

Downtown Precise Plan | Focus Group Meetings
Focus Group 1: Historic Preservation Stakeholders
May 2, 2019, 10:30 AM

Participants: *Amy Likover, Ray Lorber, Danielle O’Leary, Larry Paul, Jeff Rhoads, Jackie Schmidt, Leslie Simons, Roger Smith, Joanne Webster*

Consultants: *Mike Garavaglia, Mitali Ganguly, Barry Miller, Renee Nickenig*

Members of the group introduced themselves. Barry Miller explained that a historic resource inventory would be done as part of the Precise Plan and a preservation strategy would be included in the Plan. Mike and Renee delivered a PowerPoint presentation providing the context for historic preservation in San Rafael (including existing General Plan goals and policies), an overview of local historic resources, and a summary of their work scope. Mike explained that his firm would bring technical data on historic preservation into the discussion so that information could be used in a positive way. Renee noted that the City’s ordinance was well developed but had a few pieces missing, such as an advisory board, incentives, definitions of key terms, and clarification of the permitting process. Some of this information is needed in the General Plan as well as the Precise Plan and Garavaglia is coordinating with the firm responsible for citywide preservation efforts.

Questions and discussion took place during and after the presentation. Participant comments include:

Comments

- What is the relationship between the Precise Plan and General Plan as it relates to preservation? Does one inform the other? Does the General Plan apply to McNear’s Brickyard and other properties outside the City but in the sphere of influence? Staff responded to this question.
- What is a “historic resource”?
 - Staff responded that there are specific criteria, such as age (older than 50 years), degree of alteration, whether properties are eligible under the California register
 - The spotty nature of the 1977 survey creates challenges
- There is a big education component to this work—there’s a lot of fear and misinformation about what it means to be a historic resource
- Why isn’t Falkirk listed/ included in Downtown?
- Are the landmarks locally or state designated?
- What’s the difference between a landmark and a district? (Staff responded to these questions)
- There is confusion between what is a “historic resource” vs a designated landmark
- San Rafael Heritage has a list of potential resources needing further evaluation. Garavaglia will digitize this list so it can be used in GIS mapping
- San Rafael Heritage’s list includes properties that didn’t make the City’s list. Heritage started this effort on its own, with volunteer assistance. We will send the data to the City.
- Garavaglia will look at all buildings over 50 years old, per the federal standard
 - 50 years is too recent

- No, 50 years is appropriate and “paces our thinking”
- Members of the Federation of Neighborhoods seem to think that the City is going to streamline future development approvals and the opportunity for them to weigh in by adopting an EIR that covers future projects. There’s a lot of concern that future projects will be exempt from design review. (Staff explained that projects consistent with the General Plan/ Precise Plan may be eligible for CEQA streamlining, but that does not mean they are exempt from design review). Need to address misconceptions.
- Don’t call them “design guidelines”—call them mandatory criteria, so developers have to follow them. In the past developers didn’t follow the guidelines and came in with bad projects that had to be redesigned.
- We should be encouraging developers to push the envelope and not over-regulating
- The idea is that if the project complies with design standards, you get approved faster. If you want to depart from the standards, you take a longer route.
- There is a lot of “resistance to learning”
- In Redwood City, the ratings of resources were clear. That provided more certainty for the development community and the preservation community. Can we go in that direction here?
- (Garavaglia) will develop standards about how to manage a historic resource, eg., don’t tack an inappropriate addition on the front, etc.
- Will the guidelines/standards be specific enough that the architects won’t have to evaluate each building? (Staff: the expectation is that the design will be dictated to some extent)
- We should have a rating system for buildings: A, B, C, D. You can change a “D” but need to preserve an “A”.
- We should not reinvent the wheel as we do this.
- More predictability would help
- But without obstacles and excessive costs
- Preservation should be part of our branding—it can help foster placemaking and help us succeed. It doesn’t have to stop progress.
- Devil is in the details. There will be controversy.
- Don’t follow San Francisco’s lead—it makes projects very costly
- Please explain the objectives of this Focus Group—it’s important to also hear the perspectives of developers and property owners (discussion followed—the intent is to understand the hot button issues before the charrette)
- It would be helpful to better understand the costs of preservation—e.g., what are the implications of calling a building an “A” vs a “B,” etc. in terms of what can be done and how much it costs the owner? This type of information should be included in public meetings, etc.
- Please highlight what is state law, and where we have discretion to make the decisions (especially around CEQA and cultural resources)
- Consider impacts to adjacent buildings as well as direct impacts to historic resources
- Any preservation overlay should be balanced. I’m anxious about the outcome of the survey.
- We need an approach that complies with CEQA but is acceptable to the community
- A lot of this is about clarifying the rules

