

THE CAPITAL

"Preserving Santa Barbara's historic sites of enduring community value"

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JUNE MEETINGS OF INTEREST

PEARL CHASE SOCIETY

Next Board of Directors meeting at the Carriage and Western Art Museum of Santa Barbara, 129 Castillo Street, June 4 at 3:30 p.m.

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA

City meetings are broadcast live on City TV channel 18 and streamed live [HERE](#), where they are also archived and viewable on demand.

City Council

Tuesdays at 2 pm at Council Chambers, City Hall. [HERE](#). JUNE 2, 9, 16

Planning Commission

First, second and third Thursdays of the month at 1 pm at Council Chambers, City Hall. [HERE](#). JUNE 4, 11, 18

Historic Landmarks Commission

Every other Wednesday at 1:30 pm at the David Gebhard Public Meeting Room, 630 Garden Street. [HERE](#). JUNE 3, 17

Architectural Board of Review

Alternate Mondays at 3 pm at the David Gebhard Public Meeting Room, 630 Garden Street. [HERE](#). JUNE 8, 22

COUNTY OF SANTA BARBARA

County Board of Supervisor Meetings and Planning Commission meetings are broadcast live on CSBTIV20. They are also streamed live [HERE](#) where they are also archived and viewable on demand.

County Board of Supervisors

Three Tuesdays of the month at 9 a.m. The first and third meetings are held in Santa Barbara in the Board of Supervisors Hearing Room, 105 East Anapamu Street, 4th Floor. The second meeting is (typically) held in Santa Maria at 511 East Lakeside Parkway. JUNE 2 (SB), 16 and 18 budget (SB), 23 (SM)

County Planning Commission

Three Wednesdays of the month at 9 a.m. The first and third meetings are held in Santa Barbara at 123 East Anapamu Street, Room 17, and the second meeting is (typically) held in Santa Maria at 511 East Lakeside Parkway. JUNE 3 (SB), 10 (SM), 24 (SB)

County Historic Landmarks Advisory Commission

Second Monday of the month at 10 a.m. at 123 East Anapamu Street, Room 17 (unless specified otherwise). JUNE 8

News and Notes

June is a month of action for all of us to get involved. The most important thing you can and must do this month is VOTE! California's primary election day is June 2. Whatever your political persuasion or belief system, the importance of voting—of having your say—cannot be overstated. It is your opportunity to stand up and be counted, no matter the final vote tally. Your voice—your choice—matters.

STATE STREET

And on the subject of having your say, there is still time for you to weigh in with your concerns about the State Street Master Plan. This is your chance to express your thoughts and requests for what happens to State Street for the next 20 to 30 years. The downtown corridor has long defined Santa Barbara, and the more who weigh in, the more representative the outcome. View the City's State Street site [HERE](#)

HIGH-RISE DEVELOPMENT

Along the same lines, you may want to take a look at—and support—the group known as SAGE-SB: Smart Action for Growth & Equity, Santa Barbara. Much like the work done by community members who created of Save Our City in the 1960s, this grassroots group of concerned citizens is tackling the complicated work of addressing inappropriate high-rise development in Santa Barbara. Keep up-to-date about the latest news about these Builder's Remedy projects that are completely out of scale, out-of-character and inappropriate for their locations. Learn more [HERE](#)

THEN and NOW

For inspiration, be sure to read our special report on the proposed El Mirasol condominium project once promoted for the square-block setting where Alice Keck Park Memorial Garden was (thankfully) established. Try to envision what that part of town—and its surrounding area—would now look like if community members had not stood up and spoken out against inappropriate development then. And reflect on what we can do now.

CALIFORNIA
PRIMARY ELECTION
2026



SAGE
SMART ACTION FOR
GROWTH & EQUITY
SANTA BARBARA

**Want to get involved, or have submissions for
The Capital? Email us at PCS@pearlchasesociety.org.**

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and comments to:

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Newsletter

Cheri Rae, *editor*

Lisa DeSpain, *graphics*

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The Big Battle: When Santa Barbara Community Members Fought High Rise Development—and Won!

