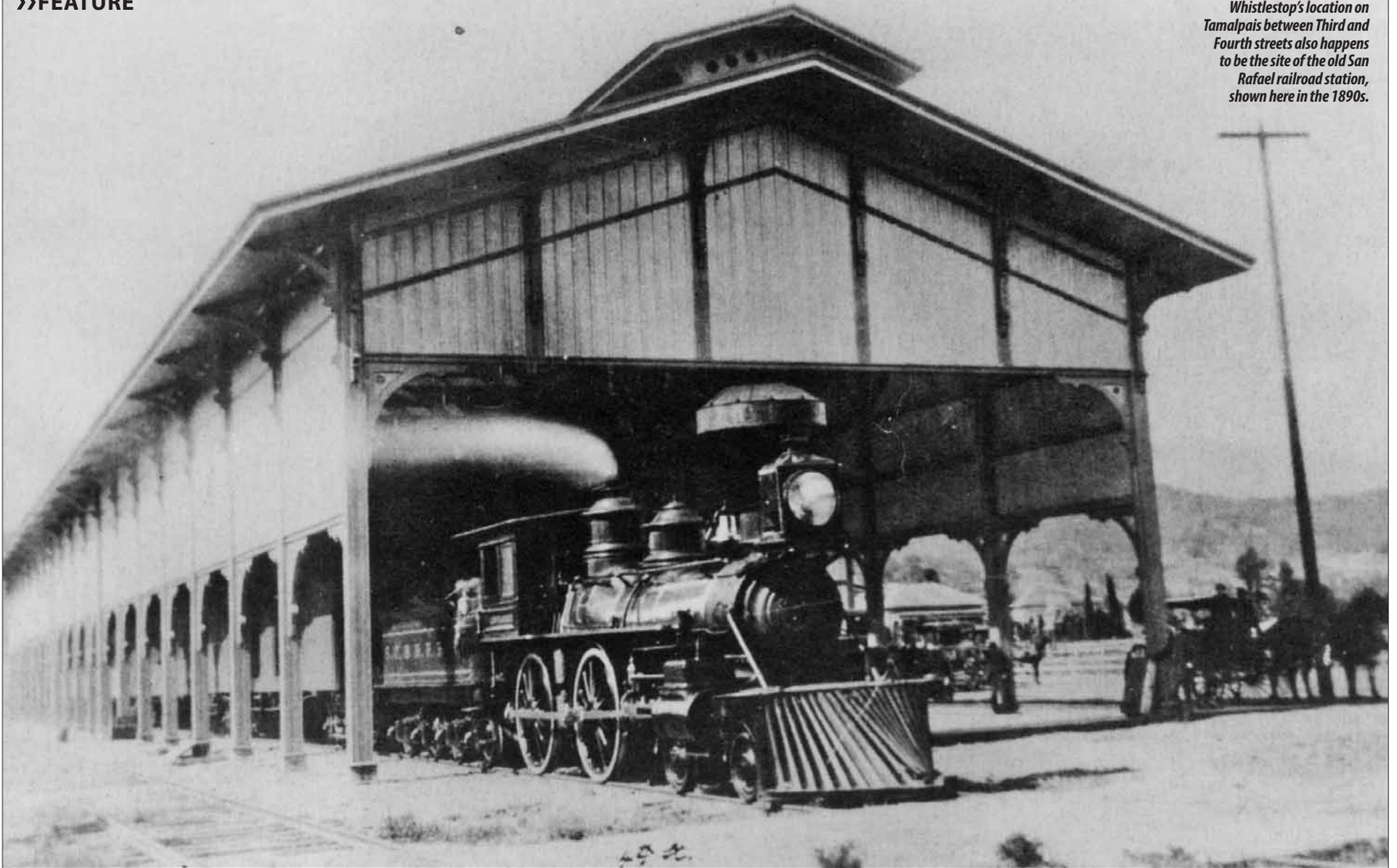


Whistlestop's location on Tamalpais between Third and Fourth streets also happens to be the site of the old San Rafael railroad station, shown here in the 1890s.



Down by the Station

After crossing tracks over rail line, Whistlestop and SMART chug toward a transit-housing destination

by
Peter
Seidman

Talk about making lemonade from lemons. Rather than threatening to sue SMART over possible construction obstruction at the downtown San Rafael station, Whistlestop now envisions a new building that would be the first transit-oriented development for seniors and people with disabilities in Marin along the SMART rail line.

"We want to take the challenge that we have with the SMART train coming here and really create an opportunity for the community," says Joe O'Hehir, Whistlestop CEO.

Back in November 2011, the Marin Senior Coordinating Council (Whistlestop's formal name) notified the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit District that Whistlestop might pursue a legal claim against SMART

if SMART continued with its construction plans for the downtown San Rafael station.

