

SECOND FRONT PAGE

Wreckers' plea: Let us be

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Owners of auto wrecking yards in East Palo Alto, who must close their businesses by Dec. 31 or face a misdemeanor charge and possible jail time, say the city has no right to force them out of business.

The yards are in a part of town that's marked for redevelopment. And while the city has no plans to build on the land, a 1997 city law holds that all wrecking yards be phased out by the end of this year. Their owners can do what they want with their property, except use it as a wrecking yard or auto shop.

Mike Baker has owned and operated Infinity Auto Salvage at 2091 Bay Road in East Palo Alto since 1974 and said he was shocked to hear from the city a few weeks ago that he would have to close within 10 months.

When City Council passed the law, Baker said he was told by a city official who has long since left the city that he had nothing to worry about.

Baker said the city's planning director at the time, David Miller, told him that if the city didn't have actual redevelopment plans for his property and as long as he obtained a yearly permit from the city, Baker could keep on operating.

Baker said Miller also told him that when the city decided to redevelop the area it would then buy his property or pay to relocate him, as required by redevelopment law.

"It's why I didn't hire an attorney in 1996," Baker said yesterday.

Undesirable and incompatible

City Attorney Michael Lawson said he doesn't know if Miller made those statements, but even if he did, Miller was wrong. The city will not allow auto wreckers to keep working



'I AM WELCOME' — Mike Baker has owned and operated Infinity Auto Salvage at 2091 Bay Road in East Palo Alto since 1974. The city wants wrecking yards to close by Dec 31. Daily News photo by Susan Bradley.

past Dec. 31, nor will it pay the owners for their property or pay to relocate them.

Lawson said City Council members decided 10 years ago that auto wrecking yards were undesirable and incompatible with their long-range plans for the city. He said the yards present an environmental hazard.

Lawson said the yard owners have received adequate notice of the closure deadline.

"This is not new," Lawson said.

William Branner, who owns B & S Towing and Auto Dismantling at 1800 Bay Road, said he and other auto dismantlers provide a needed service in the city and for the whole county.

Besides towing abandoned cars from the streets of East Palo Alto to his yard, Branner said that tow trucks from companies all over the Peninsula drop off abandoned cars on his

property overnight. The cars have to go somewhere, or they pile up in the streets, he said.

Many abandoned cars

"This city probably has more abandoned cars in it per capita than any other city in the county," said Baker, who also arrives at work in the mornings to find cars that were dropped off there overnight. "East Palo Alto is a dumping ground."

He also said he thinks city officials were left with a "bad taste in their mouths" from past auto dismantlers who ran their businesses in the city poorly.

"The city is throwing me into the barrel with a lot of bad apples," Baker said. "I want the city to acknowledge that I do service needs and that I am welcome by the citizens. Let the economy take care of getting me out, not police power."