

Car dismantlers face end of road

EAST P.A. ORDERS THEM TO CLOSE DOORS



JOANNE HOYOUNG LEE — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Mike Baker of Infinity Salvage in East Palo Alto stands amid stacks of cars that his business dismantled and recycled until he closed it, complying with an order from the city. He and others in the business are fighting the city's decision.

THE OWNERS' ARGUMENT

Owners and customers say it is unfair that people in search of spare carburetors or a place to dump their jalopy would now have to travel to cities in Santa Clara County or the East Bay.

By **Thaai Walker**
Mercury News

At the end of Bay Road in East Palo Alto, down a dead-end graveled street, is Infinity Salvage, the auto dismantling yard Mike Baker has run for the past 28 years.

A two-acre spread of dead cars, old wrecks and auto parts, it is one of a handful of such licensed businesses remaining in San Mateo County.

Soon, there may be none. Late last month, East Palo Alto told dismantlers along Bay Road to shut down as part of a plan put in place years ago to phase out the gritty businesses and redevelop the surrounding industrial neighborhood. While some have followed the order, others are fighting it.

The city has traditionally viewed dismantlers as environmentally hazardous eyesores. Dismantlers, who prefer to call themselves "auto recyclers," say they perform important but undervalued jobs: providing recycled parts at good prices to keep old cars running and getting junk cars off the streets by trucking them to shredders for disposal.

Those who want to see them stay in business say the impact goes far beyond East Palo Alto. Last week customers, auto repair shop owners and tow truck drivers from cities around the Peninsula pleaded the dismantlers' case before the East Palo Alto city council.

They said it is unfair that people in search of spare carburetors or a place to dump their jalopy would now have to travel to cities in Santa Clara County or the East Bay.

THE CITY'S ARGUMENT

The city wants the 130-acre industrial area transformed into a tax-revenue-generating area of neat offices and small research and development plants.

SALVAGE | Some dismantlers fight East Palo Alto's order to close

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"How is my little two acres and my use stopping redevelopment from coming to the city of East Palo Alto? Forcing us out of existence is unfair."

— MIKE BAKER,
OWNER
OF INFINITY
SALVAGE

"There's a heck of a lot of people in the community who want to see my business continue," said Baker, who closed Infinity but is protesting the city's decision.

Three other smaller East Palo Alto dismantlers have also complied with the city's order, but one other is defying it.

"I hope the city reconsiders, but if they don't, I'll just fight them in court all the way," said Bill Branner, who owns B&S Towing and Dismantling.

City officials say the order should not have come as a surprise, but agreed to revisit the issue next month. Council members, most of whom are newly elected, could revise or rescind the order, or let it stand. At the same time, the city is also exploring a range of responses to dismantlers who don't shut down — from citations to legal action.

East Palo Alto's move to phase out the dismantlers is part of a larger struggle throughout California between businesses that do the job of dumping cars, and cities that don't want to be dumping grounds.

Martha Bucknell, executive director of the state's Auto Dismantlers Association, said many cities have either restricted the number of dismantler licenses or phased out the businesses altogether. Over the past decade the number of licensed auto recyclers statewide has dropped from 1,719 to 1,495, she said.

In East Palo Alto, phasing out dismantlers has been considered an important step in moving forward with an ambitious redevelopment plan.

In the 1990s, the city decided it wanted the 130 acres known as the Ravenswood industrial area transformed from a place of junkyards into a tax-revenue-generating area of neat offices and small research and development plants.

There were many more dismantlers in East Palo Alto in those days. While some

ran tidy, licensed businesses, others ran slipshod yards filled with towering, rusty car carcasses.

City officials worried about the environmental impact of the oil, fluids and other hazardous materials that could be seeping into the ground, and about their ability to market an area that developers might view as blighted.

Five years ago, dismantlers were notified that the city intended to rezone the area to eliminate that use, although they were free to do something else with their land. A sunset date was set for the end of 2002. Last year, dismantlers were called to a meeting and reminded of the city's plans.

But the soured economy has put plans for the Ravenswood industrial area on hold. It is unclear when construction will begin.

"This was a plan from 10 years ago. The climate is a little different now," said David Woods, a newly elected council member who says he hasn't made up his mind. "Had development started then, I'd say, 'Sure, they've got to go.' But at the same time, there's nothing planned for that area that's going to happen very soon."

Infinity's Baker says he realizes redevelopment will happen someday. He even has big plans of his own for his land: a five-story pyramid-shaped tower of offices, cafes and retail space where he can hawk auto parts.

In the meantime, Baker said it's only fair that the city let him continue to operate.

"How is my little two acres and my use stopping redevelopment from coming to the city of East Palo Alto?" he said. "Forcing us out of existence is unfair."

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— EAST PALO ALTO
COUNCILMAN
DAVID WOODS

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