Many Marin residents are aware of the Whistlestop shuttles that are a key part of the organization's services, but, as the legal claim noted, Whistlestop does much more than act as a bus service. In addition to the transit services, the organization offers help "for dealing with insurance and other practical issues, multilingual support groups, multicultural experiences, and a variety of programs that assist and enrich the lives of the older adult community." It also serves as a social gathering point for older adults and helps them remain connected to their community.

As outlined in the notice to file a legal

claim, construction of the SMART station would eliminate 23 parking spaces associated with the property at 930 Tamalpais Avenue. Reducing

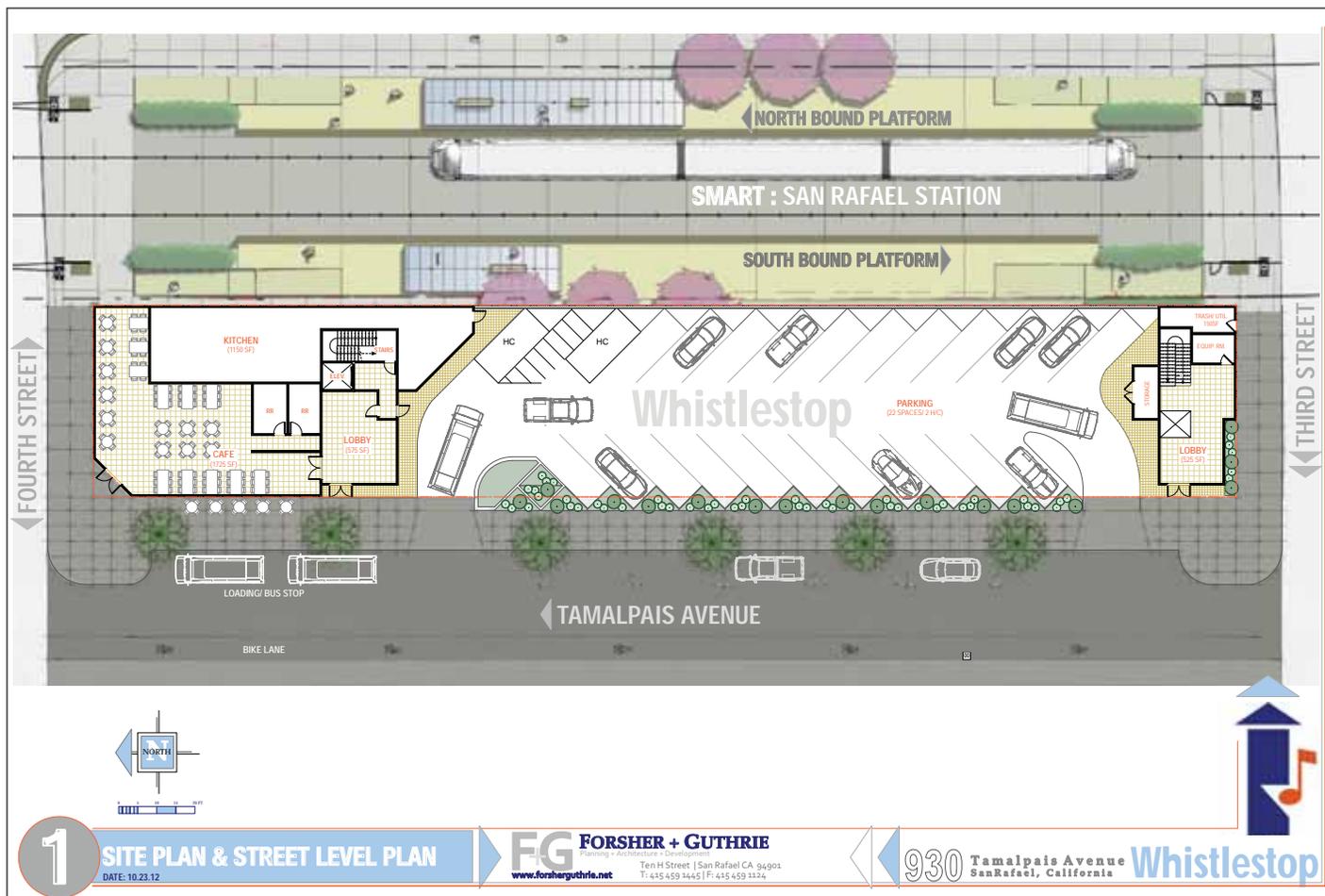
the number of available parking places, Whistlestop worried, could put the building out of compliance with the city. Construction also could hamper access for persons with disabilities. "Construction and operation of the San Rafael station adjacent to the Whistlestop property will have disastrous impacts on Whistlestop's ability to provide its desperately needed services to the elderly and the disabled."

