

County inexplicably breaks off talks: Old Martinez Jail demolition looms once again



The New County Administration Building on Escobar is finally finished and operating, so at their recent February 9th meeting, the County Board of Supervisors voted to issue an RFP for demolition of the old County Administration Building at 651 Pine Street ... and the 1903 Jail and Annex across the street.

County's about-face: The Supervisors' decision came as a shock to the City of Martinez, Southport Land and Commercial Company, and The Architectural Preservation Foundation of Contra Costa County, all of whom have been involved for at least four years in negotiations with the County to save the Jail. As of January 26th, the negotiations, according to the County, were on track for a final agreement, with just "one last item" to be resolved – said item being reaching agreement on "assuming liability" for the Jail property, according to Eric Angstadt, Chief Assistant County Administrator, at the February 9th meeting.

Liability? Southport's plans to refurbish the Jail directly address lead paint, asbestos and soils contamination associated with the Jail, so it isn't clear what sort of "liability" was being referred to. The question was underscored when Supervisor Anderson asked about possible toxic plume migration from neighboring County properties that had toxics histories, and Angstadt replied that an extensive number of tests and mitigations had been performed, indicating that soils contamination was not an issue for the Jail.

Surprise requirement: Adding to the puzzlement at the February meeting was Angstadt's out-of-the-blue questioning of Southport's financial qualifications –

while hardly mentioning the “liability” that was the stated reason for the County’s terminating negotiations and moving towards demolition. The County has not only been negotiating with Southport for four years regarding the Jail, but the County had already entered into two quite similar agreements with Southport and the City of Martinez in the past regarding 610 and 630 Court Street - albeit before Angstadt came on board in 2016. 610 Court Street is finished and occupied; 630 Court Street is in progress. According to its letterhead, Southport is California’s oldest stock corporation, incorporated in 1861. It uses very conservative financing, so there are virtually no worries regarding Southport's failing, said worries being a deal breaker for Angstadt when negotiations began four years ago.

Parking needs: In 2017, the County proposed demolishing the Old Jail in order to replace it with nine parking spaces. At the end of 2020, a new parking deck with 75 stalls was built behind the new jail next to Willow Street. In addition, a new County Administration Building (just proposed) to replace 651 Pine after demolition will have substantial parking (“not too much, but not too little”), so there appears to be little reason to destroy the historic Jail for parking. All in all, the County’s action regarding the Jail appears capricious.

As a rule, senior career planning authorities just do their job in a quiet, under-the-radar, professional manner, without attracting attention. This doesn’t seem to quite be the case with Mr. Angstadt: <https://www.berkeleydailyplanet.com/issue/2012-05-04/article/39676>

The Historic Old Jail was built in 1903 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, representing classically inspired early 20th Century public buildings. It, along with the Courthouse (Finance Building), was Contra Costa County’s first major government headquarters. It was built of Vermont granite block “to last far into the future to express Contra Costa’s pride and confidence.” The Historic Old Jail is 118 years old.

- Harlan Strickland