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## LOCAL

## Surf City facing image makeover

Two projects figure to give the blue-collar beachfront a big helping of upscale.

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By **JIM HINCH**

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HUNTINGTON BEACH – Housewives Bunny Hart and Pam Lawrence sat in the sun one morning, sipped their coffee and talked the talk that has vexed and enticed downtown developers for years.

"I hate downtown Huntington Beach," Hart said, her face puckered.

"It's filthy. There're surf stickers all over everything. Slovenly kids walking around swearing.

"You can't walk around without some drunk walking into you, some person who escaped from somewhere. ... Huntington Beach attracts freaks," Hart said.

Lawrence considered. Her 17-year-old cruises his cherry red 1964 Ford on Main Street. Her parents like the surf-themed restaurants on the pier. The streets are safer than when her mom forbid her from going downtown in the 1960s.

Put in a Gap, she said, and "suburban moms" like herself would make downtown a destination.

Freaks, surf punks, tourists, beach-goers, developers, city officials and suburban moms have endlessly dreamed and schemed about one of Orange County's most famous stretches of waterfront.

Now, after years of false starts and bitter political debate, two massive redevelopment proposals are aiming to put a definitive stamp on what has long been an Orange County anomaly: a blue-collar beachfront whose oil-drilling past has never quite yielded to officials' vision of an upscale tourist mecca.

The proposals, one submitted in March, the other heading for approval later this year, would fill two massive vacant lots north and south of the pier with an eight-story hotel, hundreds of condominiums, chain clothing stores and big-name restaurants.

Officials say Pacific City and The Strand, as the proposals are named by developers, will cap a decade-long attempt to win over locals like



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Hart and attract lucrative conventions and international travelers to a waterfront once ruled by long-haired surfers, punk rockers and mom-and-pop cafes.

Said David Biggs, economic development director: "In my mind's eye, I see it evolving into Santa Barbara."

As outlined in a March proposal by Newport Beach-based Makar Properties, Pacific City would replace a 31-acre oil field south of the pier with a miniature city of condominiums, stores and restaurants anchored by an eight-story hotel.

The hotel would join two neighboring resorts - a 12-story Hilton and a soon-to-be-completed Hyatt - to form a convention-drawing hotel triumvirate, city officials say.

The proposal, at present a conceptual plan, will require months of review and environmental studies before it can be approved.

The Strand, slated for three vacant acres in the heart of downtown, will fill one and a half blocks with clothing stores, restaurants and offices topped by a four-story hotel. Officials say the development will finally lure local and regional shoppers who currently flock to out-of-town malls.

The Planning Commission is expected to vote on the project this summer.

If completed, the two projects will make downtown Huntington Beach the most heavily urbanized strip of coastline in Orange County, where most beaches are fronted by cliffs, homes or small towns.

Pacific City's price tag is not yet known.

The Strand, to be built by CIM Group of Hollywood, will cost about \$50 million. The city's redevelopment agency will contribute \$8 million in tax rebates to The Strand. The agency will also give the developer the 3-acre building site, which cost \$8 million when the agency bought it several years ago.

In return, the city expects to collect about \$9 million over the next 25 years in property, sales and hotel taxes.

"If you take it in financial terms, it may not work out," said Gus Duran, redevelopment manager.

"But we did what we were supposed to do: clean up a blighted area."

Duran said that without subsidies, the vacant lots would quickly fill up with what developers consider the most cost-effective use of heavily trafficked property: fast-food joints. "Probably not what the community wants," he said.

Mayor Debbie Cook, who 10 years ago fought a redevelopment

proposal for a shopping mall on the beach, said she isn't opposed to the projects as long as they follow city design and density guidelines. But she dislikes the subsidies, which were promised before she was elected, she said.

Others have mixed feelings about downtown's imminent glossy identity, and wonder whether problems can be solved more prosaically and cheaply.

Bill and Phil Gallegos, owners of The Shed restaurant on Fifth Street for 19 years, said better marketing and cheaper parking would fill downtown sidewalks.

Surrounded by the yellow Dutch clogs, Navajo rugs and cast-iron ranch-hand pots that deck their dining room walls (Phil is Dutch, Bill grew up on a New Mexico ranch), the couple said parking meters that charge \$1.50 per hour scare away more visitors than downtown's lingering rough reputation.

Parking fees are high because they pay for local beach and park amenities, officials said.

Jork Brandenburg and Tanya Ruge, German tourists ambling sleepily on Main Street with early-morning Jamba Juices in hand, said they had learned of The Strand from the owner of the motel they were staying in. Asked about it, they shook their heads.

"It's tacky," said Ruge. "It's too commercial," said Brandenburg.

They pointed to some renovated brick shops and cafes when asked their recipe for downtown success: "Little things, not the big things," Brandenburg said.

A photographer who has visited Huntington before to collect shots of surfers and skaters, Brandenburg said the city is famous among German youth for what he called street style: surf clothes, skate clothes and tattoos.

Replace those with chain stores, and you lose what makes Huntington distinctive, he said.

"Surf City needs to be more street-style, more real," he said.



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