

## **City should re-think location of cineplex parking garage**

By Irene Dieter

Sitting on a shelf in city hall are two studies that could help end the controversy over the theater/garage project currently being planned for downtown Alameda. The Park Street Streetscape and Town Center Project study and the Parking Structure Feasibility study were both prepared in 2002 by city-hired experts with countless hours of community input. Both studies indicate that the proposed parking garage near the corner of Oak Street and Central Avenue is in the wrong place. They point instead to the Elks Lodge parking lot as the best site for a new garage.

The Streetscape and Town Center study covers traffic circulation, land use, and parking. The Town Center team of 27 individuals plus consultants recommends a pedestrian-oriented civic corridor along Oak Street with a plaza. They never envisioned and never recommended traffic from a parking garage there.

In response to the streetscape and town center efforts, the Parking Structure Feasibility study looked at viable sites for a parking garage and identified the Elks Lodge parking lot as ideal. According to articles in the Alameda Journal in October 2002, the Elks responded favorably, offering their site for parking, with the provision that they get a rebuilt gym. The project also provided for additional city office space above the section of the garage facing Oak Street. Members of the Downtown Vision Task Force responded favorably as well, saying: "The Elks Lodge site will produce the most parking for the least money and has better ingress and egress than the other possibilities" (Oct. 22, 2002). Furthermore, the cost for this entire package, in 2002 dollars, was a little over \$10 million, almost the same as the cost of the current garage proposal. The Elks Lodge garage would provide 513 total spaces with 163 spaces reserved for Elks' events, versus the current proposal for 352 spaces.

What else makes the Elks' site ideal? The feasibility study notes its close proximity to city hall, the police station, the proposed library, and the historic theater. The study also suggests that the parking structure would extend onto the existing parking lot between city hall and the police station in an L-shaped configuration that would provide easy pedestrian access and visibility to downtown. The main entrance and exit would be on Lincoln Avenue—an established traffic corridor—with a suggested secondary entrance and exit on Oak Street, presumably for city employees. The garage would be discreetly nestled among existing buildings.

The added distance from the Elks Lodge site to the theater is only one block, an inconsequential walk for most people. Priority parking for those with mobility impairments could be made available at the existing city lot across from the theater.

Moving the garage to the Elks' site will address the two main environmental concerns about the current theater/garage project: poor traffic circulation and the massiveness of the combined cineplex and garage on the corner of Oak and Central. An Elks' site garage would free up valuable space at this corner for the town plaza envisioned by the Town Center study. Instead of cars, we could have a fountain, benches, and trees in the heart of our downtown—a relaxed gathering place for moviegoers, shoppers, diners, and those enjoying a stroll through their own downtown.

Moving the parking structure to the Elks Lodge site may cost a little more than the current garage proposal, but we would get so much more for our money. Besides the environmental benefits, we would have more parking spaces, more city office space, and open space for a plaza. It's time to take those 2002 studies down off the city hall shelf.