The El Mirasol project offers an example of how community members organized and worked together; and how values, history, and tradition won out over financial interests.

By Cheri Rae

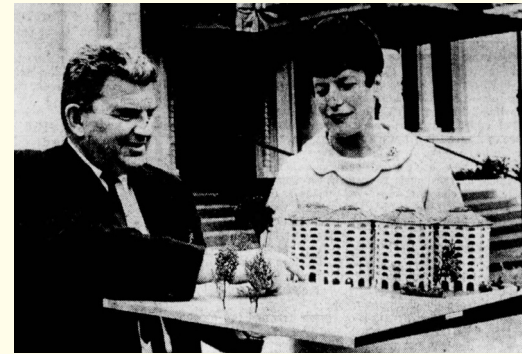
The square block now occupied by Alice Keck Park Memorial Garden was once the site of a grassroots community battle that determined the soul—and the skyline—of Santa Barbara for generations.

Both Pearl Chase and Thomas M. Storke remembered around the turn of the century when the downtown adjacent location—bounded by Micheltorena, Garden, Arrellaga, and Santa Barbara streets—served as a pasture where horses grazed. As a schoolgirl, Pearl had lived across the street in a rental house located at 1530 Garden Street, where she loved gazing out her bedroom window at the pastoral scene.

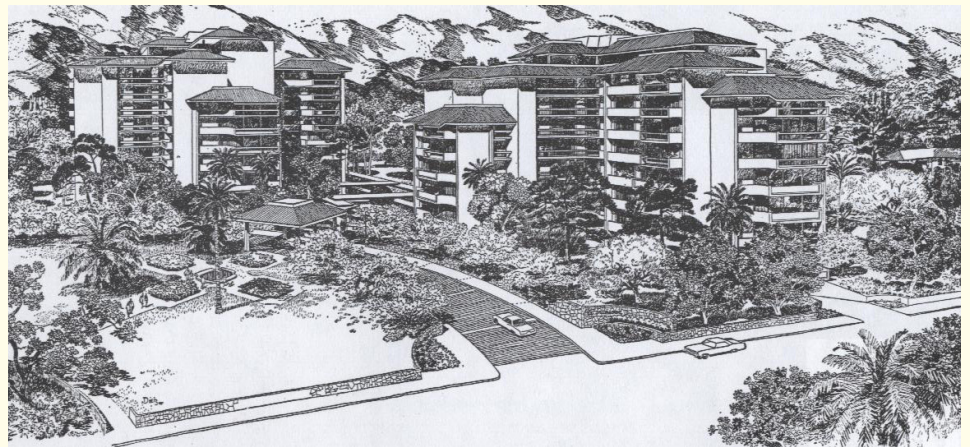
Multiple Owners of the Property

In 1904, Mary Miles Herter, the wealthy widow of New York City interior designer Christian Herter, purchased the entire block and commissioned an extravagant mansion built, and beautiful gardens planted on the spot. At her passing in 1913, her son, Albert, and daughter-in-law, Adele—both artists—repurposed the mansion to serve as the lobby and headquarters for a luxury hotel, named “El Mirasol” (The Sunflower) with several guest bungalows built on the property. Among the prominent guests who vacationed at the resort were Rockefellers, Vanderbilts and the Guggenheims.

After the Depression and over the decades, the hotel was bought and sold by a number of hoteliers, and the luxurious



One of the proposals by the Seldowitz family was for a five-tower, 11-story hotel to replace the historic El Mirasol.



The El Mirasol Investment Company proposed these two nine-story luxury condos, but needed a variance to build them.

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accommodations lost their luster. The final owner, Jacob Seldowitz—fell on hard times, and when two electrical fires in one week in 1966 devastated the ancient wiring, the old hotel was no longer viable. Seldowitz and his wife came up with other plans; they made a pitch to the city and proposed three different large potential projects. They hoped the city would approve the needed variances so they could build one of them: A high-rise apartment complex, a 2,500-seat conference center, or a luxury hotel with five 11-story towers. When all their proposals were denied, the Seldowitzes put the property up for sale—warning that a potential buyer, a Los Angeles developer, would build what they termed, a “three-story ghetto” near downtown. The couple held a sale of hotel items at the end of 1967, and moved on after they managed to sell the property as well.