A solution floated that would have called for SMART to buy the Whistlestop building, which the nonprofit organization bought in

1971. Its current value has been assessed at \$3.6 million. The nonprofit could take the purchase money and use it to relocate. But in talking about the potential legal claim in February 2012, Farhad Mansourian, executive director at SMART, said the rail agency had no interest in buying the Whistlestop building. "They did what they thought they needed to do," says Mansourian about the notice of filing a legal claim. "We always said we care about your services. Let's work together." Even as late as June 2012, the future of the Whistlestop building remained uncertain.

Mansourian says Whistlestop wrote a letter to SMART that stated the nonprofit was planning to drop its potential legal action. Instead of butting heads with SMART, Whistle-

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1 SITE PLAN & STREET LEVEL PLAN

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< 11 Down by the station

stop has embarked on a bold plan to redevelop its property into a center that would continue to offer its Whistlestop services for older adults—and provide 50 units of affordable housing for seniors. “We see many older adults coming here, and they love spending the day here,” says O’Hehir. “Then they have to return to these places where they are lonely and isolated. I’ve always thought we should be able to build some housing where older adults who want to give up their cars can be near a transit center and be able to walk downtown.” That transit-oriented concept was inherent in the minds of SMART planners for its first stages. And transit-oriented development has gained considerable interest among regional planners, despite critics who say the concept of transit-oriented development is the wrong way to go.



THE KEY COMPONENT of the Whistlestop Renaissance Project, as the organization is calling its plan, will be to complement its active aging center with the on-site affordable housing. The concept of active aging has been a key element of the Marin Senior Coordinating Council, an organization started in 1954 by volunteers who got together to look at the issues facing older adults in Marin. Whistlestop has been working quietly with the architectural firm of Forsher + Guthrie for the past nine months to develop a conceptual plan for the new Whistlestop building. O’Hehir says it applies the city’s current land-use and zoning policies, and the concept works, although parking will remain a challenge.

The design of the new building will mitigate part of that parking challenge. The first floor, according to O’Hehir, will feature a relocated entrance for the Jackson Cafe, which passersby will see. The ground floor also will allow for 25 to 27 parking spaces. And it will accommodate the Whistlestop shuttles as they drop off and pick up passengers. Also on

the ground floor will be two lobbies, one for the residences on the second through fourth floors, and one for a new active aging center on the top floor.

The residences will be 600-square-foot one-bedroom units. A two-bedroom unit will be home to a resident manager. The active aging center on the top floor will face west,

giving it a view of Mount Tam. The fifth floor also could serve as space for community use and other nonprofit groups, notes O’Hehir. “We are going to have a nice top floor with community rooms and classes and some open garden space, so the residents and the typical day visitors who we have at Whistlestop will have access to a beautiful active aging center, and they can come in and have classes and activities that we offer now.”

In the notice of intent to file a legal claim, Whistlestop said it had access to about 40 parking spaces, and the 23 places that SMART would eliminate would mean the nonprofit could no longer meet its parking demand. No one says the challenge of finding enough parking spaces is an easy task, but the conversation has turned from adversarial to cooperative.

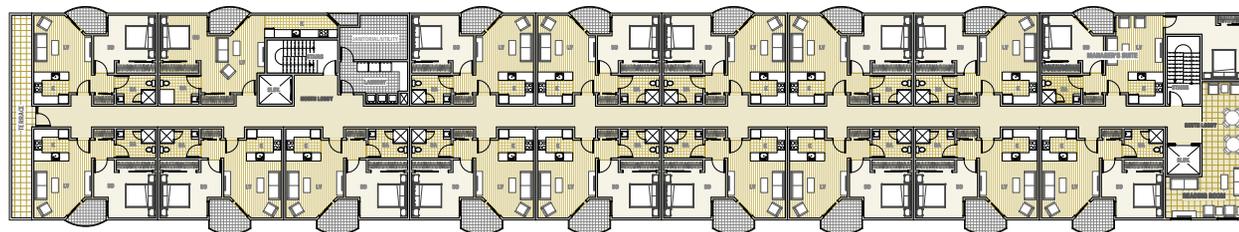
O’Hehir says his organization has reached out to other nonprofits in similar situations and determined that senior housing such as the type envisioned in the Whistlestop project can meet parking demand by providing one-half of a parking space for each residential unit. That’s practical because many older adults in this type of living arrangement have stopped driving. The 25 to 27 parking spaces now in the plan meet that need. And the ability of Whistlestop shuttles to drive essentially into the building to load and unload passengers takes care of that requirement.

