

**Summary of San Rafael General Plan 2040 Steering Committee Meeting
Meeting #17 August 14, 2019
6:00 – 9:00 PM at 750 Lindero St.**

Attendance

Members Present:	<i>Don Blayney, Maribeth Bushey, Bill Carney, Omar Carrera, Berenice Davidson, Richard Hall, Eric Holm, Linda Jackson, Margaret Johnston, Jeff Jones, Bonnie Marmor, Robert Miller, Stephanie Plante, Kate Powers, Jeff Rhoads, Jackie Schmidt, Sparkie Spaeth</i>
Alternates Seated:	<i>Samantha Sargent</i>
Members Excused:	<i>DJ Allison, Jenny Broering, Drew Norton, Roger Smith, Karen Strolia, Cecilia Zamora</i>
Absences:	<i>Jack McGinn</i>
Alternates Present:	<i>Amy Likover, Leslie Simons</i>
Staff Present:	<i>Raffi Boloyan, Anne Derrick, Allison Giffin, Paul Jensen, Barry Miller</i>
Consultants:	<i>Stefan Pellegrini (Opticos)</i>
Guest Presenter:	<i>Max Crome</i>
Sign-Ins:	<i>Shirl Buss, Josh Townsend, Bob Grandy</i>

(1/2) Call to Order/ Roll Call

The meeting was called to order at 6:10 PM. Chair Plante thanked Berenice Davidson for chairing the July meeting.

(3) Approval of Minutes

Prior to approval of minutes, Committee Member Hall noted his objection to the outcome of the electronic polling conducted at the prior meeting. He felt the Committee was not in sync with the residents of North San Rafael. The minutes were subsequently approved (Motion: Jackson, Second: Bushey). Members who were not present at the prior meeting abstained from the vote.

(4) Public Comment

Amy Likover, Alternate, thanked the Committee for their work and asked that there be a regular reporting out of the progress that is being made to implement General Plan policies and programs. She cited the North San Rafael Promenade as an example of an exciting idea in the existing Plan that had not been implemented. She encouraged staff to regularly evaluate implementation status to better understand if the programs were still relevant.

(5) Presentation and Discussion Items

A. Community Design Element Overview

Project Manager (PM) Miller delivered a PowerPoint presentation on the Community Design Element in General Plan 2020. The following comments were made (*staff responses are in italics*):

- In the previous General Plan the Historic Preservation was covered in the Culture and Arts Element. *It will be covered under the Community Design Element in General Plan 2040.*
- One interesting aspect of San Rafael’s design and form is the extent to which topography defines boundaries and shapes the character of different places (Terra Linda is very different from Downtown, for example). General Plan polices should reflect these differences.
- In going through the Policy Audit (provided in the agenda packet) it was hard to follow the big ideas. The hierarchy of the concepts was not clear. The PowerPoint helped clarify the flow, and could be used as a starting point for reorganizing this chapter so it is more intuitive. The concept of what constitutes “compatible” design is vague and should be more clearly explained.
- The goal statement for this element is pretty vague and uses a lot of subjective words like appealing, attractive, and interesting. Can we use more definitive words?
- Much of this element is about design guidelines—what are the city’s intentions with respect to design guidelines given the fact that we are doing a Downtown Precise Plan and form-based code for Downtown? Can we integrate the guidelines into the Code so they are mandatory? The current process is not working, and developers must go back to the Design Review Board or Planning Commission several times. *Opticos will address these concerns in their presentation. The Precise Plan will include Design Guidelines.*
- How will Senate Bill 35 (SB35) relate to this Element—it says we need “objective design guidelines” to expedite housing. *Staff explained SB35, noting that this was a state law that required the City to approve projects (with little or no discretion to make changes) if they met certain criteria. The law requires cities to have “objective standards” (e.g, not subjective statements such as the project needs to be “compatible.”) Objective standards could cover things like height and setbacks, parking, landscaping, etc. The Planning Department is working on these standards now. Since the General Plan is a policy document, it doesn’t spell out these requirements—but it will describe what needs to be done. The Downtown Precise Plan will have more specific design standards.*
- The materials provided by staff exclude the context statements and background data that is in the actual General Plan document. This would be helpful to better understand the rationale for policies and programs. *Staff is currently revising these sections and will be providing it to the Committee along with the actual draft policies and programs once they are written.*
- Will the Committee have a chance to review the background text? *Given the schedule and scope of the project, the Committee’s focus is on policies and programs. All of the material will be on the website, and Committee members are welcome to download it and provide comments via email—but we are unlikely to cover the background reports in the Committee Meetings.*
- It would make sense to provide the background information after policies are revised and we are getting the Draft Elements for our final review.
- If we can’t have the background reports, perhaps provide the existing General Plan Elements, since they have the context information already. We can use that along with the proposed policies.
- Please provide the background reports in Word so it is easier to make comments.

B. What is Good Design?

PM Miller introduced Max Crome, a local architect. Max had participated on a Committee created in 2017 to advise the Council on how design guidelines might be strengthened for Downtown. Max delivered a presentation that was given to the City Council in February 2018. The presentation is on the project website at sanrafael2040.org.

