

Downtown San Rafael Station Area Plan

Executive Summary

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The full report can be found at www.cityofsanrafael.org/stationareaplans

Background

SMART

The Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit ("SMART") is a planned 70-mile rail corridor for passenger trains from Cloverdale to Larkspur. The SMART rail corridor encompasses the former NWP ROW. The SMART corridor will eventually have 14 stations. SMART's Initial Operating Segment ("IOS") is from Downtown Santa Rosa to Downtown San Rafael. Rail service is anticipated to begin in 2016.

San Rafael will have two SMART stations; one at the Marin Civic Center and one in Downtown. The Downtown San Rafael SMART station is the second southern-most station along the full SMART rail corridor and currently the major transfer point for connecting bus service within Marin County and to the Larkspur Ferry for San Francisco bound passengers. It is the southern-most station for the IOS.

Downtown Station Area Plan

The coming of SMART rail service to Downtown San Rafael in 2016 is an opportunity to build on the work that the City of San Rafael has undertaken to revitalize the Downtown and to create a variety of transportation and housing options, economic stability, and vibrant community gathering places in the heart of San Rafael. This Downtown Station Area Plan builds on previous City initiatives to create a more vibrant, mixed-use, livable area supported by a mix of transit opportunities, including passenger rail service.

The City of San Rafael received grant funding from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to prepare this Station Area Plan for the area around the future Downtown rail station. The Station Area Plan is a multi-agency collaborative planning effort between the City of San Rafael, SMART, Golden Gate Bridge Highway and Transportation District (GGBHTD), Marin Transit, the San Rafael Redevelopment Agency, and the Transportation Authority of Marin (TAM).

The Redevelopment Agency Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) has provided oversight for the development of the Downtown Station Area Plan. The CAC is composed of representatives of the citizens of San Rafael, including residents, businesspersons and property owners.

Plan Area & Existing Conditions

The Station Area Plan encompasses a 1/2-mile radius around the planned Downtown San Rafael SMART station. The Plan focuses on an area bounded by Mission Avenue, Irwin Street, the San Rafael Canal and Lincoln Avenue.

The Existing Conditions Report (November, 2010) shows that the Plan Area hosts a confluence of transit services; auto, pedestrian and bicycle access routes. The area serves as the primary transit hub of Marin County and for Golden Gate Transit and Marin Transit,



represents an important gateway to the City of San Rafael and its Downtown, and acts as the primary traffic and freeway access point for San Rafael and much of the western portion of the County. This area serves as the Gateway to Downtown San Rafael. However, the vibrancy of the pedestrian experience in the core of Downtown dissipates in this area. The pedestrian experience in the Plan area is hindered by the lack of significant buildings on the west side of Hetherington, the lack of a physical definition at the edge of the pedestrian realm due to buildings that do not directly front onto and address the street, and the parking lots and curb cuts that interrupt the pedestrian realm.

The Station Area Plan (the “Plan”)

The Plan considers conditions in the area, including traffic, pedestrian and bicycle connections, and land use patterns, such as the location of residential neighborhoods and areas of commercial concentration. The Plan sets out a community-supported long-term strategy for the Downtown San Rafael station area, including the reconfiguration and operation of a new Downtown San Rafael transit complex. Through the station area planning process, the San Rafael community has considered and provided input on the safest way for buses, pedestrians, bicyclists, and automobile drivers to travel to and from residential and commercial areas, the best ways to access the SMART station and nearby services, the most appropriate crossing improvements, design guidelines to maximize amenities and passenger rail ridership potential, and strategies to sustain and improve economic vitality.

The Plan is largely conceptual, laying out broad goals for the Plan Area and options for achieving these goals. Elements that compose the community’s vision for the station area may require further or more detailed study as they are implemented going forward.

Goals of the Plan

The five goals for the Plan are:

1. Integrate rail and bus transit within the Plan Area.
2. Provide a street network that supports the Plan's land use vision while balancing the needs of motorists, bus and rail customers, bicyclists, and pedestrians.
3. Enable pedestrians and bicyclists to safely and comfortably get to, around, and through the Plan Area.
4. Supply adequate parking for new housing and businesses while encouraging transit use, walking, and bicycling.
5. Explore making zoning changes to provide a consistent urban fabric on both sides of the freeway.
6. Enable new transit-oriented development characterized by increased activity, a mix of uses, and a strong sense of place.

