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## WHY DID THE BUILDING CROSS THE STREET?

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ALAN LOPEZ, STAFF WRITER

**Caption:** Photo 1. Workers are demolishing the back part of the vacant El Cerrito Mill and Lumber building during the beginning stages of its move across the street. Photo 2. Construction workers Scott Stewart, Chris Cristobal, and Joel Touijan discuss the logistics of dismantling the vacant building. (Tue Nam Ton/Staff).

EL CERRITO -The El Cerrito Mill and Lumber building is getting a new home for the second time in about 80 years.

Now sitting at the corner of San Pablo Avenue and Schmidt Lane, it will be moved just across the street to the west side of San Pablo and used for retail and office space. One- and two-bedroom apartments will be placed on the piece of land the building now occupies.

"We're going to keep the integrity of the building, and make some positive improvements to the building," said **Aaron Vitale**, president of Vital Building and Enterprises Inc., the owner of the building.

The Mill and Lumber building was a former dance hall and chicken stand called "Mamie's Shack" in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Jack Freethy, whose parents bought the building and its business in 1944. It sat across San Pablo Avenue from what is now the Del Norte BART station.

From the late 1930s on, the building housed a mill and lumber business, which sold decorative specialty moldings for buildings as well as building materials until Freethy closed up shop in 2000. The building itself moved to its current location in the late 1930s.

In 1996 Freethy remodeled the building's exterior, giving it an old-fashioned Victorian "gingerbread house" look, to attract business, and eventually a buyer, so he could retire.

"We went from the worst-looking building to the best-looking building," said Freethy, standing in front of his old building while construction crews began tearing some of it apart. "That's what everybody tells us."

Vitale heard the building was up for sale earlier this year, and bought it about three months ago, while trying to figure out what to do with the parcel of land across the street that he purchased two years ago.

"We heard input that everybody would like the building to be saved," said Vitale. "A couple people even approached us to find a way to save the building."

On Tuesday, construction crews were busy putting up a fence around the perimeter and demolishing the former milling shed and storage space that sat to the east of the building. The building's exterior and offices, however, will be saved.

"Everything you see from the street you're still going to see," said Vitale. After demolition, the building will be swiveled 180 degrees, then in late August, placed on giant dollies and moved across the street at a cost of about \$100,000.

A portion of the building on the north side will be raised and a new floor will be erected underneath it. The building will house about 2,700 square feet of commercial space on the bottom floor and nearly 1,700 square feet of office space on the top floor.

Vitale said city officials from Richmond and El Cerrito have been very helpful with the plan. The building will sit in Richmond but retain an El Cerrito address.

"I actually am quite excited about that building going there," said Mayor Janet Abelson. "It's not going to be in El Cerrito but if it's not going to be in El Cerrito, why not across the street from where it was? So he's saving the building and it'll be a great improvement for the avenue."

As for Freethy, he retired in 2000, but gave his equipment and advice to three former employees who recently started a new company in Oakland called El Cerrito Woodworking.

He's happy the building will be saved.

"It was a win-win situation mainly because we could move the company and we could provide the services necessary to the Bay Area in the woodworking field," he said, with the sound of jackhammering in the background. "It's been two to three years in planning at least."

Reach Alan Lopez at 510-243-3578 or at [alopez1@cctimes.com](mailto:alopez1@cctimes.com).