After the presentation, the following questions and comments were raised (responses from the guest speaker and/or staff are noted in italics):

- Why didn't the design guidelines consider the potential impacts of autonomous vehicles? *The concept was outside the purview of the Committee—their task was to advise on principles of good design and architecture.*
- The presentation suggested that future buildings over three stories should step back in height before going up any higher— is it the City's intent to disallow new buildings that are taller than three stories, like the Rafael Town Center building? There are many recent examples of good architecture that do not step back at the third floor—that seems rather restrictive. *The purpose of this recommendation was to reduce perceived massing, particularly on the south side of 4th Street. However, the guidelines are written to allow exceptions for good design, or recognize areas where adjacent buildings are taller, or there is no height context, etc.*
- How do these principles related to the “objective standards” discussed earlier for SB35? The exception for “exceptional design” seems like a very big loophole that would allow a developer to get an inappropriate building approved due to SB 35. *CD Director Jensen indicated that SB 35 compliance was a separate discussion. However, these design guidelines could provide a springboard for the “objective standards” referenced in SB 35.*
- How do these guidelines ensure access for persons with disabilities? There were some examples in the presentation that are not very accommodating. *In general, ramps (for wheelchairs, etc.) should not be in the public right of way, and should be incorporated in the design of the front (or interior) of the building. That has not always happened in the past, leading to ramps on the sidewalks.*
- The discussion of community design needs to address other parts of San Rafael, like Terra Linda. It is not clear on how these areas will be addressed in the Community Design Element. We should do an assessment of where we want to go in other areas, and how we are doing in achieving our design vision. *The Community Design Element will look at the entire city, not just the Downtown. The General Plan will not have design guidelines, as it is a policy document. Design guidelines are an implementation tool—the General Plan will provide broad policy direction as to what those guidelines should cover, and how they might be improved.*
- What happens when there are two contiguous buildings with no setbacks right next to each other? Is it better to have a “wall” of building fronts, or smaller buildings with varying setbacks? What is the process for answering questions like these? *Both of these scenarios might make sense, depending on the context. One of the advantages of the form-based code is that it recognizes different contexts for each building. It focuses on the ways a building can fit in with its surroundings by defining the form of the building rather than other design elements. A hybrid of a form based code and traditional code might be considered. In any case, its important that the Design Review Board has a good sense of the community and understanding of architecture.*

- ADA accessibility is a very important issue that should be integral in the design of every building. *Agreed. This was not the focus of the 2017-2018 “Principles” process because this is already required by the Building Code and is not discretionary. All licensed architects must take courses on this every year for certification.*

C. Community Design and Place Types

Stefan Pellegrini from Opticos Design provided a presentation on the concept of “place types”. Stefan asked the Committee for questions, and a discussion followed (staff and consultant comments/responses are shown in italics, in response to committee questions).

- The concept of place types is objectionable as this term is from “Plan Bay Area” and was used to set minimum densities and targets for growth. Can a community opt out of using this terminology—some communities don’t want this type of growth, and it is social engineering to impose it. *The concept of place types is not exclusively tied to Plan Bay Area and has been in use for awhile—it does not necessarily imply a target for growth. Many place types will not change. The designation of a Priority Development Areas (PDA) is entirely voluntary and is at the City’s discretion.*
- How can we predict where we will be in 20 years? We need flexibility – we don’t know what direction we will go with the SMART train and how that might impact the community. Also, rents are already going down in some places—we should not overbuild. *One of the purposes of this Plan is to discuss our vision—that provides the basis for the policies in the Precise Plan and General Plan. We also recognize that there are boom and bust cycles; plans can’t just be reactive to what is happening right now, but need to also recognize long term change.*
- Do “walkable environments” includes bicycles? *Yes. The idea is to improve access for all modes of travel.*
- The notion of place types seems totally rational to me—it is merely a way to describe what exists today, and carries no value judgment about the future. It’s useful to help understand and explain where we are right now, which helps us articulate where we want to be in the future. The real question is—which places will stay as they are, and which will evolve from one place type to another?
- The risk of this type of analysis is that it puts labels on neighborhoods, with the motive of changing some areas into “transit oriented developments” which I disagree with.
- We should think about areas like Northgate and whether it can be a more walkable location in the future. Where are the most likely areas for change? *Northgate is a logical location for change but there are others, including areas with older buildings that are ready for reinvestment. The Canal may be another example. Realistically, the residential pattern in most San Rafael neighborhoods is well established and will not change. These areas will evolve very incrementally and subtly, through remodeling, adding new ADUs, etc.*
- Not all stable neighborhoods will remain as is forever. Loch Lomond is a good example of a well established area that has evolved a lot since the last plan, with new denser housing added. It is possible to accommodate infill in established neighborhoods.
- How will place type designations be affected by disruptive transportation technology—e.g., things like ridesharing and driverless cars. What will be the effect on walkability? *Stefan responded that driverless technology does not necessarily mean people will no longer walk or use transit. Living in a walkable community is still desirable, and driverless technology will benefit transit as well (driverless buses).*

- How are we characterizing neighborhoods outside the Downtown area? Do we have any aspirations about how these areas should change—or be preserved? We need to use the Neighborhoods Element of the General Plan to address this issue. Walkability should be a goal for all areas.
- Lincoln Avenue and the Miracle Mile are not in the Downtown Precise Plan boundary but are both areas with the potential to become more walkable, and accommodate some development. Bellam also.
- The Committee needs to receive a presentation on autonomous vehicles. This is a very important technological change that will reshape our cities. We need to be bold and look at options like this, and think about how they might alter our future.
- Shopping centers can be repurposed but should still be neighborhood centers. How can we set timelines for place types to change—we need to recognize that change is often incremental and pivots as technology changes. We need to grow in an informed way.

