

Times-Herald

For better or worse, urban renewal has helped shape modern day Vallejo

By Sarah Rohrs/ *Times-Herald* staff writer

Posted: 07/26/2009 12:00:22 AM PDT



Almost five decades ago, Vallejo city leaders banked big dreams on a federal urban renewal project that promised a new era of prosperity.

There would be a transformation of the waterfront and downtown with modern buildings and an exciting mix of shops, restaurants, motels, and public plazas and parks.

Sound familiar? A half-century later the city is still trying to realize that promise and unlock the waterfront's and downtown's potential.

"They tried but nothing ever happened," said Terry Curtola, Vallejo's mayor from 1979 to 1987. Of the

myriad development plans presented over the years, "there was always somebody who wanted something different," he said.

"Vallejo has had a hard time," said Marilyn Armstrong, daughter of the late James Richardson, former Vallejo Redevelopment Agency director, who spearheaded the urban renewal project. He also managed and oversaw construction of tens of thousands of World War II houses needed for Mare Island Naval Shipyard workers.

Baby steps

The city is taking baby steps toward the Callahan DeSilva development plan. Mayor Osby Davis said it "has a lot of promise and opportunity." The plan "has everything Vallejo needs to be a sought-after place for transportation, tourism and other events happening on our waterfront," he added.

Toward that aim, the closed My Café, which opened as a Denny's in 1968, is coming down soon to make way for an underground parking structure with retail and walkways to the waterfront on top. It is part of overall plans that include a hotel, conference center, plus retail and restaurants on the waterfront.

Further, a ground-breaking will take place 10 a.m.

Aug. 10, for a new bus transfer center behind the Georgia Street Plaza.

The latest waterfront plan is, in a way, an effort to complete the 1960s urban renewal plan.

First urban renewal project

Excitement and promise was in the air at the time as Vallejo set into motion the Marina Vista project, a plan local newspaper articles heralded as a daring move.

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Vallejo was the first to receive funds through the federal urban renewal project, Curtola said.

Bounded by Florida, Carolina, Capitol and Sacramento streets, and Mare Island Way, the area was showing signs of age, Curtola and others said. Historic city plans and other documents called the area blighted and a social and economic liability -- characterized by shabby living conditions, and overall dilapidation and neglect.

The marshy waterfront flooded often and the area had little, if any, drainage pipes or other infrastructure, Curtola recalled. "The goal was to get rid of all the blighted area downtown. They got rid of it and they had this great plan," he said. "They got rid of a huge slum."

But many long-time residents regret the loss of the old downtown and notable historic buildings, such as the 1903 Carnegie Library where the Marina Towers senior housing complex is today, and the Vallejo Women's Club, an architectural gem at York and Sacramento streets, designed by famous architect Julia Morgan.

Downtown's lost flavor

Vallejo native Desiree Toronto, who operated Elite Cleaners on Santa Clara Street with her husband Joe, said the area lost its flavor through demolition of fish markets, Chinese laundries, Cafés, bars and other businesses.

The downtown was "not very interesting" after urban renewal, she said. Another Vallejo native, Pat Patrick, said urban renewal struck a death knell for the downtown.

Eleanore Gallow, 84, recalled watching Mare Island ships being launched from the roof of the Astor House where the City Hall at 555 Santa Clara St. now

stands. She and her sister, Alma Ecklind, grew up in the 1888 building where their parents Stella and Louie Guidi operated an Italian restaurant.

"Old-timers like us were against (the urban renewal plan). It hurt us more than people who came here later on and who didn't know the history," Gallow said.

Then a city of 60,000, Vallejo was expanding north of town, and construction had begun on the Larwin Plaza shopping center on Sonoma Boulevard, the site now home to Seafood City.

Businesses, residents

displaced

In early 1957 the Vallejo Redevelopment Agency (VRA) delivered a 33-pound application to the U.S. Housing and Home Finance Agency to kick off the \$7.2 million project, an early newspaper article noted. Marina Vista encompassed 125 acres and a 24-square-block area. An estimated 500 families and individuals were displaced, and dozens of businesses were bought out.

The Vallejo Redevelopment Agency negotiated for land and business purchases and, in some cases, used its powers of eminent domain to acquire property.

The agency acquired nearly 350 parcels, built a mile-long seawall, installed underground utilities and a sanitation system, and built new streets and sidewalks, according to historical records. Altogether, nearly 600 structures were razed.

Numerous thoroughfares were closed to the waterfront, including Branciforte, Capitol, Virginia, York, Maine, and Pennsylvania streets. In the downtown, demolition stopped at Sacramento Street,

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but some blocks between Sacramento and Sonoma streets were razed for parking lots, Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum director Jim Kern said.

Meanwhile, the state wanted to build a double-decker expressway along the Mare Island Strait to improve downtown access, and link Highway 37 and what is now Interstate 80.

With the freeway plans in mind, the city closed Georgia and Virginia streets, positioned new buildings to face away from the waterfront and also planted tall hedges around the new plaza to cut off the view.