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Focus Group 2: Downtown Merchants and Businesses

May 8, 2019, 10:00 AM

Participants: *Mike Altman (Iron Springs Public House), Anne Dubinsky Altman (Iron Springs Public House), Erika Bowker (Pleasures of the Heart), Tobi Lessem (Bodywise Massage), Trevor Martens (Pond Farm), Joanne Webster (San Rafael Chamber of Commerce), Robert Wellbeloved (Magnolia Park Kitchen)*
Consultants: *Stefan Pellegrini, Mitali Ganguly, Barry Miller*

Members of the group introduced themselves. Stefan asked each person to talk about what brought them to Downtown San Rafael, and about the positive and negative qualities they've observed. The following points were raised by the participants.

Comments

- We moved here from Southern Marin. It was more affordable than Mill Valley. But the restaurants were old and uninteresting—it was a tough market to break into. We made a home here and wanted to be part of this community. We see a lot of potential here. There have been positive changes lately, but there's still some issues that need work. A lot of us are betting on San Rafael's future. The positives are that the city is coalescing and getting exciting. The major negative is homelessness.
- Street closures and other such measures are ok but not serving current population - for today's sophisticated customers, need to change ideas such as farmers market. Courthouse Square is underutilized needs late evening activity. Retail is tough, relevant retail is a puzzle, emphasis on restaurants and furniture stores.
- There's room for improvement in the types of special events that come downtown and the way they impact businesses. Events should benefit businesses, but they don't—some are not relevant, or block access to our businesses. The courtyard outside our business is quiet from 3 to 6. On-line retail makes it harder for brick and mortar businesses to succeed. Restaurants and furniture stores seem to be growth areas.
- There is an opportunity for a cluster of health and wellness businesses here---bodywork, etc. Bring massage businesses out of the dark and recognize they are a legitimate part of the health and wellness sector. It can be integrated with healthy local eating etc, use it as a theme for Downtown to create a unique experience, bridge supporting businesses.
- Need to improve the "near west end" area
- There's a market for Wearables that we can tap into—interactive products
- Let's keep building a vibrant Downtown scene. Create a Downtown culture. Let's have events that match the vibrancy. Right now, when there's a special event, the City closes off access to the front of our store, but we don't get any patrons out of it. On the other hand, the Thursday Farmers Market is great.
- Need to improve street lighting—it's too dark. The street lights are high up and the trees block light. Lighting helps in the perception of safety. 4th street in Berkeley is great. It is close to transit and has

different kinds of stores. Street lighting in Santana Row, San Jose is good. Maybe antique light standards, like in the West End.

