
REPORT TO GENERAL PLAN 2040 STEERING COMMITTEE

Subject: Responses to “Eight Questions” Visioning Exercise

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the February 14, 2018 Meeting, the General Plan 2040 Steering Committee discussed its responses to eight questions about San Rafael’s future. Most Committee members also responded to the questions in writing. This report provides a synopsis of the responses. It provides a profile of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the City’s future, as expressed by members of the Steering Committee. **Attachment 5** includes the verbatim responses themselves.

REPORT

At the February 14 2018 Meeting, the General Plan 2040 Steering Committee discussed its responses to eight questions about San Rafael’s future. The questions highlighted aspects of the city that are valued or need improvement, things that are missing, and external forces shaping the quality of life.

Committee members were given the option of responding to the questions in writing. Twenty Committee members did, providing thoughtful and insightful answers. With so many responses, there were many different ideas and opinions expressed. However, there were common threads and themes, and many shared goals and concerns. The responses provide a foundation for editing the current General Plan goals and revisiting the General Plan 2020 Vision for San Rafael’s future (drafted roughly 15 years ago).

Responses to Question 1: What is precious here that we don’t want to lose?

This question asked Committee members to think about the things that make San Rafael a great place to live and work—the valued and cherished aspects of the community and its greatest strengths. Recurring responses were:

- Open Space and the sense of being a refuge from the urban Bay Area
- Physical beauty and aesthetics, proximity to nature (woods, hillsides, wetlands, bay)
- Walkable and historic downtown—a true and authentic civic gathering place
- Small town/Small city character
- Diversity and inclusion; welcoming persons of all backgrounds
- Culture of good government, accessible leadership and civic engagement
- Neighborhoods and strong sense of identity— a “community of communities”

- Creative and innovative spirit
- Balance between urban life, neighborhoods, and open space
- Excellent schools, parks, and services

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.

Responses to Question 2: What’s almost good that we need to make better?

This question asked Committee members to think about the things in San Rafael that were “pretty good” but could be better with a little bit of work. Recurring responses were:

- Pedestrian and bicycle safety—overall walkability
- Congestion and traffic—ability to get around town
- Aging parks and community facilities in need of investment
- Waterfront accessibility and the general state of the waterfront
- Affordable housing and services for the homeless
- The arts, culture, entertainment, and dining scene
- Older, shabby shopping centers
- Architectural design standards and architectural quality
- Overcoming anti-immigrant sentiment and being more inclusive
- The public transportation system
- The Downtown business district, including preservation of historic buildings, sensitive infill, and more programmed activities

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.

Responses to Question 3: What is terrible that needs to change?

This question asked Committee members to identify the City’s greatest weaknesses, and areas where San Rafael is falling short. Traffic and housing were the primary responses, with many also mentioning climate-related hazards such as sea level rise and wildfire. Recurring responses were:

- Intolerable traffic congestion
- Not enough affordable/ workforce housing
- Inequities and limited opportunities for lower income and immigrant households
- Lack of sufficient parking in specific locations
- Climate-related hazards, particularly flooding and sea level rise
- Homelessness
- Trash and litter
- Creeks are not valued and have been ruined
- Fiscal constraints and responsibilities
- Pedestrian and bicycle safety, and better cycling behavior
- More visionary, thoughtful, and environmentally aware planning

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.

Responses to Question 4: What's missing?

Question 4 asked respondents to identify missing features that could improve the quality of life or make San Rafael a better place. The “threads” common to many of the responses are listed below:

- More unity—community gathering places and events that bring people together
- More sensitive treatment of creeks and awareness of watersheds
- Better access to the waterfront and identity as a waterfront city
- More housing options, including seniors, emergency responders, formerly homeless
- Better commercial services—restaurants, hotels, places to go, choices for local workers and residents
- More economic equality and access to good education/ services
- More focus on North San Rafael / Terra Linda; sometimes feels like the City ignores these areas
- Safer, more walkable neighborhoods and viable commercial centers
- More cohesive and higher-quality architecture
- Emergency preparedness
- More partnerships (public/private, neighborhoods/city, seniors/youth, etc.)

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.

Responses to Question 5: What's happening nearby that we should take advantage of?

