
REPORT TO GENERAL PLAN 2040 STEERING COMMITTEE

Subject: Downtown Options Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of San Rafael is preparing a Downtown Precise Plan concurrently with the 2040 General Plan Update. The Precise Plan development process includes several phases, including a Downtown Profile Report (completed), a Downtown Charrette (completed), a Downtown Options Report (the subject of this report), and the Draft Plan itself (to be completed in early 2020). This staff report highlights the contents of the Downtown Options Report. The intent of the Options report is to present illustrative Downtown land use, transportation, and community design concepts for public discussion. Steering Committee feedback is requested on these concepts, as well as specific aspects of the Plan such as development phasing and land use mix. Following community feedback on the Options Report, the consultant team will begin drafting the Plan itself, including development regulations, economic development strategies, transportation plans, historic preservation provisions, and design guidelines.

REPORT

The intent of the Downtown Precise Plan is to establish a vision for Downtown San Rafael for the next 20 years, including zoning standards and design direction for architectural quality, streetscape design, and historic preservation. The Plan Area is 265 acres and extends (roughly) from the Miracle Mile on the west to San Rafael High School on the east, and from Mission Avenue on the north to Albert Park on the south. It includes the Downtown core, the Montecito Shopping Center and commercial district east of Highway 101, and the West End Village. Most of this area is included in a “Priority Development Area” (PDA) that has been locally and regionally recognized as appropriate for accommodating growth during the next 20 years.

Work on the Downtown Precise Plan began in January 2019. The Steering Committee discussed Downtown goals and priorities at meetings in March and April 2019. In May 2019, the City convened a three-day design “charrette” in which planning issues and design ideas for Downtown were discussed. A Downtown Profile Report was prepared in June 2019. Feedback from the various outreach events is summarized in the Options Report (pages 11-29).

The first draft of the Downtown Options Report was published on August 16, 2019. The City hosted a “pop-up” workshop on the options at the Downtown Farmers Market on August 29 and convened a Planning Commission study session on the options on September 10. A revised version of the Options Report was published on September 29, 2019.

Options Report

Steering Committee members are asked to review the Downtown Options Report prior to the Committee meeting. The report may be reviewed/downloaded on line at the hyperlinks below. The file is quite large, and has been divided into two parts:

- [Part One](#) (pages 1-40)
- [Part Two](#) (pages 41-112)

Design Principles

Based on the input received through the public process, the following six design principles have been developed for Downtown:

1. Focus development at key nodes to establish a distinct Downtown experience and identity
2. Reinforce gateways and design the Transit Station to create a sense of arrival
3. Strengthen multimodal connectivity, prioritizing pedestrian and bicycle safety and access
4. Create a cohesive public realm through an interconnected network of civic spaces
5. Generate a development program and policies that support City goals related to TOD, mixed-use development, affordable housing, and jobs-housing balance
6. Recommend growth and adaptation strategies that are resilient to climate change, in particular sea-level rise.

These design principles are illustrated on pages 35-41 of the Options Report.

Concepts for Four Subareas

Four subareas have been identified for Downtown:

- Transit Station Area
- Downtown Core
- West End Village
- Montecito Commercial Area

For each of these subareas, the Options Report includes photos and a narrative description of existing character, a table showing future design intent, an illustrative plan, and a side-by-side comparison of the existing built form (e.g., areas covered by buildings) and potential built form. This information may be found on pages 44-70 of the Report.

The illustrative plans are based on hypothetical scenarios, including existing projects that are in the “pipeline” (such as the Biomarin expansion) and potential projects that could be built on opportunity sites within each subarea. These scenarios represent development envelopes (heights and floor areas) that are permissible under existing zoning, although they would likely exceed the residential densities currently allowed on these sites.

