

Proposed Eight-Story Building at Market and Buchanan Streets Causing Controversy

Some Hermann Street residents fear lower property values, obstructed views

By Jaime San Felippo

Plans to turn a decrepit gas station into a state-of-the-art condominium and retail structure on the corner of Buchanan and Market Streets has not even been fully approved by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, but is already a hot topic for neighbors.

Two years ago, local builder Brian Spiers purchased the 22,000 square-foot plot, where a Union 76 gas station currently sits. He plans to build an eight-story, 115-unit, residential condominium complex with commercial space on the ground level.

"It will be a beautiful, innovative and architecturally moving building that will make the location more vibrant," Spiers said.

The Planning Commission has preliminarily approved Spiers' proposal. Spiers is currently completing the environmental impact review so he can file his Negative Declaration as required by the California Environmental Quality Act. He hopes to go to the SF Board of Supervisors for full approval sometime in the first half of this year.

Spiers' project falls under the zoning parameters of the Market & Octavia Better Neighborhood Plan. This plan intends to create a neighborhood dense with housing over retail structures amenable to mass transit and make the area on Market Street between Octavia and Church streets more pedestrian and bicycle friendly.

"The plan will be creating a better neighborhood in an area

that has yet to reach its full potential," said Jonas Ionin, a city planner who has been working on the Spiers project and is familiar with the Market and Octavia Plan.

Ionin said it is hard to say when Spiers will be able to begin building as it depends



Photo: Bill Sywak

A photo of the Union 76 gas station on Market Street that is slated to be replaced by an eight-story building.

on full approval of the plan, whether there are appeals, if any, and land testing and reviews. Ionin estimated that building could begin within one to two years.

Neighborhood Reaction

While Spiers is eager to break ground, not everyone is as enthusiastic.

Bill Rusconi lives at 65 Hermann St., in a 12-unit building of condominiums. The back of his condo faces south and overlooks Market Street, the Castro and beyond — a view that will no longer exist when Spiers' building is erected.

"If I'm sitting here looking out the window or sitting on my balcony, I can see sky and

sun and a nice view," said Rusconi, who bought his unit 16 years ago. "With the new building I'll just be staring at a dark wall."

In his first year of retirement after working in the SF Opera Orchestra for 35 years, Rusconi, 64, says he depends on the sun exposure to light and heat his place.

Sally McDonnell is the president of the 65 Hermann Street Homeowners Association and said that she first learned of the building plan just a few months ago by reading an article in the "SF Business Times." That is when she informed the rest of the affected tenants in her building and said that most of their concerns are similar to Rusconi's.

"It's a quality of life issue," said McDonnell. "Most of us are concerned about having an eight-story wall facing us. We don't want our balconies looking into someone else's living room."

A few months ago Spiers made a visit to the residents of 65 Hermann St. to share his vision with them and talk about their concerns. He brought a miniature model of the proposed building.

McDonnell said it was an "awkward shape."

Spiers claims that the meeting went well and that "everyone seemed to understand where we each were coming from." Spiers said that there would be approximately 100 feet between the new building and the Hermann Street condominium.

But McDonnell said that when Spiers

was explaining the model to her, a corner of the new building will be just 15-17 feet away.

"I'm absolutely dreading it," said McDonnell. "I'm terrified of it. I'm just holding out hope that the city will see the bigger picture in terms of all these huge buildings that will be going up."

Spiers said that no matter what anyone builds, whether it is he or another developer, that McDonnell's and Rusconi's views would be obstructed.

"I can't imagine that anyone would think it would stay a rundown gas station forever," Spiers said. The Union 76 station is slated to close within the next six months.

Besides the loss of view, tenants of the building are concerned about their property values deteriorating.

Abigail Glynn is a real estate broker with Davis Realty Company Inc. and is familiar with the site. She said that the loss of this view could drop the value of the individual condos by \$100,000 each.

"Taking a view looking out into the valley of the Castro and turning it into a wall would greatly depreciate the value of the property," Glynn said.

Market and Octavia Plan

The Buchanan and Market Streets site is just one of many sites in the Upper Market area targeted for development under the Market and Octavia Plan. Others include the Shell gas station at Market and Sanchez streets, the empty lot next to Café Du Nord as well as the former S&C Ford dealership building at Market and Dolores streets.

The SF Board of Supervisors has approved the general zoning for the plan and there will be further meetings with the Planning Commission to decide the specifics of the land use. The next meeting is scheduled for Feb. 7.

The plan calls for more than 4,000 new housing units in the city. While many will be expensive condos, the City's Inclusionary Housing Ordinance requires that 15 percent of all new projects be affordable housing. Fifty percent of the units will be dedicated to family housing.

According to Brian Basinger, founder and executive director of the AIDS Housing Alliance, the Market and Octavia Plan has far greater implications on the LGBT community, than just obstructed

views.

Basinger believes that the sites eyed for development under the Market & Octavia Plan are some of the last developable sites in the Upper Market and Castro area. He would like to see the city acquire that land to meet the diverse needs of the LGBT community.

"The average person living with HIV/AIDS makes about \$750-\$950 a month," said Basinger. "Folks paying so much for housing are at risk and any bump in the road makes them homeless."

Towards this end, Basinger has a plan to purchase the public parking lot behind the Walgreens in the Castro and another lot next to the Castro Theater and develop low-income housing.



Photo: Bill Sywak

Bill Rusconi stands in the lot that would be filled by a new condominium build-up. His Hermann Street condominium is situated in the building at right.