But parking still remains a challenge, especially in the transition period when SMART begins construction but before Whistlestop has finished its new building. Whistlestop is looking around its immediate neighborhood to determine if it can find some alternative parking, at least on an interim basis, which would mean it could continue to have its current approximately 40 spaces. “And we have



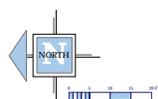
ACTIVE AGING FLOOR PLAN | LEVEL 5

SCALE: 1" = 10'-0"



RESIDENTIAL FLOOR PLANS | LEVELS 2-4

SCALE: 1" = 10'-0"



2 UPPER LEVEL FLOOR PLANS

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been working with the city on a couple of leased lots within a block or so," says O'Hehir. "Parking still remains a challenge. It's our challenge now, and it's going to be a challenge for anything into the future. We are just trying to look at any options we can."

The SMART board has been supportive of Whistlestop services, says Mansourian. "We have put money on the table to help them relocate parking spaces. At one point we were talking about relocating their entrance."

But Whistlestop, says Mansourian, decided it could continue to operate temporarily under its current configuration while plans proceed for the new building. "What SMART has offered, and what they have gladly accepted," is help to lease parking nearby during construction and design review for the new building. SMART is keeping the amount of financial help it's offering close to the vest, at least for the time being, because Whistlestop currently is negotiating with a few property owners for potential sites for leased parking. If property owners learn how much money SMART has put on the table during the negotiations with Whistlestop, it could sour a deal.

• • • •

THE PRECISE COST for the new building will come into clearer focus as the conceptual plan moves through the design and planning-review process, says O'Hehir. But initial budget work shows that the structure will be in the \$21 million neighborhood and will take about five years from planning to finished construction. (Of course much can happen on the road that starts from a conceptual plan, especially in Marin, a center of the CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) challenge. One thing in Whistlestop's favor: The building already is zoned for mixed use. And it's now politically correct to add transit-oriented development, despite naysayers.)

Whistlestop talked with about 10 nonprofit affordable housing organizations to find a partner for the affordable housing element of the plan. Three organizations still are in the running: Mercy Housing, Eden Housing and BRIDGE housing. Each already has experience in Marin. The organization that becomes the housing partner will take the lead on funding for the project, using its expertise and connections in the affordable housing world.

Whistlestop's financial stake in the property, says O'Hehir, should go a long way toward fulfilling his organization's financial participation. It owns the property free and clear. And the services that Whistlestop provides add another benefit to the bottom line for any affordable housing organization that may become a Whistlestop partner. O'Hehir says it's likely the project still will need some "local funding." Whistlestop has spoken with the Marin Community Foundation; although



Whistlestop CEO Joe O'Hehir has grand plans for Marin's active-aging community—but the big challenge, he says, could be parking.

in the early stages any talks must be preliminary, especially until Whistlestop chooses a housing partner. O'Hehir says his organization should make that decision by the end of January. County Supervisor Steve Kinsey, who sits on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, has expressed support for the project, adds O'Hehir.

Putting together financing packages for affordable housing always is a complicated job, and this project, Marin's first transit-oriented development for seniors and people with disabilities, could be even more complicated because it could draw funding from additional sources. That's why organizations such as Whistlestop turn to nonprofit affordable housing groups to "put these types of capital stacks together," says O'Hehir.

Although many may debate design details for the new building, few are able to contradict the need for more services and affordable housing for seniors in Marin. In 2008, the Marin Community Foundation commissioned a report on services needed for older adults in the county. Those needs, as well as the need for affordable housing, have been core goals at the foundation.

"The ranks of those ages 65-74 in Marin are growing by 20,000 people between the years 2000 and 2020," the report states. And that doesn't include residents older than 74, "whose needs and perspectives are critically important as well."

The report notes that the need for "improved and expanded access to transportation is recognized as a major issue among all who contributed to this study." In addition to accessibility to public transportation, the report notes, "a related concern is walkability. Marin's older adults lead active lives. An important factor influencing their ability to remain active is living in an environment with easy accessibility to parks, trails, and walkable neighborhoods that are located close to stores and restaurants."

The Whistlestop Renaissance Project is a model for that concept. It also is a model for a SMART-oriented transit development and one that helps San Rafael fulfill its housing needs.

"We're excited," says O'Hehir. In a cooperative effort with the city and SMART, he says, Whistlestop could be the catalyst for taking the largest single property in the downtown station planning vicinity and starting the redevelopment of the SMART station area.

Whistlestop will continue to work with SMART, says O'Hehir, as the rail agency continues its planning for the station. The goal, he says, should be for the station and the new building to become "one contiguous design." *

Contact the writer at peter@psidman.com.

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