

# BERKELEY

## BUSINESS ADVOCATE

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## Can Berkeley afford 'European density'?

### Would six-story 'Parisian-style' buildings solve Berkeley's housing crisis?

By Dennis Evanosky

SECTION EDITOR

To those familiar with Heidelberg, Germany, the name invokes a sleepy university town on the Neckar River. Perhaps the town's castle comes to mind. For about three years in the early 1980s, my job took me to Heidelberg every other month, and I fondly remember this charming city transforming its busy, bustling downtown streets into a broad pedestrian zone. Today, for blocks on end one can traverse the "Old City" without worrying about cars and buses, streetcars and traffic lights.

Could this happen in another, livelier university town a world away? Could this happen in Berkeley? Could we give up our cars and walk down Telegraph from Dwight Way to Sather Gate, or down Shattuck from Channing to Bancroft, or down University from, say, Milvia to the UC campus without a car, bus or traffic light in the way?

Could we leave our homes, our apartments or condos along University or Telegraph, along Shattuck or San Pablo and not get into a car, — walk or depend on public transportation to get where we want to go?

When Patrick Kennedy of Panoramic Interests spoke to me recently of his vision of Parisian-style apartments along University, Shattuck and San Pablo avenues, three things came to mind: the Wells Fargo Building near the BART station on Shattuck, some newer condos at Shattuck and Channing — and Heidelberg.

To me, an Oaklander who looks forward to his visits to Berkeley, the Wells Fargo building represents the 20th century way of thinking, the condos a fresher perspective and Heidelberg, an ideal. In the past, in the 20th century, we dreamed of living in the suburbs, getting into our cars and going to work in a building not unlike the Wells Fargo high-rise.

Things have changed: We see far too many cars chasing far too few parking spaces. And buildings like the towering Wells Fargo building give rise to the fear that planners and builders just might trans-



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**THIS FIVE-STORY BUILDING** at Shattuck and Channing in Berkeley may point the way to the future as planners move toward a Parisian-style design for America's cities.

form downtown Berkeley into another Manhattan. Opponents point to a downtown high-rise like the Wells Fargo building and say, "Not in my backyard, not in my downtown."

This sort of attitude, which we know as NIMBYism, may place obstacles in the way

of getting Berkeley from that 20th century drive-to-work frame of mind to what some see as a fresher perspective. According to Kennedy an article of faith present in Berkeley politics feeds on the attitude that anything over two stories is bad.

But Kennedy thinks that the housing crisis in Berkeley has an easy solution: Build six-story "Parisian-style apartments" along University, Shattuck and San Pablo avenues. Kennedy calls University an "underachieving thoroughfare." He suggests making the street more desirable, with more amenities within walking distance. Other than a few popular restaurants, Kennedy sees too few neighborhood services on University today.

Those condos at Shattuck and Channing also remind me of Europe. Here, on a busy downtown thoroughfare, sits an elegant, modern five-story building with retail on the ground floor and housing above. Does

**'We need smart growth — intense development near transit.'**

Patrick Kennedy

this building represent the 21st century as closely as the Wells Fargo mirrors the 20th? Will we see more buildings like the one at Channing along Shattuck or University or even Telegraph?

Does this building and others like it on the drawing board represent the way we are going, the way we must go? In answer to this question, Kennedy points to housing in Stockholm, Sweden as a perfect example of the six-story solution.

Ten thousand Swedes live in a planned development, in a car-free environment. Kennedy thinks that this Swedish model has something to teach us. Perhaps this building at Shattuck and Channing is pointing us in that direction.

Kennedy says that he sees no reason to touch the neighborhoods that surround Berkeley's main corridors of University and San Pablo avenues. "We need smart growth, intense development near transit," he says.

"This is a political battle, he said. The city needs the starch and the will to set a course and follow it."

According to Kennedy, far too many politicians are caving in to a few obstructionists, allowing self-appointed activists to dictate policy.

The disabled and students get shut out of the process while arguments fly about preserving tin galvanized sheds, crumbling walls and vacant lots, he says.

Steven Donaldson of Bay Graphics Design agrees. Donaldson envisions what he calls the "six-story solution." Berkeley doesn't need high-rises over 10 stories, he says. We need six-story buildings on the main corridors. But Donaldson says Berkeley needs the political will to see itself through the current housing crisis.

"The City Council needs to set policy regarding rental units and expedite that policy," he says. But, as Donaldson sees it, too many key people oppose change. Because of the controversy, everything is stalled, no one is taking the lead.

