

From the editor's desk: Why the county needs to buy the Castle

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson

Monday, 12 January 2009

Last Updated Wednesday, 18 March 2009

I don't like to make big pleas to local officials in a public way very often, because I like to save up for the big ticket items.

But the time has come. So, here goes.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors – if its members care at all about the future of the Northshore town of Lucerne – should give direction to county administrative staff to begin the process of purchasing the old Lucerne Hotel, which some of us here who know and love the building affectionately call “the Castle.”

Ignore that sound that you hear off in the distance of a screaming man in a buffalo print shirt and I'll explain.

In recent years, thanks mostly to the Lake County Redevelopment Agency, the county has purchased a lot of property for the purpose of sprucing up the county. That's not an entirely popular business with some folks, including Supervisor Rob Brown (hopefully he's stopped screaming in frustration by now).

A few years ago, when Brown happened to take a vacation and neglected to make sure his office at the courthouse was locked, county staff did a little modifying, draping his office in pink decorations, among them a prominent “I love redevelopment” poster – printed in pink – on one wall. It was pretty priceless. Wish I could find the pictures I took of that.

To his credit, Brown hasn't ruled out every redevelopment-funded property purchase the county has made, and has generally looked at them based on impact and merit.

In November 2007 he wholeheartedly supported the purchase of Clark's Island in Clearlake Oaks as a way of dealing with a blighted property that impacted the lake. When he embraced the purchase at a meeting a few months before the final vote to purchase, Supervisor Jeff Smith couldn't help himself – he had to give Brown a good ribbing about it, telling him, “You are coming around.”

So, there are no real absolutes in this process, and for the most part it's been approached with a great deal of care and investigation. I've appreciated it when board members question the process and are willing to disagree, because the resulting dialog has benefited the county's residents.

Now comes the announcement that the Lucerne Christian Conference Center – the group that owns the Castle – is putting it up for sale. No asking price yet, but they want to sell it fairly fast.

I have to make a quick qualification here – I live in Lucerne, within view of the Castle and just around the corner from it. Its spires greet me every day, and I'm utterly in love with the building.

So this is an appeal from the heart, not just from mine but from our little community's.

Please, Rob Brown, Jim Comstock, Tony Farrington, Jeff Smith, Denise Rushing ... buy the Castle for the entire county.

I've seen few buildings as unique in my travels around the rural reaches of Northern California. Personally, I can think of no other place that best exemplifies the possibilities for redevelopment than the Castle. How many opportunities does anyone have – whether private individuals or government agencies – to buy a big, beautiful white castle?

It's one of the county's largest buildings at 75,000 square feet, and one of the tallest at seven stories.

Why should the county buy this building?

Well, for one, to protect it. That, quite honestly, is the first and best reason.

The Castle has had a lot of missed opportunities since construction on it began in 1926, part of a vast dream for Lucerne. It wasn't even completed when the despair of the Great Depression descended on the country, leading to its first sale.

Now, here we are again, in a period now being called the Great Recession, and the Castle is on the block once more, littered with broken dreams and the best of intentions.

If nothing else, the board should purchase the building to protect it from the kind of real estate speculators who have held a death grip on Lucerne for years, buying up properties in key locations and then attempting to sell them – often to the county – for outrageously inflated rates often double the market value. It's part of the reason that I believe Lucerne still languishes economically and socially.

If you think I'm paranoid, you have to remember that I've both been studying this from a professional standpoint as a journalist and as a resident of this town. So I have some information that isn't widely known.

For example, I've come across information that indicates some of these same speculators I'm concerned about had their eyes on the Lucerne Alpine Senior Center. I don't believe it's any mistake that, when the county offered monetary support to get that center back on its feet, it included ironclad protections to try to keep the building's holding nonprofit from losing the property to a private owner.

That's a nightmare scenario for many Lucernians; but just as bad – or possibly worse – is the prospect that one of these speculators attempts to purchase the Castle and turn it into something such as a drug rehab or flop house, which we're all full up on, thank you very much.

If that happens, I guarantee, it will put a spike through the heart of this community. And it's going to be torch and pitchfork time here in the neighborhood. The mess that could result might find the county having to intervene and try to buy the building anyway, at a much-inflated price.

There's also the outrageous suggestion being made by the current owners to start selling off pieces of the seven-acre property the building sits on while they're waiting for a buyer, which would eat away at the building's opportunities.

Another reason to buy the building: There's nothing like it anywhere, situated as it is, with what is arguably one of the

most beautiful settings to be found. Napa and Sonoma counties may have grand buildings, but I can't think of a castle overlooking the water, as you would find in the original Lucerne in Switzerland – which, incidentally, is believed to be that country's most popular tourist destination.