Business Leaders vs. the Grassroots Movement

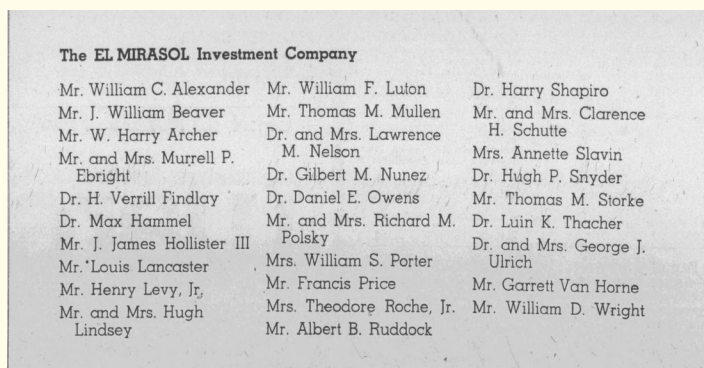
Enter the Santa Barbara business community and the formation of the El Mirasol Investment Company. In 1968, the group announced it had purchased the El Mirasol property with the intention of building a luxury high-rise condominium project; its first iteration was for 11 stories, 120 feet. It was denied.

Led by publisher Thomas M. Storke, banker Louis Lancaster and developers Jerry Beaver and William Alexander, the group of investors—that also included prominent doctors, dentists and attorneys—described themselves as “29 long-time local citizens who represent more than 1,000 years of residence in Santa Barbara.” They added, “They are vitally concerned with the future of Santa Barbara and have made many important contributions in terms of civic duty and service to our fellow citizens.”

The list of respected and influential community members was used in their advertisements to gain favor for their revised project: Two nine-story, 107-foot condominium towers housing 162 luxury units with a penthouse on top of each tower. The 360-degree view penthouses were reserved for two of the wealthiest and most influential investors, Storke and Lancaster.

But the zoning for the property only allowed three stories at 45 feet. For the project to be built, the proponents would have to obtain a height variance from the city. As prominent members of the community, they expected to receive it.

A *News-Press* editorial (undoubtedly influenced by



Prominent community leaders who invested in the luxury high-rise project listed their names in many of their ads.

publisher/ investor/ potential penthouse resident Storke) appeared the day before the hearing. Its final two paragraphs:

The News-Press traditionally avoids taking editorial stands in zoning or variance controversies, but the El Mirasol issue is important enough to deserve comment. We feel that in this case the City Planning Commission should concern itself with imaginative planning as well as zoning, and ask itself these questions:

Would El Mirasol project constitute a good use for the land, would it be compatible with the surrounding neighborhood, and would it be good for Santa Barbara? We believe that it would.

When the investors presented their case to the Planning Commission on February, 20, 1969, the community packed City Hall and many turned out to speak out about it—nine in favor and thirteen opposed it in the three-hour meeting.

Pearl Chase, who was the last community member to speak, commented on the architect’s drawings of the proposed project: “It is not a view that any one of us would see except from an airplane.” Smiling, she added, “I believe it is one of the tricks of the trade.”

When the variance was denied by the Planning Commission on a vote of 4-3, the investment group appealed to City Council.

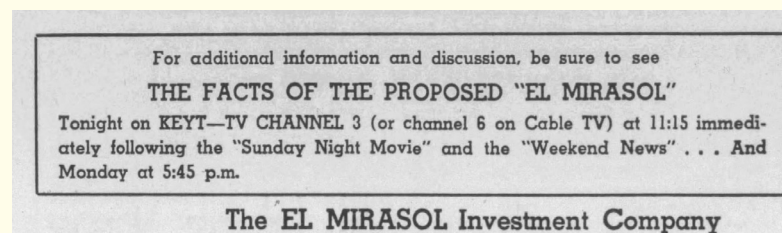
Inevitable Progress or the City at Stake?