John DeClercq credits Berkeley's former city manager Jim Keene with getting the conversation started about the city's future. "But smart growth is difficult to do when a few voices can block the construction of

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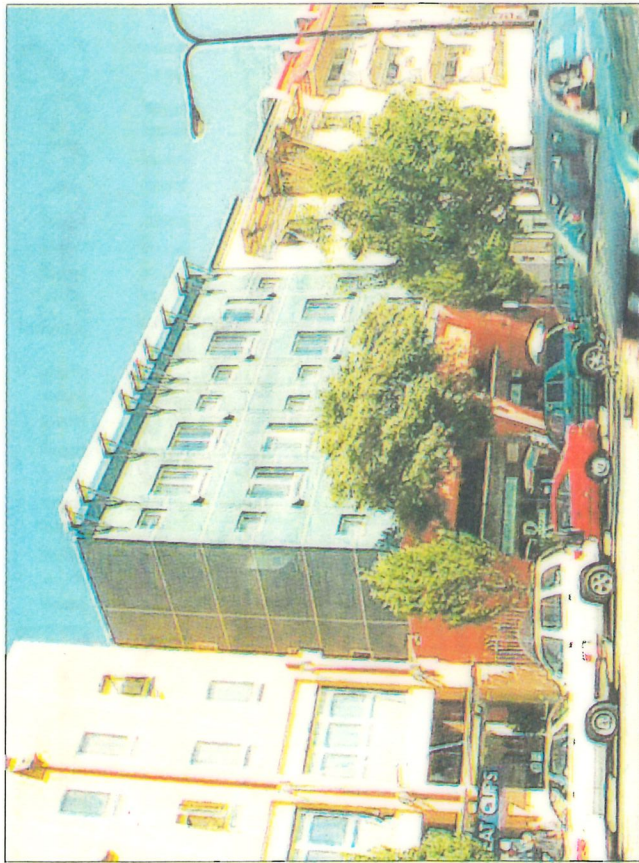
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**A SECOND FIVE-STORY building, center, adjacent to the one on Shattuck at Channing reflects the 21st century attitude of smart growth or urban fill.**

## Housing

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He thinks attitudes must change before anything else can really change. DeClercq cites Kennedy's recently thwarted attempt to build within the current code on San Pablo Avenue. "Patrick wanted to build there, he designed a project consistent with the zoning, but neighbors were affected and zap!"

Berkeley has plenty of room for smart growth. DeClercq thinks that the current general plan could house several thousand more residents in Berkeley.

But he points out that most sites are not available for construction and those that are present problems similar to ones Kennedy encountered on San Pablo.

Because of the prevailing attitude and lack of available sites, DeClercq sees the only solution as building up. "The solution to our housing needs must include higher heights where possible to counter the NIMBYs."

But building up gets expensive. The current code limits wood construction to 55 feet — five floors; higher than that requires steel and concrete.

"This gets geometrically more expensive," DeClercq points out. "In order to go higher than 55 feet, a builder needs to go eight or nine stories to break even. In order to build higher, eight stories and above, changes to the city's general plan are needed. That's what we've been working toward: a few sites that can properly accommodate a tall building."

Bill Lambert of the City of Berkeley's Economic Development department says the debate must reach beyond housing. "Dense, inner-city mixed-use developments are a better solution," he says. And he sees an economic upside to smart growth. "What isn't being said here is that denser-higher housing projects mean more disposable income for those who live there."

Residents who occupy this new urban infill will no longer drive to do their shopping, get a hair cut, buy or rent their videos. The proponents say, will all be done



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**THE HIGH-RISE THAT HOUSES Wells Fargo Bank reflects the 20th century attitude of commuting to work; it also symbolizes the fear many have of the "Manhattanization" of Berkeley.**

right in the neighborhoods where smart growth has succeeded.

"Many businesses are hoping and praying for 'crowded' urban areas for survival," says DeClercq. "How can local, unique stores survive unless there's a lot of neighborhood people who shop at these businesses?"

The challenges facing Berkeley and, indeed the Bay Area and beyond, are daunting. The price of a home has reach such heights that fewer and fewer can afford to step up and buy. And more people are coming.

"Most say that they want more housing," DeClercq says. "Only a few make it possible. Many want a perfect world, but creating perfect housing on perfect sites is difficult. Housing or action? Such is the essence of the controversy."

**Creating perfect housing on perfect sites is difficult. Housing or perfection? Such is the essence of the controversy.**

John DeClercq