Along other stretches of the Northshore, the county has taken the opportunity to buy and revitalize or give assistance in revitalizing areas that were either historically town centers or could serve as centers in areas where there weren't any.

Take The Plaza project in Clearlake Oaks, where the community and its willingness to partner with local government has put them very much ahead of the game in recreating what was reportedly once the little town's focal point. That project will reestablish a town center around which business and services can rotate.

In Nice, last summer the board decided to purchase Holiday Harbor, again suggesting it could be a town square, rather than the Hinman Park area previously chosen. That decision, according to District 3 Supervisor Denise Rushing, was urged by community members.

Brown, however, wasn't happy about it, especially from the standpoint that the county's redevelopment plan had centered on Hinman, and it represented a case of changing horses midstream. His reaction was a reasonable and understandable reaction to having a longstanding plan seem suddenly to change.

Lucerne already has a town center. It's the Castle. The town's widest street, 13th Avenue, was created to lead directly to the building, which is framed elegantly at the end of the street.

The county's redevelopment plan calls for commercial development with a mixed-use element – apartments over businesses – lining 13th Avenue. Those plans, connected to the Castle as a community and conference center and hotel, would be a masterstroke, and could end up being redevelopment's crowning achievement in Lake County.

The building's pool, tennis and basketball courts could be updated, its facilities improved. Lease out restaurant and pub space, have a day spa, a book shop and even rent out the hotel rooms, use its undeveloped grounds as a park, offer much-needed after school activities for local children. New and existing businesses could be stimulated and expanded in such an environment.

Just as reasonable an option is that the county purchase the land and hold it for resale to a thoroughly vetted and proven developer with a portfolio of successful, similar projects. The county also could enter into a unique public-private partnership with a commercial business that would provide a conference center and office space for county government functions mixed with business and community use.

There are literally endless options.

But what isn't an option here is letting this pass us by. Redevelopment isn't a concept that has universal approval or appeal, as we've already discussed, but I've seen it do tremendous good in Lake County.

I've seen what the impact of one building can be to a community. Here in Lucerne in 2007 the county purchased and demolished “the blue monster,” an old house that had become a lakeside eyesore.

The impact of having that building gone has been incredible on the town's look and feel. It's as if the evening light hits the town differently, with that lurking bulk out of the way. We're also eagerly awaiting the scheduled demolition this spring of two blighted motels on the other end of town.

Great, you say. But what about the money? How can the county afford this at such a difficult economic time? I'm glad you asked.

Here's the great part about redevelopment: The county redevelopment agency can finance this purchase.

Let me say that again: The county has the ability to do this. They can buy the Castle today and begin the process of saving it. Redevelopment can make that happen.

So, yes, it's possible. I've confirmed with county officials that the funding possibilities exist.

This will come down purely to a political decision for our board. If the money is there, it will be more about ideological concerns about government getting involved in private property ownership and commercial development.

However, we live in interesting times. With what's happening in our government right now – buying shares of banks and finance companies – the expectations of what government should be and what it should do have changed forever. The federal government has set the precedent of buying into private enterprise elsewhere, although not very well, but I believe our local government has the ability to make public-private partnerships work.

That's because I have faith in certain key people, who have made redevelopment work for the people of this county. They can take this opportunity and use redevelopment for a vast project of community rebuilding.

The chance is here now, however, and may not last long. If the county carries too much, the Castle could fall into an ownership that once again can't do the right things due to lack of will, knowledge or finance.

If the heart of the community isn't addressed, then other attempts to revitalize the Lucerne community may be seriously diminished. From that building flows huge possibilities, both good and bad, depending on what happens to it next.

This isn't an opportunity likely to present itself again – at least while the building is standing in its current condition. The next time, it could be a battered ruin, the saving of which could cost millions more than it would take today to turn it into a world-class community and conference center.

To the community: If you support this, let your supervisors know. E-mail them (you can find their addresses by going to this page and clicking on your district in the lefthand side of the page:

www.co.lake.ca.us/Government/Boards/Board_of_Supervisors.htm), call them at 263-2368 or – better yet – show up at the Board of Supervisors meeting on Tuesday. The Castle is scheduled to be discussed at 11:15 a.m.

To our supervisors, I implore you: Storm the Castle. Take it. Let the community come together to plan a future for it. You hesitate at the community's peril.

Elizabeth Larson is publisher and editor of Lake County News and proud to live in Lucerne.

{mos_sb_discuss:4}