Razing history

Wrecking began on a 1908 vacant structure at 200 Georgia Street, followed by 15 residences perched precariously on a York Street hilltop. The massive demolition project was thought, at the time, to be the largest such municipal job ever undertaken in California, according to 1960 Times-Herald news reports.

Vallejo's downtown and waterfront landscape changed significantly -- the tall York Street hill that once held the state capitol building was graded out of existence, and its dirt was among fill needed to create the new marina district.

Key demolition areas were the 100 and 200 blocks of Georgia Street -- the notorious "lower Georgia Street" -- that drew scores of sailors and others with promises of wild nights and illicit acts.

The colorful, if somewhat seedy, area was replaced with the new City Hall and adjacent parking lot, post office and library, and a large plaza dotted with modern sculptures.

Few these days would recommend large-scale

demolition of historic buildings, but in that era, saving historically significant structures was not a high priority, Armstrong and others said.

Referring to many broken-down bars and other empty buildings that filled the downtown decades ago, Armstrong said, "What was torn down should have been torn down."

Kern said it's easy to criticize past decisions, but "it's important to try to understand it from the point of view of that era. They thought it was being done for the good of the community."

Waterfront isolated

But the loss was significant, Kern said.

"The biggest connection to the city's heritage is its waterfront and this literally cut off the waterfront and sent a message that we're ignoring our heritage," he said.

Following the urban renewal project, nothing remained of the bars, brothels and boarding houses and other businesses and homes. Armstrong, a museum volunteer, is recording the razed businesses in the 100 and 200 blocks of Georgia and Virginia streets in 1900, 1925 and 1950.

Recorded on large poster boards are Cafés, bars and liquor stores standing neck-and-neck in the two lower Georgia Street blocks -- the Rex Room, Sami's Shooting Gallery, Bank Club Liquors, States Club Liquors, the Port Hole Café, Navy Café and Liquors, Turf Club Liquors, Wine Liquors and Vallejo Top Cab, among others.

The area also sported an ethnically colorful and diverse area containing a fish market, Italian restaurants, tailors, Mom and Pop groceries, and small Filipino businesses, Kern said.

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The agency bought up the Farragut Club, Al's Sport Shop, Ammon's Stationary Store, plus two mortuaries and the 1890s Original Barrel House, which was the headquarters for many baseball fans and political figures in the 400 block of Santa Clara Street, according to an early news account.

The demolition project also took out a fire station, the Standard Oil Company Dock and pilings of the old Monticello Wharf.

In 1962, 13 buildings on Virginia Street were leveled to make way for a parking lot -- Vernon's Tailor Shop, Glover's TV Service, the New Home Restaurant, plus the Home Bakery, Crown Theater, Vallejo Poultry Company, Salvation Army headquarters, and the Charlotte Hotel.

Ready to celebrate

The razing and mass grading project took years, but when it was over, Vallejo was ready to celebrate.

On Jan. 13, 1965, 500 people with 500 shovels took part in a gala groundbreaking to mark the first new buildings -- the Bank of America at Georgia and Santa Clara, and the Ascension Arms senior apartment complex at Florida and Butte streets.

The main speaker was Justin Herman, the noted executive director of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency which spearheaded sweeping urban renewal projects in that city.

Two years later, another gala celebration was held as large crowds gathered around the new plaza, examined the new buildings on Georgia and Santa Clara, and also flocked to the new waterfront promenade which many enjoy today.

The Carnegie Library was the last structure to fall. Former Mayor Florence Douglas was against losing

the old library, but voters rejected two bonds to repair and expand it, according to a Solano Historian article by Thomas Lucy. The new \$2.3 million John F. Kennedy Library opened on Sept. 10, 1970.

The waterfront expressway never came to pass. Curtola said the city and a citizens committee later fought the plan in the 1970s, and also considered ways to attract development while also saving the waterfront's natural beauty.

Curtola said little, if anything, has happened. At one point, waterfront land went for a dental building with the expectation a new restaurant would come in to share parking and other infrastructure expenses, though that never occurred, he said.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the urban renewal area also saw building of the subsidized Marina Vista Apartments at Marin and Maine streets, a Safeway, Shell gas station, and more modern downtown buildings.

Preserving what's left

Though many notable buildings were already gone, Vallejoans worked to save the remaining historical treasures in the mid-1970s, Kern said.

The museum was established inside the former City Hall at Marin and Capitol streets, and the Heritage District was created to place buildings and houses on the National Register of Historical Places, Kern said.

The 1970s citizens committee proposed the reopening of Georgia Street past Santa Clara as early as 1975 to improve business conditions. That finally happened in 2004, when the city spent nearly \$1 million to reopen the street to the waterfront, and plant landscaping, City Engineer David Kleinschmidt

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said. The site was renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Plaza.

Today, the 1965 Bank of America building now is home to the Housing Authority, and the downtown has many vacant buildings, including some dating back to urban renewal.

Mayor Davis said the waterfront plans are somewhat hampered by the current economic downturn, but the city is moving forward.

After so many years, Curtola said the best plan will be one that merges the downtown and waterfront.

"The waterfront needs the downtown, and the downtown needs the waterfront," he said.

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