

## Stakes are high for San Jose's Japantown development

RESIDENTS SUPPORT PLAN TO ADD 600 HOMES IN TOWERS AS HIGH AS 15 STORIES

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Since March, city officials, community leaders and developer Williams & Dame of Portland, Ore., have been working on the project that has already stymied one developer.

"This project must make economic sense and still give people a sense of place," said Jerry Hiura, a Japanese-American and San Jose resident who has been closely involved with the project. "At the same time, we want to build something beautiful that has a relationship with the existing community."

That's a tall order for any development. Given the nation's declining housing market, the challenge becomes even more formidable for a residential project estimated to cost \$350 million.

Before anything can be built, an archaeological excavation of the former storage yard - a block

between Jackson and Taylor streets - must be completed as part of an environmental impact report to be released in the spring. The five-acre site was once a Chinatown known as Heintlerville and officials expect that artifacts will be found.

In the meantime, the most controversial component of the project - tripling the number of homes from the previous proposal to 600 - appears acceptable to the neighborhood. Those homes would be built in four towers ranging in height from six to 15 stories.

Williams & Dame proposed a much higher density than the other developers, said John Weis, deputy director of the city's redevelopment agency. "But they convinced us and the community that it's worth (it)."

Homer Williams, whose company agreed to pay \$21.6 million for the block, said he was interested in the project only as long as he could build towers.

"If you're in our business, the idea of more density is usually a pretty contentious item," he said. "What we've found is, if you really want to make a difference in the neighborhood, you can't do it with three-story woody walk-ups. We're not talking about 25-story towers, just something to create the density so that your retail could begin to flourish."

So far, neighbors are on board.

"Fifteen stories kind of scares people, but if it's done well it's not bad," said William Lambson, president of the Japantown Neighborhood Association. "I think the community understands the trade-off. More people would attract the (retail) services we've been asking for."

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residents, the community wants a home for San Jose Taiko, a Japanese drum ensemble; at least 30,000 square feet of retail that does not include a big-box store; a park; and a community center/theater.

Lambson said his association is adamant about the size of retail development: 30,000 square feet - not the 15,000 square feet currently proposed. "If that's not going to be developed, there is a possibility of the community not supporting the density they're talking about," he said.

It's too early to tell whether all the community's wishes will be granted.

San Jose resident Tamon Norimoto, who traveled to Portland in October to tour Williams & Dame's projects along with Hiura and Weis, also said he worries about the developer's ability to obtain financing. Will it shortchange Japantown?

"When the margins become tighter, some things promised to the community may not potentially happen," he said. "This is the place where we retain our culture. We don't want to develop Anywhere USA," he said about the neighborhood where Japanese-Americans attend church or temple and send their children to learn the language of their ancestors.

"This is the only living Japantown that has not gone through a redevelopment stage. This Japantown continues to have a soul, that's why so many people care for it."

Williams understands the community's passion. But he's confident that the current housing market won't derail his project because the towers won't be built for at least another three years. While he agreed that the credit crisis has made financing tricky, the veteran of high-density projects in both Portland and Los

Angeles said his company is still completing projects.

"My partner and I have been around a long time. Every public/private deal we've done, we've always developed it," he said. "We don't speculate."

Community leaders give Williams & Dame high marks for its willingness to engage neighbors in a dialogue about what should be built.

Councilman Sam Liccardo, whose district encompasses Japantown, said in an e-mail to the Mercury News that he is impressed with Williams & Dame's responsiveness to the community. As an example, when neighbors protested that one of the towers would cast too much of a shadow on their homes, the developer reconfigured the design without Liccardo's involvement.

But traffic impact, size and scope of the community center and how to fit the noisy Taiko group into a residential community remain hurdles.

"What I'm worried about is when they're working those drums, what is it like to live around them?" Williams asked. "But it will be solved."

While Hiura praises Williams & Dame's outreach, he knows that negotiations could get difficult until a development agreement is signed between the Portland company and the city - expected to occur by year's end.

"This thing will get political, and when it does, this community needs to have a united voice as well as a big horn," Hiura said. "We have a very good relationship with the mayor and Councilman Liccardo. Things are friendly now, but when the rubber hits the road . . ."

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