Vision for the Area

The planning process involved multiple community workshops and meetings, extensive discussion among the agencies that compose a project team and steering committee and the members of the San Rafael Redevelopment Agency Citizen's Advisory Committee. The process has allowed for an intensive study of transit operations, opportunity sites, and traffic, parking, and bicycle/pedestrian conditions. Several visions emerged from this process that should guide implementation of the Plan:

- *Fostering a strong sense of place will be critical to meeting the community's vision for the Plan Area as the gateway to Downtown San Rafael.*

The implementing agencies should work together to integrate the Plan's elements into a cohesive whole and create a unique sense of place. Reuse of the Whistlestop building, enhancement of the existing strong pedestrian character & sense of place from the Downtown core to the east side of 101 with Streetscape treatments, pedestrian amenities, artwork, public gathering spaces, restored natural features, and high-quality architecture and design will all contribute to achieving this vision.

- *Providing a range of improvements to the street network and bicycle/pedestrian conditions to set the stage for future redevelopment and to promote transit ridership.*

The Plan Area is characterized by significant traffic congestion and gaps in the bicycle and pedestrian network. Addressing these challenges and providing improved bicycle and pedestrian conditions will help encourage transit ridership and make the area more attractive for new development.

- *Modifying parking and land use regulations to open up opportunities for redevelopment.*

The opportunity sites analysis conducted as part of the planning process showed that modifications to parking, height, density, and floor area ratio regulations can assist in enabling the kind of development envisioned for the area. Even after regulatory changes are made, however, the sites in the area are small, so accommodating sufficient parking as part of individual development projects is likely to remain a challenge. Improved parking demand management, combined with strategies to enable some off-site parking such as the development of a new municipal parking structure, may play an important part in facilitating new development.

- *Providing improvements to improve existing conditions for pedestrians, cyclists and transit users and to accommodate the SMART station and train service.*

Some improvements are needed to accommodate SMART's initial operations, and will need to be completed within a relatively short time frame. However, the Plan also includes improvements to the Bettini Center, street network, and bicycle and pedestrian conditions that address challenges that existed prior to SMART. While these latter improvements could be implemented independently of SMART's development, the introduction of SMART service may create an opportunity to make these long-needed improvements that will also help optimize the benefit of SMART to San Rafael.

Implementation Actions

Goal 1. Integrate rail and bus transit within the Plan Area.

The Plan examined strategies for integrating SMART service with existing Golden Gate Transit, Marin Transit, and other transportation providers in the Plan Area. This includes three concepts: short, medium and long term implementation. Implementing the short-, mid-, and long-term visions will require coordination among the City and the multiple transit providers that serve the Plan Area.

Concept A. "Day 1" Opening Day: SMART IOS to Downtown

In order for SMART's IOS to operate safely and in accordance with California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) regulations, a series of improvements will be required prior to implementation of the IOS, including:

- i. Install new traffic signal controllers and upgrade signal interconnection systems.
- ii. Mitigate the likelihood of jaywalking between the Bettini Center and SMART station through physical design, coordination among transit agencies, and enforcement of jaywalking regulations.
- iii. Coordinate bus and rail schedules to minimize disruption of bus service.

Concept B. Mid-Term: Improve Operations of the Current Bettini Center.

The Plan recommends the following medium-term actions to improve operations at the existing Bettini Center:

- i. Modify Platform C and Platform D when rail service is extended to the south, as described in Chapter V, Section 2 of the Plan
- ii. Consider options for providing additional space for shuttles, buses, taxis, kiss-and-ride, and other passenger loading activities, as discussed in Chapter VI, Section 6 of the Plan.

Concept C. Long-Term: Consolidate bus and rail service in a San Rafael Transit Complex surrounding the SMART station.

The Plan’s long-term vision recommends creating an integrated San Rafael Transit Complex surrounding the SMART station.

