

Baby Doe's neighbors oppose apartments

Area already has too many rentals, they say

By John Rebchook, Rocky Mountain News
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The company headed by the owner of the National Football League's San Diego Chargers wants to buy and raze Baby Doe's restaurant to make way for a large apartment community two blocks from Invesco Field at Mile High.

The Stockton, Calif.-based A.G. Spanos Cos., founded in 1960 by Chargers owner Alex Spanos, has the Baby Doe's Matchless Mine site at 2520 W. 23rd Ave. and the adjoining Chili Pepper restaurant at 2150 Bryant St. under contract.

But the plan, in the words of one resident in the adjacent Jefferson Park neighborhood, faces "massive opposition."

The site is considered prime real estate because of its hilltop location and dramatic views of the downtown skyline.

Baby Doe's, which opened in 1978, closed more than a year ago and is open only for special events.

Initial plans call for tearing down the restaurants and replacing them with 250 to 300 apartment units in a four-story development. Real estate experts estimate the cost to build all 300 units would be about \$45 million.

But residents of the Jefferson Park neighborhood argue there already are too many renters in the northwest Denver area. The neighborhood, just south of the West Highland area, is one of the oldest and smallest neighborhoods in Denver.

On Tuesday night, members of Jefferson Park United Neighbors criticized Spanos' plan at a meeting in Riverside Baptist Church, across the street from Baby Doe's.

Bruce O'Donnell, Spanos' Denver representative for the proposal, was told that about 80 percent of the residents in Jefferson Park are renters.

On Monday, Denver City Council approved an 87-page neighborhood plan for Jefferson Park that calls for "bringing a greater number of single-family home ownership opportunities as part of stabilizing the neighborhood," said Councilman Rick Garcia, who represents northwest Denver.

The plan recommends that any redevelopment of the Baby Doe's site retain its views of downtown.

"The view plane is very critical," Barbara Baker, a member of the neighborhood group, said Wednesday. "I would like to see a mixed-use development," with a wide range of housing prices.

During the meeting, neighbor Brad Evans cited "massive opposition" to the plan and asked O'Donnell what he will tell the Spanos organization.

"I'm going to tell them there is massive opposition," O'Donnell, principal of Denver-based Starboard Realty Group, replied. "They will digest that. This is just the beginning. I'm not trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes."

Evans, a real estate agent with Keller Williams, said he would like to see "quality townhomes" or possibly a high-quality restaurant on the site.

"Nobody is opposed to seeing an old run-down restaurant torn down," he said of Baby Doe's. "We just want it replaced with something that will not just make the developer happy."

Although it's too early to estimate the dollar value of the project or monthly rents, O'Donnell said land prices and construction prices likely will "drive projects like this toward middle- and upper-income renters. This is not going to be a shoddy, cheaper project."

He said the "ideal" scenario would be to make it 100 percent rental because that is the core business of Spanos. But he said Spanos has built some for-sale homes in other parts of the country.

Another member of the neighborhood group, Rafael Espinoza, said neighbors have been inundated with "hearsay and innuendo" about the Spanos project for the past four months, and he was disturbed that O'Donnell had met with city officials before meeting with neighbors.

"It looks (like) you are trying to handle it at such a high level that it would bypass us," Espinoza said.

But O'Donnell responded, "We look forward and anticipate a public process with plenty of community involvement. Personally, I do not want to be involved with a project that is just rammed through or attempted to be rammed through."

Neighbors fear losing views of the Denver skyline, above, as seen from Riverside Baptist Church, next door to the Baby Doe's Matchless Mine, left, and Chili Pepper restaurants. The structures could be demolished to make way for apartments proposed by a company owned by San Diego Chargers owner Alex Spanos.

rebhookj@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-5207

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