D. Introduction to “Form-Based Codes

Stefan gave a presentation on Form-Based Codes. Questions and comments from the Committee are noted below. Staff/ consultant responses and comments are in italics.

- How do we account and plan for the different intensities of use allowed by form-based codes? The same building form could have 3 units or 20 units—but 20 units are much more impactful. It’s a problem if we don’t have the regulatory means to address this issue. *Land use considerations still play a role in determining the types of allowable uses. Most form based codes do address the potential for adverse impacts in their standards. Certain uses that might generate traffic, noise, etc. may be subject to use permit requirements, or conditions of approval (hours of operation, etc.) that address these impacts.*
- How is parking handled in a form-based code, since you don’t know how many units there could be in a building? Don’t overdesign each building in the Code. Maintain the flexibility for some discretion by the Planning Commission and Design Review Board. *Parking can be determined once a given project is proposed, based on the number of units in that project. There may be minimum parking requirements. Also, these requirements may vary from area to area, and be tied to factors such as the size of the units (larger units require more spaces). CD Director Jensen noted that the Parking and Wayfinding study also provided direction on this issue.*
- It’s exciting that we are contemplating form-based codes. We have talked about doing this since the 1990s—the impacts have been transformational for some communities. It can help make our community more walkable and facilitate housing growth.
- One of the constraints to Downtown development is small, individually owned lots that need to be assembled to create viable development sites. How have other cities addressed this in their plans? *Some cities have incentives for consolidating smaller parcels, e.g., more density on larger sites.*
- Redwood City has used a form-based code process, and it has accommodated a lot of growth. There is a development envelope for each site that is given “by right” with a streamlined CEQA process. The strong real estate market has helped propel development. But also, the certainty of being able to get your project approved and the ability to increase yield because of having larger parcels, has resulted in the market supporting the assembly of parcels. Consolidation of sites can occur more easily if there is more predictability in the development process. However, there are cases where financial institutions own properties and keep them undeveloped because there is no motivation for them to sell. *The West America Bank site at 4th and E and the Citibank at 4th and Hetherton are examples.*

- Would the form based code be used outside of Downtown? *Not at this time.*
- There are lot of small, underutilized, outdated buildings in San Rafael. Since we have been studying downtown for 25 years with little motion in some cases, perhaps being bolder is a good idea. 10 new residential units over a 10 year period is not a good outcome.
- Do property owners perceive that the City is holding them back from doing what they want? *The development community is usually supportive of form-base codes as they reduce regulatory barriers. A good form-base code strikes a balance between predictability and flexibility.*
- When will see this happening in San Rafael? New zoning codes could be helpful in attracting denser housing to Downtown and complying with the SB 35 requirements. *PM Miller responded that there are several decisions that must be made first before we have a Form-based code for downtown. He stated that Opticos will be producing an Options Report and will be back in October to present ideas to the Committee.*

E. Status Report on Map and Policy Development

PM Miller reported that the Steering Committee has completed its review of all the Policy Audits. He thanked the Committee members who had handed in comments and noted that there was still time to make comments for those who hadn't yet. He reported that the Committee has reviewed the first draft of the Land Use and Safety (Environmental Hazards) Element. He noted that Staff has completed the Conservation Sustainability, Air and Water Quality and Open Space Elements. These policies will be discussed at the next Committee meeting. He also indicated the Committee still needed to discuss the JEDI Element (Justice, Equity Diversion Inclusion), a new part of the General Plan being prepared in response to state law.

6. COMMITTEE ALTERNATE COMMENTS

There were no comments from Alternates.

7. GENERAL BUSINESS ITEMS

PM Miller announced that the next meeting would be September 11, 2019. He also noted that staff would be hosting a “pop-up” workshop at the Farmers Market in late August. PM Miller noted that staff had begun working on the Neighborhoods Element by consulting with individual neighborhood groups about what the existing Plan says regarding that area (and asking for feedback). An on-line feedback form is being developed to solicit broader input.

A committee member asked if the Sustainability Element would be treated as a “stand-alone” element or be integrated in the other Elements. Miller noted that it will be a thread that runs throughout the Plan, but practically speaking, many of its policies and programs have landed in the Conservation Element.

There were no member announcements.

8/9. PUBLIC COMMENTS/ ADJOURNMENT

There were no additional public comments. The meeting was adjourned at 9.10 PM.