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Huge housing tower is eyed for one-time Sunset campus in Menlo Park

By George Avalos
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The leafy, low-slung former headquarters of Sunset Magazine in Menlo Park could become the tallest high-rise in San Mateo County if a project on file with city planners comes to fruition.

A sweeping redevelopment is being eyed at the one-time home of the lifestyle publication, which could include several hundred homes, office space for 1,000-plus workers, a hotel and a housing tower that could top 20 stories.

A review of plans on file with Menlo Park city planners shows the most prominent feature of the project at 80 Willow Road would be a residential tower that could soar 328 feet. If the floors were a conventional 12 feet, that could equate to 27 stories.

The property owners — a group whose principal executives include the son of a former top government official with close ties to Russia's President Vladimir Putin, the New York Times reported in 2019 — are using what's known as the "builder's remedy" to attempt to gain approval for the project.

The three-decade-old provision could allow developers to pursue, through a streamlined decision-making process, projects of virtually any size in cities without approved plans to meet state-mandated homebuilding goals. Menlo Park has yet to receive such approval from the state government.

According to details of the development on file at Menlo Park City Hall, the proposed project would consist of four buildings. These include two residential complexes, one building for office, research, or laboratory uses; and a fourth building that would be an amenities center for the housing. One of the residential sites would also include a hotel.

Planning documents suggest 800–1,100 housing units could be built on the property, and the office building could be as large as 280,000 square feet — or big enough to accommodate up to 1,400 workers. The hotel would consist of 150 rooms and might be an extended-stay lodging.

It's unclear whether such a project — which would dwarf anything in the surrounding area — will come to pass.

One area of contention with "builder's remedy" proposals has arisen in multiple cities over whether the usual approval process — which can involve delays of months or years — takes effect if a city has approved a housing plan but the state agency hasn't certified the municipality's plans for future housing development.

Menlo Park in January 2023 approved its 2023–2031 housing plan and submitted it to state government officials, but California dropped the proposal back in the city's lap, saying the original proposal lacked multiple components. On June 30, Menlo Park approved a revised

plan that it hopes will pass muster with California. The state as of Thursday had yet to certify the updated plan, the city's website says.

David Blackwell, an attorney with law firm Allen Matkins, in a letter to city officials reminiscent of a legal brief in an adversarial court proceeding, sketched out the rationale for the "builder's remedy" application to redevelop the suburban office site.

"Per SB 330, the submitted preliminary development applications comply" with state laws, Blackwell wrote in the letter to Menlo Park.

The letter cited multiple state government codes. Blackwell also cautioned the city that state rules could constrict Menlo Park's ability to toss roadblocks in the project's path. Blackwell again referenced the SB 330 provisions.

"This statutory framework, which preempts any conflicting local laws, sets forth strict criteria that a local agency must apply when considering a project for approval," Blackwell wrote in the letter to the city.

The current property owners, operating as Willow Project LLC, bought the former Sunset Magazine site for \$72 million in 2018, according to documents on file with the San Mateo County Recorder's Office. The purchase was an all-cash transaction, the county files show.

Sunset Magazine left the Menlo Park site several years ago, saying in 2015 that it would relocate to Oakland's Jack London Square.

A development company operating as N17 proposed the massive new development at the old Sunset offices. Oisín Heneghan, a former executive with real estate titan Trammell Crow, is the principal executive of N17.

"I started a new real estate developer company called N17," Heneghan stated in a post on his LinkedIn page. "We have some exciting developments coming soon #buildersremedy." The post, filed in late June, was titled, "Builder's remedy applications coming very soon."

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