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Bowling lanes in line for OK from planning

Plans include restaurant, partnering with community

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After 12 years since it was closed, and 18 months after plans for its return began, one of the landmark relics from Ojai's past, the old bowling alley, will come before the Planning Commission tonight for concept review.

Stacey Benotto, the developer, a retired real estate investor and operator from Los Angeles, said, "This has been a mission for me, a project very close to my heart." As the mother of a 13-year-old daughter, a rising tennis star enrolled at the Weil Tennis Academy, and a 7-year-old son, a student at Monica Ros School, she said she felt a strong

need for a place for children to have fun and be safe. But she will actively promote "an intergenerational approach, from babies to seniors."

Besides major renovations to the 16,351 square-foot property on a nearly 1.5-acre property at 1202 W. Ojai Ave., Benotto's proposal includes adding 475-square-foot of new construction. She estimates the total cost of renovation at \$2.5 million. If the permit and construction process goes smoothly, the proposed Ojai Bowling Center will open in early 2010.

Before then, she plans to keep the community involved. "I have a web site, bowltheojai.com, where I encourage people to leave stories about their experiences with the old bowling alley, to incorporate those memories into the new one," she said.

The proposal before the

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planners includes a restaurant café, called Phoenix Rising, an arcade, a party room and, perhaps, a batting cage. The number of lanes would be four less than before, and Benotto said that the bowling lanes would be pedestrian friendly, and even include a hitching post and watering trough.

The proposal is a "low-impact development," she said, using an existing building, and using solar panels and other energy-efficient materials. The project will not require an environmental impact report, she said, since it is being used for a same purpose.

Benotto said she made a deal with Gail Bazzano, the former owner, and the property is in a long-term escrow, contingent on permit approvals with the city.

"The community has been extremely supportive. Everywhere I go people are encouraging me," Benotto said. "Every town deserves a bowling alley," she said. "I'm interested in relationships being built and having fun." City planners and officials have been helpful, as well, she said. "They've been looking at ways they can help, for which I'm very appreciative."