



Projects begin to emerge for Upper Market

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When San Francisco's Central Freeway came down in 2003, the laid-back Upper Market area caught the eye of developers and planners as one of the city's best places to add housing and small businesses.

But the area's expected growth stalled as planners, city officials and residents spent several years debating the finer points of how the area should evolve.

Now projects are finally starting to emerge, providing a preview of what the neighborhood might look like in coming years.

Approximately 10 developments are in the city's planning pipeline, proposing - among other things - to convert former gas stations into condominiums with coffee shops, stores and high-end grocery stores on the first floor.

And while most of the new construction might be slowed by the tight credit market, developers and community groups are actively negotiating the details of new buildings and the businesses they might house.

Since 1959, the freeway had loomed over Market Street at Octavia Boulevard, creating a psychological barrier that discouraged development in the seven blocks of Market that run west to Castro Street. The 40-foot-high, concrete double decks were damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 and ultimately demolished. When one section of the freeway was torn down in 1992, a once-severed row of Hayes Street shops blossomed into trendy boutiques, offering a glimpse of changes that might happen nearby.

But for now, the Upper Market area feels the way it has for years - quiet, given its central location. Storefronts include a comic-book store, dry cleaners, barbers, restaurants, a Safeway and a much higher concentration of gas stations than in many commercial corridors.

All along, city officials looked to guide the area toward becoming a more densely populated and thriving commercial strip, where residents walk and bike to shops and commute on public transportation. In that vein, officials drafted rules permitting new buildings that pack in more units and severely limit parking.

Special fees were imposed on builders to pay for affordable housing, parks and other amenities.

Parking issues

Since the new rules were implemented last year, developers generally have tried to lobby the city for more parking than is allowed (one car per residential unit) and disagreements have flared over architecture and building size. But there appears to be consensus that growth - as outlined by the years of planning - could be a good thing.

"For a long time now if you came up Market Street from the Ferry Building you'd hit Octavia and you'd see some gas stations and a Safeway," said Dennis Richards, president of the Duboce Triangle Neighborhood Association, one of several local resident organizations. "The area has had a weird sense of a suburban place. ... We think it's appropriate to develop it in a more urban way where people will be encouraged to associate with each other in a more walkable area."

Two projects planned for the short block of Market Street between Buchanan and Dolores streets presage what the future might hold.

At Buchanan, developer Brian Spiers has received city permission to replace a closed Union 76 station with 115 glassy, modern condominiums in a nine-story building whose corner entrance will be set back several feet from the street for outdoor seating.

Just kitty-corner, the Prado development firm has proposed 80 condominiums in three interconnected structures and a ground floor Whole Foods market. The project will replace the S&C Ford dealership that closed in 2006.

More units allowed

Because of new zoning, Spiers was permitted to build 30 more units into the same amount of space than was previously allowed. He paid about \$10 million for the parcel and has had to change his project's design and build less parking in response to community concerns, but he said he thinks it's worth it.

"If you're going to build housing, there is no better place than a shut-down gas station with all of this transportation and shopping and existing infrastructure," Spiers said.

Peter Cohen, who lives in the area and is an advocate for affordable housing and public transit, said that the neighborhood already is thriving but could benefit from well-planned development.

"The question is how you preserve the character of the area while supporting growth," Cohen said. "That's the sweet spot we are aiming for."

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