Goal 2. Provide a street network that supports the Plan's land use vision while balancing the needs of motorists, bus and rail customers, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

The Plan identified several potential improvements to the street network that would improve multi-modal access to the transit center and help address congestion in the Plan Area. The City would take the lead on these implementation actions, which involve changes to the City-owned right-of-way.

Concept A. Consider modifications to Tamalpais Avenue to create a “front door” to the transit stations and facilitate passenger loading and bicycle/pedestrian activities.

The planning process evaluated alternatives for modifying Tamalpais Avenue between Second Street and Mission Avenue to allow this section of Tamalpais to serve as a “front door” to the transit stations, facilitate passenger loading activities, and create space for wider sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and green space.

Concept B. If and when the Bettini Center is relocated, explore implementing traffic capacity improvements on Hetherton Street while balancing the needs of other modes.

Moving the Bettini Center to the SMART station block could potentially allow the City to increase capacity on Hetherton Street, as discussed in Chapter VII, Section 2 and the “Alternatives Report.” However, this proposal would require further study. Any improvements to traffic capacity should be considered in light of potential impacts on bus and rail, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

Goal 3. Enable pedestrians and bicyclists to safely and comfortably get to, around, and through the Plan Area.

The Plan identified a number of improvements that would improve bicycle and pedestrian safety and encourage more people to walk or bike to, around, and through the station area..

Concept A. Consider options for improving bicycle and pedestrian access on Tamalpais Avenue.

The Plan considered several bicycle and pedestrian improvements to Tamalpais Avenue, including widening sidewalks, constructing bicycle facilities, and providing green space in the City-owned right-of-way adjacent to the SMART tracks. These improvements would require modifications to Tamalpais Avenue (see Goal 2, Concept A, above) in order to free up the required right-of-way.

Concept B. Explore other options for improving pedestrian and bicycle conditions in the Plan Area.

The Plan identified a number of other potential improvements that would significantly improve pedestrian and bicycle conditions in the Plan Area. These improvements could include:

- i. Wider sidewalks, improved pedestrian crossings, and extended curbs adjacent to the transit stations, including on Second Street, Third Street, and/or Hetherton Street.
- ii. Wider sidewalks and improved pedestrian connections under US 101 at Third, Fourth, Fifth, and/or Mission Streets.
- iii. Bicycle signage on Fourth Street, Fifth Street, Lincoln Avenue, and Mission Avenue.
- iv. A multi-use path along the southern side of Second Street between Hetherton and Irwin Streets. The path could be further extended to Francisco Boulevard, with an undercrossing of the southbound US-101 on-ramp, an at-grade crossing of the SMART tracks, and a new east-west crosswalk at Francisco Blvd.
- v. Improved public space along Fourth Street or a Station Plaza at the north end of the Whistlestop site.

Concept C. Consider adding wayfinding signs and features in and around the Plan Area.

New wayfinding features in and around the Plan Area would help orient visitors to San Rafael and facilitate access to the transit stations, downtown, and shopping and other amenities. The City could coordinate efforts with GGBHTD, which is implementing MTC's Hub Signage Program – a regional effort to install standardized wayfinding signs, transit information displays, and real-time transit departure indicators – at the Bettini Center. SMART and GGBHTD could also consider asking MTC to modify the scope of the Hub

Signage Program to include integrated wayfinding for the SMART station and bus transit center.

Concept D. Work with developers and property owners to provide wider sidewalks and pedestrian amenities along the frontages of the transit center and parcels as they redevelop.

Portions of Hetherton Street and Tamalpais Avenue have narrow sidewalks and other pedestrian deficiencies. As redevelopment occurs, the City could work with developers to widen the sidewalks and provide pedestrian amenities adjacent to development sites.

Goal 4. Supply adequate parking for new housing and businesses while encouraging transit use, walking, and bicycling.

The Plan recommends a series of changes that the City could make to parking policies and identifies opportunities for expanding parking capacity in the Plan Area. These recommended actions are intended to address concerns about the parking spaces that will be removed to accommodate SMART service; ensure efficient use of new and existing parking spaces, whether publicly or privately owned; limit the impact of parking from commuters, visitors, and new residents on existing residential neighborhoods surrounding the Plan Area; facilitate the development of small parcels; and encourage the use of alternatives to the private automobile.