- Happy the City approved a hotel!
- Need another anchor—like Macy’s was.
- There’s a sense of a rising tide here—we are becoming more of a destination: Biomarin, apartments in the pipeline, etc. We just need to get the word out.
- We are just getting our feet on the ground. San Rafael is well situated for families with ties to the north (Santa Rosa) and the south (San Francisco).
- Participant Y Runs a brewery, were in Santa Rosa. Santa Rosa had 20 breweries and San Rafael had two—so this was the logical choice for our investment. Things are great so far. Having a little more downtown cohesion will be great - but diversity retail is good. Not like a ‘cuter’ version of a strip mall similar to new downtowns.
- Arts district needs to be highlighted. But IT IS complicated to get something happening. The color, arts, etc can work very well to do so.
- I like the architectural diversity. We should would look for cohesion, events, marketing.
- Extend streetlights to the west end of 4th Street. Would like to see more art installations
- Can we paint the side of Best Buy outlet—its 80s beige and is a massive canvas. Can we do a mural?
- I live in Petaluma. Downtown is always busy—there’s a lot of art. City appears to be trying to welcome people.
- When disembarking the SMART train in San Rafael, there’s nothing exciting. There’s no wayfinding, no welcoming public space, nothing that says “you’ve arrived in San Rafael.” How can we make the transit plaza inviting?
- Petaluma has interesting small spaces and places to pause in the Downtown with fountains, etc. Can we do this in San Rafael? Maybe in the passage between 3rd and 4th next to San Rafael Joes?
- Bon Air has neat and clean storefronts, need to have owners who take a proprietary ownership about stores etc. The space where Macy’s used to be is scary. We need to make our vacant buildings less intimidating—temporary activation? The building at 4th and A (southwest corner) is also a little scary and has a lot of empty space in the upper floors.
- The vacant storefronts can at least be cleaned. It will help to feel part of welcoming ambience.
- Don’t make it too hard for businesses. Union St did that and drove away the merchants. Owners and managers need to take a proprietary interest in what’s going on.
- We went through a renaissance in the 1990s. There was a lot of investment in infrastructure. There hasn’t been a lot of investment in public space.
- City needs to be less aggressive about parking enforcement—it scares away our customers
- What’s the vision for parking? Are we as merchants ready to give up parking and intentionally encourage people to walk, use transit, etc.? “Parking or parklets”??
- Parking is our customers’ biggest concern. We opened without a dedicated lot, but the first question patrons ask is “where should we park?” We have adjacent businesses with private lots that are empty at night, but we can’t use them. More shared parking agreements would help a lot. People come here anyway—they are OK walking one block, but not really more.
- If we had bikeshare from the train, would that work for customers? Bikeshare from transit center - issue of locking bikes. What about parklets, parking and a bike program?

- The bikeshare program can be like a draw - strategy similar to Napa - ask people to park, ride bikes and do wine and beer tasting.
- Many customers don't realize that there is cheap and available parking in the City; most focus on 4th street. Don't look beyond 4th street - how to change this perception? Market a bike program.
- Be careful--tons of people ride bikes over the Golden Gate and overrun Sausalito. We can't really do that here unless we have bike lanes.
- At our business, we have a public lot nearby—that's helpful. The parking structures are underused and most people don't know they're there.
- Bike lanes come to the edges of Downtown but don't go through. Need better connections from east to west—Montecito to West End is not well served by bike lanes.
- Can 4th Street become a pedestrian-bike only street? I don't think that this will work. How would deliveries work? Service access is crucial. No issues doing servicing for their business so far.
- Perhaps make it more like Boulder—more pedestrian oriented?
- No, it's a car-centric city. No way to get trucks in if we prohibit autos. Perhaps if deliveries and commercial goods can be addressed?
- Perceptions of safety? It's relatively safe here, but there's a perception it's not. This is partially caused by homeless individuals who may be screaming or have mental health issues. We can deal with it, but families with kids maybe not. They will go to Northgate or Bonaire instead.
- Perhaps do what Pasadena does and leave the lights on in the store until 10 PM? Yes, this might be good on Thursday nights when we have music and there's nightlife.
- City is sometimes overzealous with street closures and blocks off 4th Street and side streets several blocks away from where an event is occurring.
- Check out Laurens alley – potential to improve pass through to garage - but scary right now.
- I stayed open late on Thursdays when the Farmers Market was going on—a few nights were good, a few nights break even, a few nights were bad. The music was too loud and close to the diners for outdoor conversation. The entertainment choices were not that helpful to our business.
- San Rafael is a destination for transactional uses. You come downtown, you do what you came to do, and you leave. You don't really hang out here. We need more distinct activity nodes and destinations—an arts district, a service district, etc. It's very linear in form—not nodal. This is a drawback for hanging out and spending time here.
- We need more public art and better lighting. We've been afraid to install benches because homeless folks may sleep there.
- The sitting walls at curb extensions don't work at all. We need better landscaping and trees.
- About biking; very inadequate facilities and safer bike racks. The Courtyard has plenty of spaces but is underutilized. We need safe enclosures at multiple locations. Locking to trees isn't great. Bike theft is a MAJOR issue; bikes need to be visible and apparent.
- Downtown 'stuck on stucco and glass'. Need design to reflect the vibrancy in downtown. Rooftop gardens, transparency and vibrancy.
- The city needs to have vision. Lootens to top of hill - similar approach to the Courtyard project. Can have hanging planters, banners, trees.

