

# Railroad to Condos

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOWNTOWN TIBURON FROM 1884 TO 1986

By Dave Gotz

Not much was happening at the end of the Tiburon Peninsula until 1884 when the San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad came through tunnels and over trestles to Point Tiburon. At the edge of the Bay on about 38 acres, composed mostly of fill from the nearby hillside, the railroad established a train and ferry terminus, which included an extensive industrial site for maintenance of the railroad equipment. For the next 60 plus years Tiburon was a busy, noisy, dirty, thoroughly blue collar railroad town.

The railroad still had a large presence into the late 1950's with freight cars coming and going via barges to and from ports around the bay, and the maintenance of engines and railcars remained an essential activity. But the operations were winding down and by the mid 60's the yard was becoming a vast industrial wasteland. When the last train pulled out of Tiburon in September 1967, it was clear that the city needed a downtown plan.

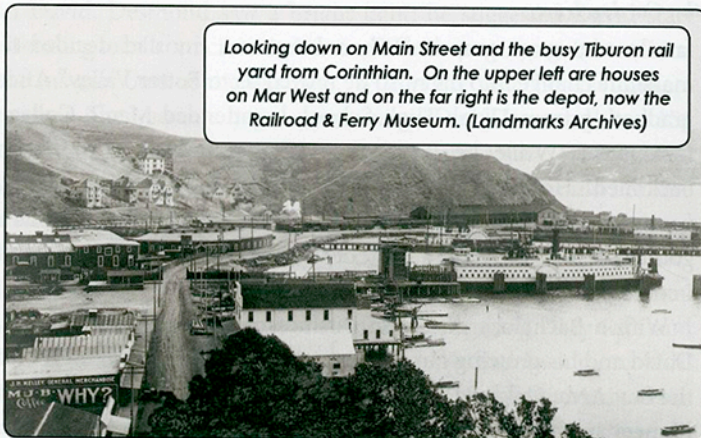
After numerous meetings with the community, the Planning Commission had approved a plan by well known Tiburon architect Warren Callister in 1966. The plan retained the Donahue Building on the waterfront as a museum, the barge dock became the ferry landing, a large hotel and shops were part of a mostly pedestrian oriented downtown. The City Council however wanted other designs to be submitted.

The Council adopted a plan in 1970 which included a boat basin with the railroad museum, shops and a restaurant; an inn and conference center with more shops and a 300 car garage; another extensive shopping area with parking for 550 cars; a professional office center, several new

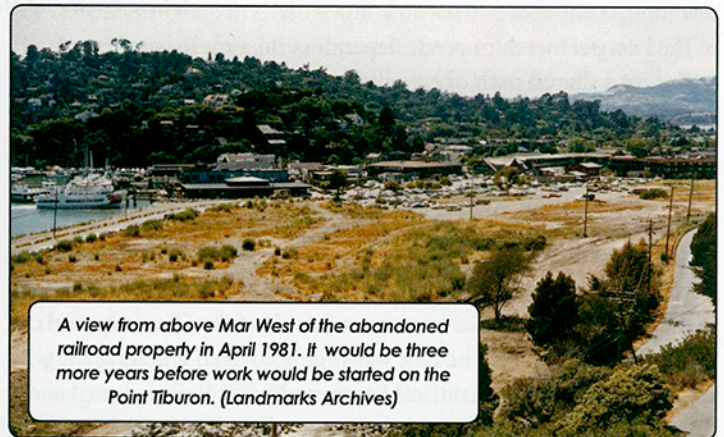
streets and three housing developments. Many citizens were not happy with this plan and in 1973 a petition signed by almost one third of the population requested that: 1. Tiburon maintain a small town character, 2. limit automobile traffic and visitors, 3. preserve the waterfront and retain the downtown area primarily for the use of residents, rather than visitors.

At this point Southern Pacific Railroad (SP), which still owned the land, weighed in with their own plan based on the 1970 general plan but with some modifications. After numerous hearings and much debate, the Council approved this plan in January 1976, but required the building density to be reduced by nearly half. No one was happy with that result and SP withdrew their plan.

A year and a half later, after fully addressing the local concerns, SP returned with a new plan by Belvedere architect Rodney Friedman. The mostly residential plan moved Paradise Drive back 150 feet, from Main Street to the Donahue Building, creating an expanded waterfront park and also included a lagoon. By now everyone was tired of looking at the desolate abandoned lot and was ready to get on with rebuilding downtown Tiburon. After some additional modifications, this plan was approved in September 1981. Innisfree Companies took out an option to acquire the land from SP in July 1983 and after clearing the site of toxic soil, construction of Point Tiburon began in 1984. The new Shoreline Park was dedicated on July 4th 1985 and the first of the 155 units went on sale in the summer of 1986, almost 19 years after the last train left Tiburon. For a more detailed look at this and other local history stories please visit our website at [www.landmarkssociety/history/videos](http://www.landmarkssociety/history/videos).



Looking down on Main Street and the busy Tiburon rail yard from Corinthian. On the upper left are houses on Mar West and on the far right is the depot, now the Railroad & Ferry Museum. (Landmarks Archives)



A view from above Mar West of the abandoned railroad property in April 1981. It would be three more years before work would be started on the Point Tiburon. (Landmarks Archives)



Above Point Tiburon, May 2014. (Drone photo by Michael Jetter Aerials)