The “design intent” statements indicate the range of building heights, the types of frontages, the typical building uses, the open space types, and expected parking formats for each subarea. They also include estimates of the number of housing units and non-residential floor space for each subarea. These estimates will ultimately be “tested” in the Environmental Impact Report to determine the impacts on transportation, utilities, natural resources, hazards, etc. and to identify appropriate mitigation measures. The City can use its discretion in determining the development “envelope” that will be tested and will likely set up a system to monitor future development to ensure that it remains within the limits presumed by the Plan.

A “high,” “medium,” and “low” range has been presented for the number of housing units and jobs that would be added by 2040 based on these scenarios (see page 89). The residential scenarios range from 1,000 new units to 2,800 new units. The employment scenarios range from 900 new jobs to 1,480 new jobs. The “mid-range scenario” in the Options report is 2,250 dwelling units and 1,480 jobs. Additional scenarios could be considered.

Circulation Options

Pages 73-83 of the Options Report address circulation options for the Downtown Area. The intent is to assign a priority mode of transportation to each street. Although all streets are multi-modal to some extent (e.g., they accommodate pedestrians, bicycles, and cars), some operate principally as auto thoroughfares while others function principally for pedestrians and bicycles. The designation of 2nd and 3rd Streets as “Vehicle Priority” does not mean that bicycle and pedestrian improvements will not be made here—in fact, many improvements are planned. It simply acknowledges that these streets will continue to be regionally important arterials with high volumes of vehicle traffic in the future.

Page 74 of the report identifies the bicycle priority network. It presumes development of bike lanes and bike routes on several streets. In a few cases, this would require the removal of on-street parking spaces—additional discussion of the pros and cons will be required before these concepts are advanced.

The Options report identifies other possible changes, including:

- The redesign of several blocks of 4th Street (from Court to Tamalpais) as a “shared street” with special pavement and other features that accommodate cars, bikes, and pedestrians in the same space
- The closure of Ritter Street (between 2nd and 3rd)
- Conversion of B, C, and D Streets from one-way streets to two-way streets.

These ideas will be discussed with the Steering Committee.

The Options Report does not presume a particular outcome for the relocated Bettini Transit Center. Instead, it merely outlines the boundary of the area in which alternative relocation sites are being considered. The Precise Plan will address alternative ways this area may develop based on which site is ultimately selected.

Discussion Questions

The Options Report presents four questions for immediate discussion:

1. **How much development should the Plan recommend?** In some respects this is a theoretical question since the zoning height limits are the same in each option---but the answer has important implications for the Environmental Impact Report, as well as whatever monitoring and growth management system is adopted to allocate Downtown capacity as future development occurs.
2. **How quickly should development happen?** This has implications for investment in infrastructure and future changes to the street system. The illustrative plans are intended to be 20-year scenarios but the City could facilitate more rapid (or slower) buildout through its capital improvement program.
3. **Where should development happen across different phases?** The illustrations generally focus development around the SMART station in the early years and presume that projects such as the Montecito Shopping Center redevelopment will happen much later in the planning period.
4. **Should certain areas be more employment focused?** The proposed scenarios are focused on housing production and assume no new 100% office buildings (other than already proposed projects such as BioMarin). A more employment-focused option could be considered.

As noted above, there are also questions to be considered around the location and design of proposed bicycle facilities, and conversion of B, C, and D streets to two-way traffic.

Pages 101-109 of the Options Report highlight a few additional issues. These include:

- The extent to which height “bonuses” are allowed for projects that provide certain amenities (especially affordable housing, but also features such as public art, open space, community meeting space, etc.)
- The protection of key view corridors
- Responses to sea level rise, including possible wetland restoration along Mahon Creek and the use of permeable paving and sub-surface stormwater storage facilities
- Location of future open spaces and plazas, including a “transit plaza” north of the SMART station
- Improved access to Boyd Park and Albert Park
- Appropriate strategies for historic preservation

We have allocated two hours on our agenda for discussion of the Downtown Options. This is an especially important meeting in terms of giving direction to the consultants before they begin drafting land use and design regulations for Downtown.