Stefan asked the participants for examples from other places that they have liked. Responses included:

- Petaluma – good vibe, art, welcoming. Works even with less parking.
- North Santa Cruz avenue in Downtown Los Gatos - very linear but public spaces are good.
- Santana Row - (twinkle lights, shops open till later)
- Boulder, CO is a good comparable city—they had a serious problem with homelessness but overcame it. It's a destination. It's busy.
- Lyons, CO is a good example. They have art on every corner
- Fairfax, CA – downtown has a rotating artist-in-residence program

Focus Group 3: Downtown Service Providers

May 8, 2019, 11:00 AM

Participants: *Alison Buck (Homeward Bound), Omar Carrera (Canal Alliance), Susie Criscimanga (Eden Housing), Eli Gelardin (Center for Independent Living), Andrew Hening (City of San Rafael), Joe O’Hehir (Whistlestop), Christine Pacquette (St. Vincents), Howard Schwartz (St. Vincents), Jesse Taylor-Vermont (Downtown Streets Team), Simon Tiles (Ritter Center)*

Consultants: *Stefan Pellegrini, Mitali Ganguly, Barry Miller*

Members of the group introduced themselves and described the services their organizations provided. They each discussed the connections between their organizations and Downtown San Rafael. Stefan asked members of the group to elaborate on what was working and not working with respect to Downtown. How could Downtown grow and change over the next 20 years in a way that helped them achieve their missions? What were challenges that persons with special needs faced in getting around Downtown?

Comments

- I lived Downtown for five years. It’s a warm, friendly, peaceful place, easy to get around, easy to commute to. It’s a sweet town—a hamlet. Very different from LA! Sometimes it’s easy to lose that perspective.
- It’s a little boring. It’s not vibrant, hip, or diverse. People take their kids to Greenbrae and Larkspur before they come to Downtown San Rafael. It can be transformed without losing its charm—like Mountain View did. The absence of people Downtown makes the homeless population more visible.
- I work in San Rafael but live in San Francisco. I walk Downtown a lot and have for a long time—it feels very safe to me. I grew up here as a kid and went to local schools. It never felt unsafe to me.
- It is a tight knit community. I commend the city for making Downtown accessible. The access has always been challenging in Marin. Everyone at the City of San Rafael has their hearts in the right place. But the reality is, we are dealing with a lot of failing infrastructure, uneven and broken sidewalks, etc. As we repair our Downtown, we should aspire to be universally accessible—go beyond the minimum standards and be a model for other cities. Look at the AARP standards.
- Downtown is really three sections: the West End Village (which is working well, with restaurants and parking, etc.), the Central Core, and the East Side. The West End have done a great job at capturing purposeful planning. Downtown is attempting to do that since it was part of planning effort to make downtown walkable similar to Boulder Co, Windsor. However it was not liked by preservationists, but it can be a unique draw for destination. The Transit center a great opportunity. The East End is very challenging especially for pedestrians and safety. We should look at places like Boulder, Charlottesville, and Windsor as we improve the Central Core and East Side. In general, it is tough for older people and the aging population.

