

# New look for Whiskey Gulch?

## Developer's sky-high proposal for E. Palo Alto causes uproar

By Janet Wells  
Mercury News Staff Writer

Joaquin De Monet spends a lot of time gazing at an aerial photograph hanging in his ornate San Mateo office.

It shows Whiskey Gulch, a weathered retail strip sandwiched between Highway 101 and Palo Alto. Investors traditionally have ignored the block of University Avenue because it is in East Palo Alto, but De Monet looks at his black and white photograph and sees a gold mine.

"Whiskey Gulch is a phenomenal location," said the 43-year-old De Monet, a developer who wants to raze the shops and replace them with the tallest buildings between San Francisco and Los Angeles. "It's the gateway to Palo Alto and Menlo Park, as well as East Palo Alto."

His proposal is still in the earliest

stages, but it already has caused an uproar. Palo Alto officials and residents have complained it would create a visual and traffic nightmare.

"The proposed development seems totally out of scale to the proposed area . . . and seems to unnecessarily and unduly affect Palo Alto," Palo Alto Councilman Larry Klein said when the proposal was made public in March.

Palo Alto and Menlo Park ought to be concerned, De Monet agreed. "But they should be sensitive to East Palo Alto's needs," he added.

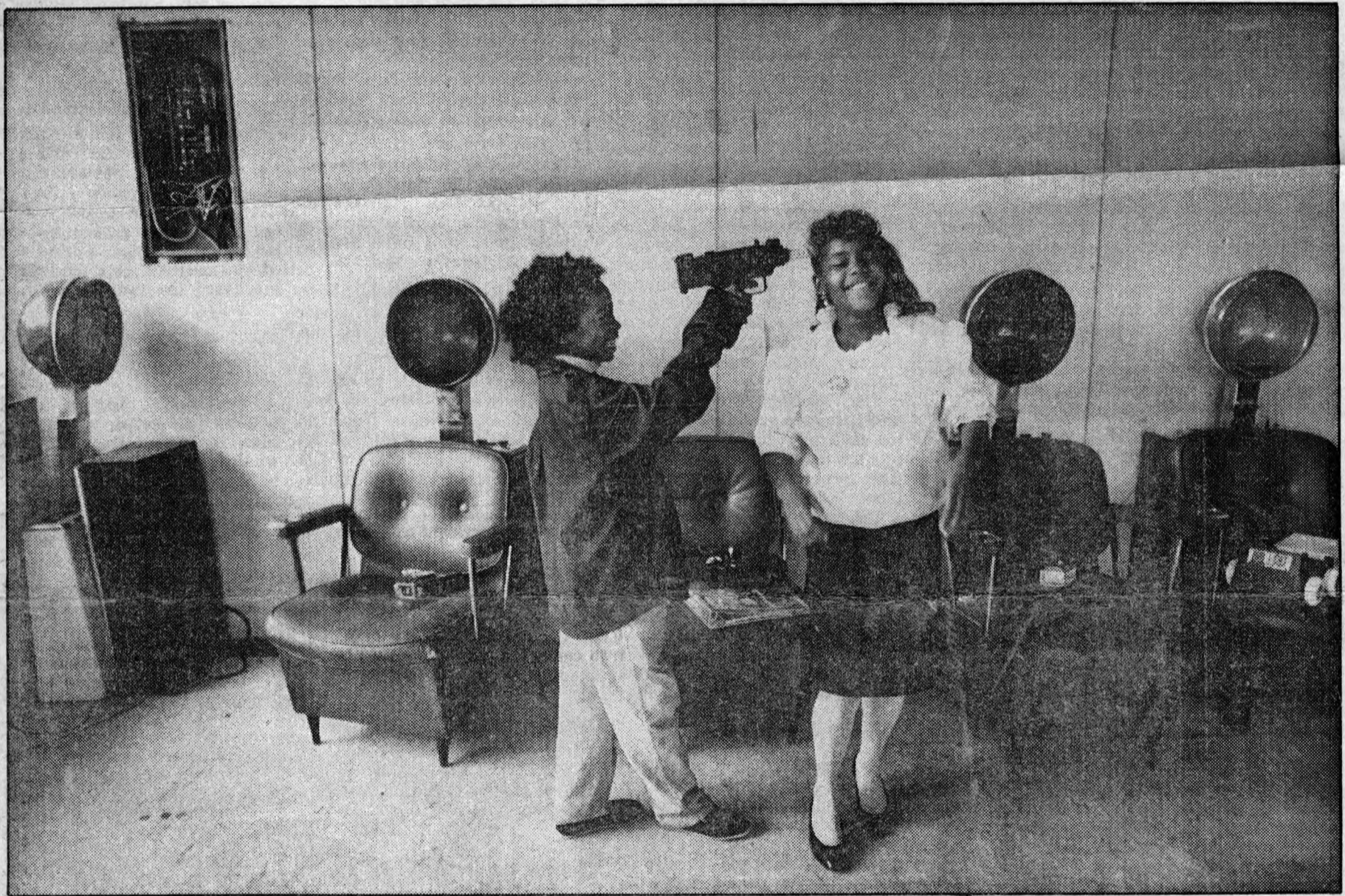
De Monet has dared to tread where few other developers have gone: the city with a reputation of having the lowest