The opposition was strong and swift as word spread about the potential high-rise development in the neighborhood that had been built around the historic hotel with its graceful gardens and relatively modest-sized bungalows scattered on the property.

They ran a low-cost campaign of small classified ads, and wrote numerous letters to the editor. They distributed postcards, went door to door with a petition stating their opposition to the high-rise—contending that granting a variance to the General Plan on a case-by-case basis was not a sound community planning.

The investment company ran full page ads in the *News-Press* and created its own television program to push the project and gain momentum. The ads referred to the opposition as “an extremely small but highly vocal minority” and ridiculed their protests, stating its purpose was “dedicated to obstructing this proposal and shortsightedly handicapping the entire community.”

Investors also asserted that the city’s tax base and downtown economy would be enhanced by the wealthy occupants of the luxury development and that the nine-story buildings were actually highly desirable high-rises whose time had come. Those who opposed it were accused



With plenty of resources, the investment company arranged for its own television show to promote the project.

NOTICE TO CONCERNED CITIZENS REGARDING HIGH RISE.

Santa Barbarans will not be fooled by expensive and devious advertising by the El Mirasol syndicate. Please come to the City Council hearing tomorrow, Tuesday, March 25 at 1:30 and support the denial of SPECIAL PRIVILEGE and poor planning.

Committee for a Clear Policy on Highrise

Pearl Chase Terence Davies Garvan F. Kuskey, D.D.S. John Robert Russell

LOST: 200 years of beautiful architectural tradition if the City Council approves El Mirasol High Rise Tuesday March 18th, 1:30 p.m.

S.O.C. still needs your financial help in funding the El Mirasol HIGHRISE Suit.

Save Our City Committee Studio G
C/O Citizen's Planning Assn. El Presidio

IS HIGH RISE COMING TO SANTA BARBARA? WE SAY NO! JOIN US

- William F. Appeler
- Mr. and Mrs. Ralph E. Allen
- Mr. Eugene R. Jones
- Patricia Barner
- Miss Virginia Bess
- Mr. and Mrs. Terence H. P. Bellamy
- Mr. and Mrs. Mark Rosman
- Elizabeth Shastum
- Paula Stevens
- Franklin C. Brooks
- Mr. and Mrs. Paul Busch
- Ruth Carr
- Helen Carter
- Miss Pearl Chase
- James Chiswick
- M. E. Colby
- Miss Christine Cope
- Ruth B. Gauding
- Paula Gray
- Richard Gurtz
- Mr. and Mrs. Carole Kasker
- Betty Clara Smith
- Mr. and Mrs. Terence Brooks
- Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. Deussen
- Shirley Deussen
- Dr. and Mrs. Edward H. Dodson III
- Dr. Steyer
- Miss Oliver Drake
- Jan and Norman Payne
- Robert O. Eaton
- Thom H. Elgson
- Miss Beatrice L. Eshken
- Miss W. Elgson
- Bertha Ellsbury
- Ray Elgson
- Arthur R. England
- George Evans
- Miss Gilda Feranda
- Mr. and Mrs. Gerald J. Foster
- Miss Harold G. Fyle
- J. H. Gilman
- Mr. and Mrs. James Green
- Dr. Paul B. Guitrie
- Miss Virginia B. Hasker
- William C. Hall
- Richard C. Haydon
- Greta Hopkins
- Mr. and Mrs. George Harold
- Miss Fred W. Hovels
- Hape Heuback
- Michael Hilde
- Mr. and Mrs. Walter C. Howe
- Dr. and Mrs. Robert J. Janssen
- Miss Alice W. Jackson
- C. E. Johnson
- Mr. and Mrs. M. Danae Jones
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- R. E. Kelley
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- Miss M. Kasper
- Joseph W. Lasker
- Miss Josephine Lane
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- Gilda E. Miller
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- A. N. Ostryang
- O. Stephen Parker
- Mr. and Mrs. George Piers
- Clayton P. Peir
- Robert J. Proust
- Don Prescott
- Jessie Rainier
- William W. Reed
- Lois and Lee Reithen
- Frances H. Ray
- William and Carol E. Reiner
- Mr. and Mrs. Leslie F. Rose
- Martha M. Rubin
- Mr. and Mrs. John E. Russell
- Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Sankster
- Robert Safford
- Clara Sawyer
- Miss Rachel Schenck
- John C. Schenk
- Miss Ruth Seaton
- John Shiley
- Miss Rita E. Sinsheimer
- Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Sizer
- Helen Smith
- Mr. and Mrs. Curtis Solberg
- M. H. Storkala
- Richard Steyer
- Mr. and Mrs. T. A. Sunde
- Dr. and Mrs. James Thompson
- Shirley Traub
- William J. Underwood
- T. F. Van Horn
- Mr. and Mrs. Gloria Van Porter
- Helen Vohselt
- Mr. and Mrs. Howard C. Waters
- Miss Alice C. Westwood
- Mr. and Mrs. Don C. Wilfong
- Miss Samuel A. Wilby
- Mr. and Mrs. Don C. Wood
- O'Brien and Louise Young
- Miss Margaret Young
- Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Yeo
- John W. Zank
- This is only a Partial Listing.