Question 5 asked Committee members to identify things the City should be doing given its location in the San Francisco Bay Area, and its relationship to other cities and counties in the region. Key messages in the responses included:

- Learn from the Sonoma County wildfires and be prepared for the next disaster
- Recognize San Rafael as the hub of the County, the gateway to the North Bay, and a destination city—home to special events and entertainment that draws visitors from other communities
- Encourage more environmentally responsible planning
- Work regionally and borrow ideas from other cities to address greenhouse gas reduction and climate resilience/ sea level rise
- Walkable town centers—housing belongs in locations with good connections to regional workplaces
- Embrace the fact that San Rafael is culturally diverse and has issues related to equity
- Improve public transit connections to the rest of the Bay Area
- Be a vanguard and regional leader on issues such as climate, transportation planning, and homelessness

Individual committee members expressed different views on issues like transit-oriented development, with some in support and others opposed. *The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.*

Responses to Question 6: What's happening nearby that we should be worried about?

Committee members were asked how changes in nearby cities and the surrounding region might be negatively impacting San Rafael. This question asked about worries and concerns relative to the future

of the Bay Area and Marin County. Almost all respondents mentioned housing and transportation in their responses, with many aspects of the current situation described. Key concerns were:

- Traffic congestion
- The lack of housing supply and resulting affordability problems (loss of economic diversity, long commutes and traffic, inability to attract and retain employees, etc.)
- Regional homelessness problem
- Increasing susceptibility to climate-change related disasters, including fire and flooding
- Suburban sprawl and diminished environmental quality, including lack of reliable water supply
- Culture of fear in the immigrant community—which divides people and erodes trust
- Intrusive state laws that take away local control
- Income inequality and the loss of the middle class
- Unfunded pension liabilities
- Impacts of the growing senior population

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.

Responses to Question 7: What do we aspire to be?

Question 7 touched on the idea of a vision for 2040. It asked Committee members to articulate what they'd like San Rafael to be known for in that Year. Some Committee members drafted full vision statements, while others jotted down a few descriptive words or goals. Most of the responses referenced the issues mentioned in Questions 1-6, but with a focus on innovation, integrity, inclusion, authenticity, and environmental stewardship.

Excerpted responses included:

- “The city in Marin that has a little bit of everything”
- “A hip city of art and innovation”
- “A multi-cultural giving-back community that promotes healthy lifestyles”
- “The first town in Marin to reach zero net GHG emissions—demonstrating how to remedy climate change while readying our community for its impacts”
- “The most diverse and inclusive city in the Bay Area. A friendly city that focuses its economy on innovation, arts, and tourism.”
- “On the forefront of innovation for transportation, self-driving cars, zero emission efforts, energized youth”
- “Celebrate (San Rafael’s) connection to the car”
- “Lacking in stratification and prejudice, we aspire to represent who we are and who we will be demographically, culturally, and socially in 2040 and beyond. Ever aware and representative of our common values and abilities.”
- “The largest, most inviting, most fun place in Marin—a welcoming community to all.”
- “A complete community, well integrated across income levels and cultures, and with the natural environment”

- “A comfortable, world class, multi-cultural, walkable, bicycle-friendly, safe, clean diverse city, with neighborhoods a downtown, businesses, cultural attractions, interesting architecture—a city that is accessible to the disabled and sustainable for generations in the future”
- “Let’s be known for our willingness to change and embrace the future—solve the solvable problems”
- “A community of gathering places safe for all”
- “A great fiscally sound small city with a wonderful and walkable downtown, highly diverse population, a strong economy, a great quality of life for our residents”
- “A great place to go shopping, with a lovely natural environment and historic buildings”
- “Good design, simple and effective planning, a city that serves its residents—a place people like to live in.”
- “More of the same---but just a little bigger and more accommodating to younger people”
- “A culturally diverse, livable community that offers all people the opportunity to be connected to community life and have the resources and support they need to thrive and achieve their life potential”
- “The hub and destination city for Marin—with a strong economic base, that embraces diversity and encourages a multi-cultural community that supports each resident.”

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.

Responses to Question 8: How do we get started?

Question 8 asked Committee members to imagine that they were the Mayor—and explain what they would do to address the issues raised in the earlier questions. There were fewer recurring themes in the responses, but several respondents mentioned the same things, including:

- Tap into local talent, imagination, knowledge, and vision
- Learn from other cities
- Improve design quality
- Strive for equity, gender equality, compassion, and inclusion

Other comments made by individual committee members included:

- Emphasize political integrity and honesty
- Overarching focus on climate change and being a greener city
- Engage the schools
- Question the benefits of TOD in light of autonomous cars and local preferences
- Proactively address pension reform and infrastructure funding needs

The full list of responses is in Attachment 5.