant with Belmont, Red-

wood City and the sanitary district. San Carlos' share is estimated at \$32 million, Public Works Director Parviz Mokhtari said.

"The only way to finance it is we have to look at the sewer rate and how much we have to raise it by," he said.

Mokhtari said bonds will also be needed to finance the project. The authority would handle the bonds, and San Carlos would only have to pay its share.

"Everybody will get a chance to vote on it, all the other cities and West Bay," said Vice Mayor Bob Grassilli, who represents the city in SBSA matters.

West Bay Sanitary District officials, however, have expressed

a reluctance to ask customers to pay for bonds for the project. They said they have not issued bonds for 40 or 50 years.

The district's customers are residents and businesses in Menlo Park, parts of East Palo Alto and Santa Clara County, Atherton and Portola Valley.

When the work will be done has not been determined, and it is possible that each city and the district could come up with separate plans to fund it, the authority's manager, Dan Childs, said late last week.

The plant needs new pumps and motors, an updated electrical system and a system to make it more automated. Corroded concrete also needs to

be replaced.

San Carlos has already raised its wastewater rates in anticipation of the treatment plant work. The upgrades will be the first improvements to the plant since it opened in the early 1980s.

Councilman Randy Royce stressed the need to let people know about the needed improvements and give them plenty of notice that their rates are going up to pay for the project.

"What we have gotten for use (of the plant for over) 35 years has been super," he said.

E-mail Mark Abramson at mark.abramson@dailynewsgroup.com.

City of Belmont
San Mateo Times
June 16, 2009

Sports complex upgrade pitched

■ Belmont official says city could use \$1 million in redevelopment funds to update fields, add concession stand

By Mike Rosenberg

MEDIANEWS STAFF

The Belmont City Council member who came under fire recently for refusing to vote on a parks ballot measure is proposing to use city redevelopment money to revitalize the Belmont Sports Complex.

Councilman Warren Lieberman said he has added to the June 23 council agenda a discussion item floating the idea of using at least \$1 million from the Belmont Redevelopment Agency fund to upgrade the complex, which is eligible for the money.

The complex could be used more often if the money is spent to install artificial turf or redesign its four playing fields, he said. A con-

Sports

FROM PAGE 3

cession stand or restaurant could also be added, enabling the city to host sports tournaments there, he added.

The lighted 12.15-acre complex, which opened in 1991 next to the Ralston Avenue exit off Highway 101, is used primarily for baseball, softball and soccer, said Parks and Recreation Director Jonathan Gervais. The city's field-use committee has found a significant demand for more playing time there, most recently from cricket and lacrosse teams, he said.

"There is enormous pressure for the use of the fields," Lieberman said. "If the sports complex can be used more frequently, that also means

there could be less pressure on using some of the other sports fields ... that are in residential areas."

He said while the redevelopment agency fund is clearly capable of contributing at least \$1 million to the project, the city should explore a public-private partnership.

Lieberman was scrutinized by some residents and Councilwoman Coralin Feierbach last week when, holding the deciding vote, he effectively killed a parks ballot measure by refusing to take sides.

Feierbach's measure was aimed for the November ballot and, if passed, would have required two-thirds public approval for development on any of Belmont's 17 parks and open spaces, including the sports complex.

"If there isn't enough room for children and adults to play ball, where would the room come from for a restaurant? I think people really need to vote on an issue like that."

— Coralin Feierbach, Belmont councilwoman

Lieberman said he hopes his proposal would "put everybody's minds greatly at ease."

In regards to Lieberman's proposal, Feierbach said it raises several questions and should be referred to the city parks and recreation commission.

"This does not protect all of the parks and open space," she said. "Enhancing one important area does not make up for his lack of supporting the parks and open space ballot measure."

She said that adding a restaurant or concession stand to the sports complex should require a public vote since it would change part of the park to a commercial use.

"If there isn't enough room for children and adults to play ball, where would the room come from for a restaurant?" Feierbach said. "I think people really need to vote on an issue like that."

Reach Mike Rosenberg at mike.rosenberg@dailynews-group.com.

City of Belmont
San Francisco
Examiner
May 21, 2009

Bike bridge is on the way

Stimulus money makes long-awaited Peninsula connection a reality

By Katie Worth
Examiner Staff Writer

BELMONT — At long last, it appears the bicycle bridge connecting Belmont and Redwood Shores will be built, creating a safer way for bicyclists cross over U.S. Highway 101.

Federal stimulus dollars are just a step away from finally funding the bicycle bridge, which will be built just north of the Ralston Avenue overpass. The bridge will provide a long-desired connection between the housing on the west side of the freeway to the school, community center, trails and jobs — including Oracle's headquarters — on the east side.

The project will also create a safe way to cross the freeway in an area that was made more dangerous when Caltrans redesigned the Ralston Avenue interchange to accommodate more cars and fewer bicycles in 1998, said Gladwyn d'Souza, a member of the Peninsula Pedestrian and Bicycle Committee.

To solve the design problem, city and state officials said they would build a pedestrian and bicycle bridge over the freeway. While the widened interchange was completed in 2004, there was not enough money to pay for the \$7 million bike bridge, d'Souza said.

During the past five years, Belmont has applied for several sources of funding, but never secured enough



MIKE KOOZMIN/SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

Make way for the little guy: Cyclists using the bridge between Belmont and Redwood Shores will soon have their own space thanks to federal stimulus dollars.

money to bring the bridge to life.

Now the problem appears to have been solved, the city's interim Director of Public Works, Karen Borrmann, said.

A committee of the Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission recently recommended spending \$2.1 million in federal stimulus dollars on the project, and the California Transportation Commission is expected to approve an additional \$2.5 million in federal stimulus dollars for the project as

well, she said.

That, on top of about \$500,000 in local funding and a smattering of other state, federal and grant dollars, should be enough to finally move the project forward, she said.

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