Plus the Many, Many Anonymous Donors

This aid paid for by those who have contributed to:

SAVE OUR CITY

For information, call
Evelyn Bush, SOC Secretary
784-4533

I want to help in the legal fight against the Height Variance granted to the El Mirasol Co.

Amount:

PRINT NAME:

ADDRESS:

CITY:

PHONE:

Mail to: Save Our City
115 Pacific St. El Presidio
Santa Barbara, Calif. Check here if you wish to remain anonymous

of stopping inevitable progress, and warned, "The alternative is to develop 200 cheap, mass-produced small apartments with only profit in mind."

The crowd at the meeting at City Hall on March 25 was described by reporter Barney Brantingham:

The 4.5-hour drama was played before a standing-room-only audience that at times stood three deep at the rear of the council chamber, along the side aisles and out into the hall and anteroom.

On March 25, City Council heard the appeal, they overruled the Planning Commission and approved the variance on a vote of 4 to 2 (with one council member who disqualified himself from voting because he had inadvertently publicly opposed the project).

Context and Assertions

In response to the approval of the project, community members joined together in a grassroots group, "Save Our City" (SOC) and immediately filed suit to appeal the Council's decision. They were convinced that if one high-rise were built in that location, nothing would keep additional variances from being granted, and the city would be changed forever.

Today's reader should be reminded that this occurred right after the horrific oil spill of in January and community members were already feeling under assault, protective of Santa Barbara—and skeptical of the assurances of members of the establishment. Many members of the newly formed grassroots group had also joined "Get Oil Out "(GOO) as a response to the environmental disaster. They idea of this high-rise development was seen as just another indicator of the ruination of the city and its long-held ideals. As SOC and GOO member Bud Bottoms stated, "Like oil platforms, it won't stop with one." He added, the city would become an extension of Los Angeles, "victims of visual pollution."

Members of SOC countered by asserting that property rights of the ordinary citizen were no longer protected by zoning, that City Council had "created special privilege for the El Mirasol syndicate," and posed the question: "Why should 29 people be given special privilege over 69,498 other citizens?" Without deep pockets to fund their effort, they appealed to the community to donate

whatever they could; they hoped to raise \$10,000 to hire a lawyer; they raised \$30,000.

Judge Harold Underwood from Trinity County—located in northwestern California, with its county seat in Weaverville—was assigned to hear the case to prevent any appearance of conflict of interest. He presided over the hearing on May 8, 1969.

Arguments at the Hearing

John Sink, the lawyer representing Save Our City argued the developers did not comply with the General Plan requirements and that City Council acted illegally when it overruled the Planning Commission.

Willard McEwen, the lawyer representing El Mirasol Investment Company, argued the developers were not the typical syndicate and "If the public support were not there, the project would have been dropped."