See DE MONET, Page 2B



Photographs by Jim Gensheimer — Mercury News

Jimmy Carter volunteers at local food program



## Merchants worry they won't survive

By Janet Wells  
Mercury News Staff Writer

Joaquin De Monet's proposal to demolish the shops in Whiskey Gulch and build a glitzy office and retail center has created a hot new topic of conversation in the area.

"Everybody's in limbo, waiting to hear the outcome. There are rumors spreading from tenant to tenant," said Russ Solbeck, who runs Berrone's Liquors and has worked in Whiskey Gulch for more than 20 years.

An uncertain future has many merchants worried, and some, such as Solbeck and Lenzie Johnson, say De Monet's development would mean the end of small businesses in the area.

They are going to knock the small businesses right on their heads, Johnson, who has been in business in Whis-

See WHISKEY GULCH, Page 2B



Jambri Johnson, 9, and his sister, Bianca, 10, goof around at their father's beauty shop, above. At left, patrons play video games at Freddy Jack's Fish and Chips.



Jim Gensheimer — Mercury News

Toccara Williams, 4, waits for her mother outside a store in East Palo Alto

## Merchants 'in limbo' over proposal to demolish Whiskey Gulch shops

**WHISKEY GULCH, from Page 1B**

key Gulch since 1972. "The development may benefit East Palo Alto for tax purposes, but not me."

But other merchants — as well as city officials — say a development would be one of the best things to come East Palo Alto's way in years.

"Most people think it's going to be great — more money and jobs for people in East Palo Alto," said Lester Lacey, who runs a print shop on the street. "It's better to tear it all down and start all over. What we need is uniformity. The same size, the same colors, not one person having a pink store and one yellow."

The merchants are concerned about having a voice in any plans for Whiskey Gulch. Lacey is trying to form a merchants association for the area and send a representative to council meetings.

Whiskey Gulch got its name during the "dry" years in Palo Alto and at Stanford University. Just over the border, on land once governed only by San Mateo County, was the first available liquor.

Liquor stores and bars still dominate the area, which also boasts several restaurants and about 20 specialty shops.

Despite its reputation in the quiet neighborhoods of Palo Alto and Menlo Park as an unsightly high-crime blight, Whiskey Gulch is also a homey neighborhood shopping center. Merchants and customers greet one another, asking about family members or discussing which is the best kind of bird seed to buy.

"I live in a town where people don't know me," said Jackson Kong, a Santa Clara resident who runs J&R Meat and Fish in Whiskey Gulch. "I walk outside here,

and people say, 'Hey, Jackson!'"

Bianca and Jambri Johnson go to their father's beauty shop, Hair Power, in Whiskey Gulch every day after school. Bianca, 10, and her 9-year-old brother pass the time by clowning around — snapping towels or pretending to "shoot" each other with blow dryers.

Solbeck's two young children play in his store two days a week at lunchtime while his wife, Linda, works. Linda's grandfather, Joseph Berrone, opened his liquor store more than 40 years ago.

Solbeck's aunt, Lena Ferrando, owns A-1 Liquors, a store built by her brother-in-law in 1937. "I've been here all my life. It's practically home," she said.

The store hasn't changed much since its opening days — except that the front door had to be moved when a Highway 101 off-ramp was built a few feet away.

Merchants think of Whiskey Gulch as East Palo Alto's downtown, since the area brings in most of the city's sales tax revenue, which is about eight times lower than Palo Alto's.

But most of East Palo Alto is on the other side of Highway 101, and customers are not plentiful for the awkwardly located Whiskey Gulch stores to the west.

"A lot of people in East Palo Alto don't know what's in here," Lacey said. "Most people go to downtown Palo Alto or Stanford."

An upscale development might be the ticket to enticing throngs of shoppers and office workers to the area, but it is doubtful that existing stores would see any of the benefits.