Concept A. Review parking regulations for the Plan Area and consider making changes to encourage more efficient use of privately owned parking spaces.

The Plan explored a range of short- and long-term options for adjusting City regulations to ensure that privately-held parking is managed efficiently and to facilitate the development of small lots that can dedicate limited space to parking. Options include reducing minimum parking requirements, allowing off-site parking for new development, allowing tandem parking and/or unbundled parking, and/or allowing bicycle parking in lieu of some portion of required automobile parking (see Chapter IV, Section 2). Implementing these changes would require making amendments to the City's zoning code.

Concept B. Consider implementing public parking management strategies in the Plan Area.

The Plan also evaluated parking management strategies that the City could implement to help accommodate public parking demand, while protecting existing residential parking and encouraging walking, bicycling, and taking transit over driving. As discussed in Chapter IV, Section 1, potential strategies include installing new signage to show parking locations and time limits; establishing short-term parking zones; installing electronic meters; and/or exploring strategies to manage parking on residential streets.

Concept C. Explore the feasibility of establishing car-share near the transit stations.

A car-share program could help reduce reliance on the private automobile, in turn reducing parking demand and vehicle travel. A private car-share organization would most likely provide and maintain the cars; the City could dedicate municipally-owned parking spaces for car-share and work with TAM to provide additional incentives as required.

Concept D. Explore opportunities to provide additional parking for bicycles.

Various agencies play a role in providing bicycle parking in the Plan Area. The City sets bicycle parking requirement for new development. Golden Gate Transit provides bicycle parking to serve bus riders. SMART will provide bicycle parking to serve train riders when SMART service begins. Caltrans provides additional public bicycle parking under Highway 101. As demand for bicycle parking increases, there may be opportunities for these agencies to create efficiencies by coordinating the provision of new bicycle parking.

Concept E. Consider options for providing additional municipal parking.

The strategies described above will help manage parking demand and supply in the Study Area. Even with these strategies in place, however, new parking spaces may still be required to replace the parking that will be removed with the construction of the SMART station and to absorb future increases in parking demand from new residents, businesses, visitors, and SMART and other transit customers.

The planning process identified and evaluated several potential sites for a new municipal parking garage.

Concept F. Consider ways to meet parking demand for transit users as needed.

As transit use expands, reserving additional parking spaces for transit riders may be required. However, the City and transit agencies should prioritize other modes of accessing the transit stations, such as walking, bicycling, buses, etc.

Goal 5. Explore making zoning changes to provide a consistent urban fabric on both sides of the freeway.

The Plan provides several recommendations intended to provide a consistent urban fabric on both sides of US 101, and to ensure that – if bus operations are relocated – the Bettini Transit Center site is redeveloped in a way that benefits the community and contributes to a vibrant, mixed-use environment.

Concept A. Consider allowing increased height limits and Floor Area Ratio (FAR) on certain blocks adjacent to US 101 to match existing requirements in nearby areas.

Extending the character of the “Hetherton Gateway” area (the portion of the Plan Area located west of US 101) under the freeway to Irwin Street would help make the Plan

Area a welcoming gateway to San Rafael. In order to accomplish this goal, the Plan recommends making the following changes to building height and FAR requirements:

- In the blocks bounded by Tamalpais Avenue, Hetherton, Mission Avenue, and Second Street, allow building heights up to 66 feet and FAR up to 2.0 to match the current height limits and FAR allowed on Tamalpais between 3rd Street and 5th Ave.
- In the blocks along the west side of Irwin Street between Mission Avenue and Fourth Street, both sides of Irwin Street between Fourth and Second Streets, and along the south side of Fourth Street between Irwin Street and Grand Avenue, allow building heights up to 54 feet and FAR up to 1.5 to match the heights and FAR allowed west of US 101.

The recommended height and FAR, as well as existing height and FAR requirements in surrounding areas, are shown in Figure VIII-2 and Figure VIII-3. These regulatory changes would require amendments to the General Plan and zoning code, as well as environmental review.