Stanley T. Tomlinson, Santa Barbara City Attorney, argued the project qualified for the "unusual circumstances doctrine," and asserted that the "attitude of the opponents was unrealistic."

The Judge's Ruling

On July 9, 1969, Judge Underwood ruled in favor of Save Our City and against the El Mirasol Investment Company and the City of Santa Barbara. He found:

"The variance granted does complete violence to the Comprehensive General Plan."

"Reliance on profit motive, attractive architectural features and benefit to the community lack legal relevance."

"Since City Council failed to make the required findings its act of granting the variance application is now invalid."

The Aftermath

The El Mirasol Investment Company, stunned by its defeat, stated it would immediately put the property up for sale. Save Our City encouraged community members to stay involved and work together.

Together with Citizens Planning Association and several other local groups, SOC developed a syllabus for a series of community lectures for an adult education class taught through Santa Barbara City College. "Should Santa Barbara Go High Rise: Community Environment and the High Rise." Held at the Lobero Theatre, the discussion series featured a number of distinguished speakers, including San

Francisco architect Robert A. Odermatt and urban economist Michael Marson; Dean of the School of Architecture and Fine Arts, USC and high-rise expert Sam T. Hurst; Development Consultant from Washington, D.C. William R. Ewald, and Planning Consultant for the City of Santa Barbara, Simon Eisner.

Additionally, opponents of high-rise development recognized that the fight would be repeated again and again, unless the policy of granting height variances was addressed and codified. The League of Women Voters took on the task of placing a height limits measure on the ballot. In the November election of 1972, the community voted overwhelmingly in support of height limits—24,499 to 8,048. The amendment to the City Charter limits noted:

“It is hereby declared the policy of the City that high buildings are inimical to the residential and historical character of the City.”

Building heights were specified as follows:

“30 feet in areas zoned for single- and two-family dwellings;

45 feet for three or more families, hotels, motels and offices;

60 feet in areas zone for industrial, manufacturing and commercial uses; and 39 feet for all other zones.”

The Property Changes Hands—and Usage

Early in 1970 the El Mirasol Investment Company announced it had sold the square-block property to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The decision received widespread praise, including from Storke, who noted, “I am truly delighted to know that El Mirasol block has a chance to serve such a fine purpose.” He added, “I had always dreamed that the lovely Herter villa site and surrounding grounds would become the home of something of community value.” It was even reported that he donated his \$25,000 share in the condo project to the museum.

While trustees of the museum raised money for their potential building project, they leased the property to the Community Environmental Council. The innovative El Mirasol Farm garden was established on the land, and—at the time of heightened awareness about ecology and the newly established Earth Day—the property served as an urban center for environmental education, farming practices, solar power and composting, as well as lectures, exhibitions, recycling campaigns, and greater awareness about pollution and good stewardship.

Despite all best efforts, the museum was unable to raise the funding for the building, and in 1974 sold the property to a local development company, ValCoast, that hoped to build 80 three-story luxury condominiums. Although the project was approved by the Planning Commission, the developers declined to pursue it. By that time, the bottom had fallen out of the luxury condo market, and it made no financial sense for the project to proceed.

Finally, in 1975, the City of Santa Barbara was informed that an anonymous donor would purchase the property and donate it to the city with the stipulation it would become a horticultural garden. The City Council agreed, and the plans for El Mirasol Park were submitted and approved.

Two years later, upon the passing of Alice Keck Park, it was revealed that she was the generous, visionary purchaser and donor of the property—and it was renamed Alice Keck Park Memorial Garden.

This treasured, tranquil oasis in the city gives no hint of what might have been built here. Next time you visit, try to imagine what might have been—were it not for the determined efforts of community members who educated themselves, donated their time and treasure, and worked together to Save Our City.



El Mirasol Park was an important educational garden for the community.



The El Mirasol Investment Company sold the property to the Museum of Art, to the relief of many in the community.



Alice Keck Park (right) and the memorial garden she generously donated to Santa Barbara.