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THE FORMER Ellis-Olson Mortuary at 727 San Pablo Ave. in Albany, is the site of a proposed three-story mixed-use complex.

Mixed-use proposal getting another look

By Alan Lopez
STAFF WRITER

ALBANY — A proposal to build a massive three-story condominium and retail building at San Pablo Avenue between Portland and Washington avenues will be brought back to the city's planning and zoning commission for approval as early as October following criticisms of the project's design at a recent meeting.

The project would extend from San Pablo Avenue east to Kains Avenue and would include 25 condominiums on the top two floors, and 5,656 square feet of retail or restaurant uses on the first floor along with 72 parking spaces.

It could reach up to 45 feet tall and would be the third mixed-use building on San Pablo Avenue in Albany in recent years.

The building would take over property now occupied by the

former Ellis Olson Mortuary, an adjacent parking lot on San Pablo Avenue and a home and two four-car garages on Kains Avenue.

At Tuesday night's planning and zoning commission meeting, commissioners and several residents had a number of criticisms about the project's design and how it would fit in with the adjacent neighborhood.

Albany planning manager Dave Dowsnell felt the biggest problem was the way the building looked. The plans were unattractive, he said, and he worried about what it would look like once built.

"If you look at it, it looks like two different buildings that have been merged together," Dowsnell said.

"It looks almost like you had

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a single-story building and put this on top of it as a remodel," added planning and zoning commissioner Phillip Moss.

Commissioners and residents also complained about a 6-foot-high concrete wall intended to buffer the project from the rest of the neighborhood on Kains Avenue.

"It almost was itself off and it's not inviting," Moss added.

"And I'd like to see something a little more inviting for the community."

Several neighbors also felt the project was out of scale with the neighborhood.

Similar complaints have been made about Albany Commons, a four-story building at 914-916 San Pablo Avenue, just south of Solano Avenue. That's the reason the city is taking such care to correct design problems in the new project, Dowsnell said.

"This is the most prominent site that will be redeveloped and

we can't afford to make a mistake at this site," he said during the meeting.

Developer Aaron Vitale of El Cerrito-based Vital Properties LLC said he felt the comments were constructive and would bring the project back for consideration with design changes

in late September or early October.

"We're going to take the comments very constructively and come back with an improved project," Vitale said after the meeting.

Apartments at ex-mortuary site OK'd

The Albany planning commission voted 3-0 Tuesday night to approve a three-story apartment building on San Pablo Avenue, south of Portland Avenue. The project will be built at the site of the former Ellis-Olson Mortuary building, at 727 San Pablo Ave. It will have 25 apartment units and 6,400 square feet of commercial space.

It will require the demolition of a home on Kains Avenue and two four-car garages formerly used by the mortuary.

Albany planning manager Dave Dowsnell expected the project to break ground in 2006. "They have a lot of work to do," he said, of the development team.

The commission also discussed a new zoning ordinance that will regulate wireless communication facilities in the city, but postponed a vote on the ordinance until its next meeting on Jan. 25.

— Alan Lopez