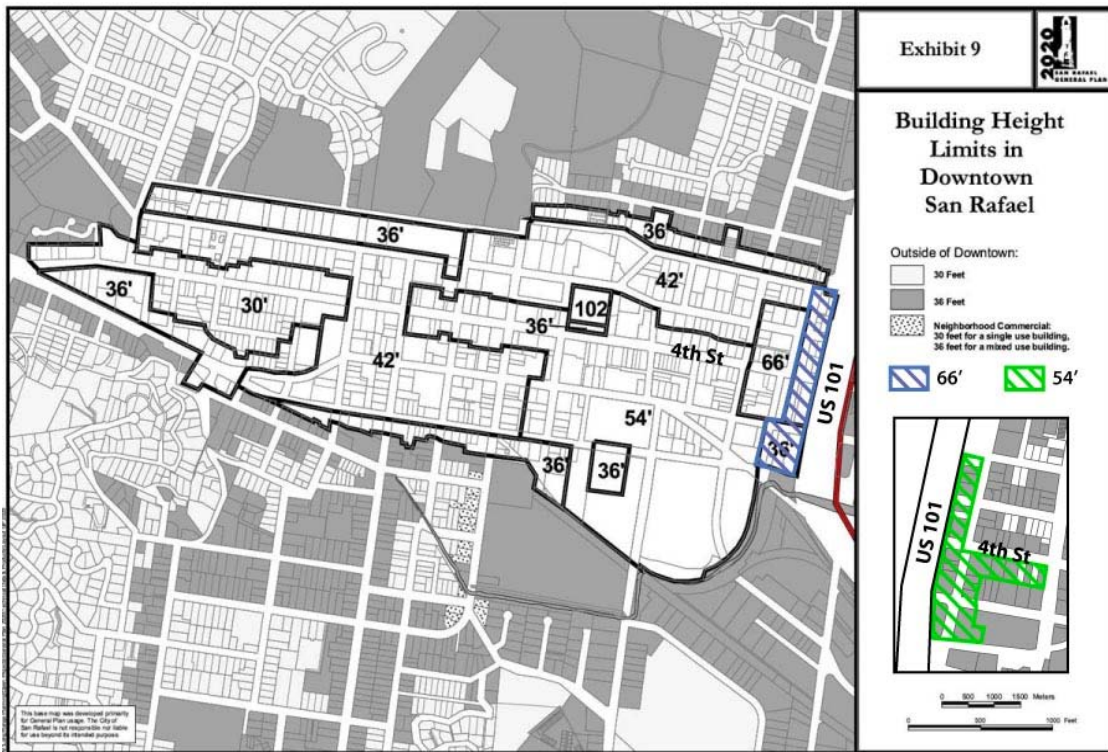


Figure VIII-2. Recommended Building Height Limits

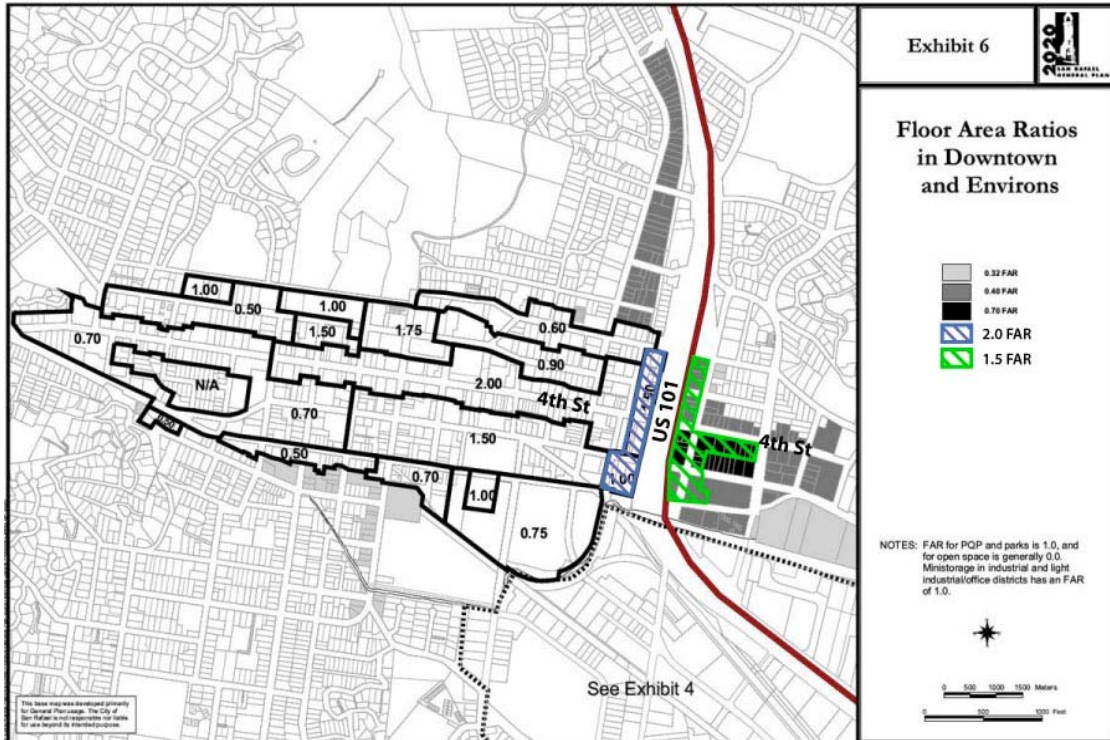


Figure VIII-3. Recommended FAR

Goal 6. Enable new transit-oriented development characterized by increased activity, a mix of uses, and a strong sense of place.

In order to enable a greater variety of building types and achieve the Plan’s vision of a vibrant, mixed-use district, the Plan recommends that the City consider allowing additional height and FAR increases in exchange for community amenities, and removing maximum density requirements on residential units.

Concept A. Explore allowing a height and/or FAR bonus for developments that provide community benefits in the Plan Area.

In exchange for community benefits such as public open space, public art, providing carshare or bicycle parking, etc., the City could consider allowing discretionary height or FAR bonuses in addition to those required by state law. These discretionary height and/or FAR bonuses would be implemented separately from the proposed increases in allowable height and FAR discussed in Goal 5, Concept A. Allowing increased building height limits could allow a greater diversity of building types, contributing to a more vibrant urban fabric that serves as a gateway to downtown San Rafael. The actual building heights/FARs and level of community benefits that could be achieved would depend on market conditions when development proposals come forward. Establishing a new height and/or FAR bonus would require amendments to the General Plan and zoning code, as well as environmental review.

Concept B. Explore removing maximum density requirements for residential uses in the Plan Area.