- Some of the residents didn't want to give up parking so we still have an auto-oriented downtown. It's not really walkable even though it's the transit hub of the North Bay. It may be walkable for us, but not for an 85 year old. That's the fastest growing segment of the population and we need to think about their needs.
- The relocation of the transit center is a challenge and its location is a really pivotal decision
- The availability of transit in Downtown San Rafael is a very important amenity—it gives Downtown a competitive advantage.
- Bettini and SMART are huge assets - take advantage, improve ridership, help low income HH, can avoid cars for poor people.
- Parking and traffic remain big issues—when the train crosses 2nd and 3rd, the impacts on traffic will be substantial. The issue with parking is not supply—there's plenty of supply---people just don't know where it is, and a lot of the spaces are not used. Only 65% of parking spaces are used, there is capacity up to 85%.
- People in their 80s don't want to parallel park—and they don't want to go into garages, so they go to Northgate instead.
- There are a lot of crossing safety issues on 2nd and 3rd. The City doesn't want to slow down traffic on these streets with crosswalks and pedestrian improvements. So, Biomarin employees can't safely get to 4th Street. Study to make 3rd street “part of 4th” but cars accelerate around the curve, no crosswalks concern that slowing traffic will create more congestion, walking is very challenging. In Boulder, they created shuttles for shoppers etc. It can be used here, especially for older population.
- Demographics in Boulder are similar to San Rafael—look at them as a model. Look to other cities for solutions.
- Social isolation is also an issue, particularly among seniors. People are afraid to leave their homes. We don't really have community spaces Downtown. We could use spaces where seniors and others can gather—perhaps near the theater, etc. How do we create a welcoming place? Public spaces for all populations.
- Yes, space for intentional opportunities is needed. We need space where kids can just run around too.
- There are great parks on the perimeter of Downtown, but they are not activated. Parks are not integrated into the fabric of Downtown—and what's more, they are hard to get to because of busy traffic on the east-west streets. The only space in Downtown is the plaza but not much are happening there.
- Even at the plaza, just see cars going past; it is not welcoming or cool.
- There is high traffic on 4th street. Could use more patios, live music.
- Need more outdoor dining areas. Take advantage of the great weather.
- Improve walkability by fixing the uneven sidewalks
- Consider improving access to the transit center—it's hard to walk to
- I like that there aren't chain restaurants here—it gives Downtown a hometown feel
- The San Rafael Community Center / Albert Park area has great outdoor spaces but nobody uses them. The Parking lot is very underutilized.

- The availability of parking is an issue. It is easy to find parking west of transit center; inside canal district the bus is working well. But in downtown it is difficult and unsafe to move around.
- What about getting to Downtown from the Canal area? It is hard to walk to Downtown from the Canal and if you take the bus, it's not really safe to walk once you get off. When the train goes through it will be even worse and could further isolate the Canal from the rest of the city. The Grand Avenue bike bridge is a good first step but it's not enough. The Transit Center relocation provides an opportunity to better connect the Canal area to Downtown.
- Marin Transit - no passes available in canal district.
- The area around Target could have been housing and an integrated community center
- The views maybe some way of linking to Canal.
- Pickleweed is a thriving community center—can we emulate it elsewhere?
- Libraries could be used everywhere and in different ways. Library in downtown - can we make it more accessible and well stocked. Becomes the community gathering space. Look into efforts for SR public library.
- Finding a location for a new library is challenging—the library is like the community's living room and is a critical facility. Maybe move it to B Street. It needs to be closer to the community and more accessible to everyone. It should be a gathering place.
- The transit center should be designed to encourage people to actually use transit—it should be welcoming. It should not be surrounded by parking.
- Our Downtown population needs the services our organizations provide. Likewise, they help support the Downtown but often are not at the table in these conversations. How can we engage them in this process and plan for them as well?
- More housing is a priority. Look at the air rights over City parking garages.
- People come to Downtown to eat at Sol Food and then they leave. They don't stroll here, like they do on 4th Street in Berkeley. The 4th Street in San Rafael does not lead to other areas, there are no gateways. We should allow more height to make it easier to build. Don't reduce the inclusionary requirement. Aim for more equitable outcomes.
- We aren't bringing in the retail we need. We don't have "strolling" type shopping here. People don't linger here.
- Agree—by contrast, look at Larkspur Landing on the weekend. The place is packed with people who are just hanging out.
- The brewpubs are bringing in a younger clientele.
- We also need a commitment from the city that community-based services like the ones we provide can stay downtown. The City might prefer hotels and high revenue generators, but we need to be downtown. Our services are an essential part of a vibrant successful Downtown. We need to be part of this Plan.
- Downtown must accept that such services need to be in Downtown; don't generate tax revenue - however critical to have downtown services in downtown. Santa Rosa is doing a good job of accepting that and not trying to get these uses out in order to attract hotels etc. Santa Rosa as a burgeoning model
- 66% of sales tax is generated in East San Rafael.

