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Thursday Jul 26

Board OKs auto lifts for condo project

Space-saving devices earn cautious approval from city

By Will Oremus / Daily News Staff Writer

A gadget that gives new meaning to the term "off-street parking" could get a test run on the Peninsula after San Mateo's Planning Commission for the first time approved the use of auto lifts in a residential parking lot.

The decision Tuesday cleared the way for a project to convert 28 apartments into 24 condominiums on Lago Street, a renovation that wouldn't have been possible without the lifts. The lot wasn't big enough to accommodate the number of traditional off-street parking spaces the city requires these days.

In giving the green light to the innovative contraption, which stacks parked cars vertically to save space, the planning commission said it hopes the first one will serve as a test case. Until it's clear that residents will actually use the lifts, developers hoping to use them will have to get a special permit from the city.

Planning commissioner Robert Gooyer likes the concept but worries that the lifts could prove intimidating to older folks and inconvenient for those in a rush.

To retrieve a car from the upper level, a user must push a button on the outside of the structure. The bottom row of vehicles then automatically slides over to make room for the car to be lowered to street level.

While auto lifts are in use in San Francisco and Berkeley, they remain all but unheard of in suburban San Mateo County, said Norman Brudigam, president of a regional dealership that sells German-made Klaus Parking Lifts.

That could be changing with the scarcity of local land and the continued demand for housing. San Mateo joins Redwood City and San Carlos in explicitly welcoming the devices, though none are slated to be built in the latter two cities.

The hope, planners say, is that the lifts will mean less asphalt and more housing and landscaping on cramped lots.

"I think it's terrific because it conserves land space," said Jill Ekas, Redwood City's planning manager, adding that they might fit right in with her city's downtown development plans.

"If you think about building higher-density residential projects in a downtown setting, I would anticipate that people interested in that sort of urban lifestyle might be comfortable using this innovation," Ekas said.

The San Mateo proposal is seen by that city as a good trial because of its small scale. The Lago Street condominium plans call for a single two-story lift structure to fit 11 cars into a six-car space.

Donald Luu, a partner in the Lago Street project, said he understands San Mateo's cautious approach to a new technology. But he thinks the lifts will catch on quickly.

"Talking to some of the tenants that have used them in Berkeley, they in fact love the idea of their car being stowed away in a parking lift, because it's a theft deterrent," Luu said. "It also keeps the car from being bumped or scratched."

When the Lago Street project actually goes forward will depend on the market, Luu said, adding that it could be completed by the middle of next year at the earliest.

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