The opportunity site assessment performed as part of the planning process found that under current regulations, maximum density was the most restrictive regulation limiting the types of residential buildings that can be built in the Plan Area. In other words, the maximum density is typically reached before either the maximum building height or maximum FAR. By removing or relaxing this density requirement, the City would effectively allow height and FAR limits to determine the density and number of residential units that can be built on a given site. Changing the density requirement require amendments to the General Plan and zoning code, as well as environmental review.

Concept C. Facilitate reuse of the Whistlestop site

The Plan recognizes the Whistlestop site as critical to creating a strong sense of place and providing character for the area, and recommends reusing the site in a manner that integrates well with the station design and related activities, creates an active ground floor use, and provides a gathering place for the area. Recommended options to be explored include:

- Address the lack of parking at the building. This could be addressed through site design, zoning considerations, including permitting off-site parking.
- Integrate the SMART station platforms with the Whistlestop site to create compatibility and improve a functional integration of uses and pedestrian connections.
- Create an attractive link to the Fourth Street retail core and Downtown.
- Provide an active, welcoming point of arrival to Downtown San Rafael.
- Integrate the site with transit passenger drop-off and loading activities on Tamalpais Avenue.

Concept D. Facilitate eventual reuse should the Bettini Transit Center be relocated.

To facilitate the site's eventual reuse as an active mixed-use development should bus operations be relocated, the Plan recommends rezoning the Bettini Center site to conform to the surrounding Hetherington Office zoning, a designation that permits a variety of retail, office, and multi-family residential uses.