- Downtown San Rafael feels like a City and we shouldn't deny that. We should be inclusive and embrace diversity. Our clientele is the foundation of the Downtown economy. We provide the workforce for many of the lower paying service jobs.
- Meanwhile, displacement is occurring in East San Rafael, placing more pressure on residents and the workforce. We need to stem displacement and educate the community about the value of an economically diverse community with housing opportunities for all workers.
- East San Rafael Working Group - growth of homeless community in east end/canal district.
- Don't equate homelessness with crime—it's about a need for more housing.

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Focus Group 4: Downtown Developers and Employers

May 8, 2019, 1:00 PM

Participants: *Paul Goldstone, Dennis Fisco (Seagate Properties), Dirck Brinckerhoff, Xavier (Bank of Marin), Char (Biomarin), Danielle Leary (Executive Director of Economic Development, City of San Rafael)*

Consultants: *Stefan Pellegrini, Mitali Ganguly, Barry Miller*

Members of the group introduced themselves. Stefan mentioned how the Precise Plan can prioritize public investment as well as private development. Participants were asked what was working for them in Downtown - what are the opportunities and barriers. The following points were raised by the participants.

Comments

- I am happy with the restaurants.
- Is this a city or provincial town? In my opinion DSR is the only candidate for a city north of SF. The general population wants a city in Marin; so define what we want. What do we want to build?
- The homeless services have done a great job of moving mental health cases which were impacting retail. We need residential use as well as jobs. How will we accommodate parking and density?
- Biomarin has proposed growth in downtown. The potential for an urban center is here - HQ moved from Novato to DSR; to provide walkable urban environment. If safety and pedestrian access issues can be removed it will be great. Then it will attract support from major investors.
- San Rafael is rich in diversity, lots of art - one of 14 arts and culture districts in California. The homeless situation is not fixed but has improved. At 4th and A they added a security person and gates.
- Art components are critical. SR theater is keeping downtown alive at night; a movie festival would attract more people.
- There is lots of daytime activity but not after 6 pm. It so unbalanced.
- Embrace 'cityness'. Develop a nighttime economy for new residents and visitors. Leverage arts and culture as economic generator. Street grid, diversity and SMART Station, are all things we can leverage. We need more office workers during the day; create an employment hub in downtown.
- Less parking and less driving is desirable. Biomarin is planning to educate Planning Commission on parking ratios in Bay Area.
- SR needs to make independent decision on topics such as parking; make rule book on what is going to work for us, after studying Bay Area cities and what is working, what is not. Pockets of resistance will always be there no matter what we propose. We cannot satisfy everyone. Onus on city to determine what is allowed/ permitted and what is not.
- We need to break up downtown into pockets - Biomarin, 4th street, Montecito, West End. Montecito will not be easy to bike for groceries etc. 4th street is an arts district.
- Biomarin is willing to pay towards improving the Lindero and 5th intersection. Two major streets that are problematic are 2nd and 3rd; people speed, skip traffic lights. They are unsafe for

pedestrians and elderly people. We need new affordable housing projects. No cameras to give tickets.

- We need to orient towards creek. How do we make SR a safe walking city? How do we prioritize people?
- Does the architecture of a place determine how fast people drive? People automatically calm down in residential areas.
- Look at ways to make streets safer for pedestrians. Move back buildings from 2nd and 3rd streets to make pedestrians on sidewalks feel safer. Planning commission is very focused on this.
- The Seagate is putting in automatic parking - 120 spaces. It is flexible and can change use in future. Stackers can be removed; make buildings convertible.
- If we overbuild, let's make it convertible to storage containers.
- Downtown needs way finding. Look at Denver; it has many one-way streets. Cross in front of the light on one-way streets; no turning movement on one-way.
- People won't mind parking further if experience is better. It is attractive for people to spend more time downtown.
- Signs help people to locate parking.

Stefan asked the participants for examples of places that they liked. Responses included:

- Mountain View - evolved a lot.
- Even Burlingame - evolved a lot.
- Walnut Creek
- Jack London Square, Oakland (SR needs outdoor seating).
- 4th Street, Berkeley
- Union Square Station, Denver
- Petaluma; integrated with water (integrated art even when controversial - art pieces, building color, etc - creates cohesion. Put movie theater in downtown - 5 pm to midnight crowd dramatically changed downtown use).