

**Summary of San Rafael General Plan 2040 Steering Committee Meeting
Meeting #24 May 13, 2020
6:00 – 8:00 PM
Convened on Zoom**

Attendance

Members Present: *DJ Allison, Jenny Broering, Maribeth Bushey, Bill Carney, Omar Carrera, Berenice Davidson, Richard Hall, Linda Jackson, Margaret Johnston, Jeff Jones, Bonnie Marmor, Robert Miller, Drew Norton, Stephanie Plante, Kate Powers, Jeff Rhoads, Jackie Schmidt, Roger Smith, Sparkie Spaeth, Karen Strolia, Cecilia Zamora*

Members Excused: *Don Blayney, Eleanor Huang*

Members Absent: *Eric Holm*

Staff Present: *Raffi Boloyan, Paul Jensen, Barry Miller*

Alternates Present: *Leslie Simons, Joanne Webster*

Consultants: *Stefan Pellegrini, Mitali Ganguly, Tony Perez, Carolyn Swinehart (Opticos) Bob Grandy (Fehr and Peers)*

Attendees: *Chris Hart*

(1/2) CALL TO ORDER/REVIEW OF MEETING PROTOCOL

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 PM. Chair Plante welcomed everyone. Project Manager (PM) Miller described the meeting protocol and went over the agenda.

(3) ROLL CALL

Project Manager (PM) Miller took roll call.

(4) APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of February 12, 2020 were approved (Motion: Rhoads, second: Carrera), with amendments as follows: Page 2, the term should be “Southeast San Rafael” rather than East San Rafael. Also, a minor typo on P 5, “wildlife” should be “wildfire”. Committee members who were not present at that meeting abstained from the vote.

(5) PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION ITEMS

A. Downtown Precise Plan – Presentation and Discussion:

Project Manager (PM) Miller introduced the item and provided the context for the discussion. He gave an overview of the timeline for the Downtown Plan and noted that staff would be engaging key Committee members in discussions of the Plan before it was presented to the Planning Commission. Barry indicated that this evening’s presentation would have three modules, corresponding to Chapters 1-4 of the document. Chapters 5-8, and Chapter 9. Each module would be 30 minutes, including the presentation and a 10-15 minute Q&A period. He introduced Stefan Pellegrini from Opticos.

Module 1: Chapters 1-4

Stefan presented the first module, covering Chapters 1-4. He provided an overview of the purpose of the Precise Plan and its contents. He also provided an overview of the community engagement process, challenges and opportunities, and the eight design principles. A presentation slide summarized the 20-year development program for the area and expressed the design vision. The area is divided into four major sub-areas. Stefan introduced the “Regulating Plan” or new zoning map for Downtown. There are four basic zone districts, and a different built character and height is envisioned for each one. A height map was presented. A public realm framework plan was presented.

The following question and comments were raised (*staff or consultant responses are in italics*):

- Building heights should be based on standard floor to floor heights for commercial districts, with 16-18 ground floor and 13’ upper floors. But these numbers don’t seem to correspond to that. They seem more aligned to residential heights with 10’ floors. *There are some increases in base heights above the prior General Plan built into the numbers, including taller ground floors. There would be a 14’ min floor to ceiling height, and a 16’ ground floor would be possible. The heights are based on the assumption that the upper floors will be residential, not commercial.*
- The job projections looked high—how will they be impacted by COVID-19? Also, there’s not that much about technology in the Plan. How will be incorporating that? *Most of the technology discussion is in the transportation section. With regard to jobs, about 40% is already in the pipeline. The square footage is heavily weighted toward residential, so it is not really focused on new jobs. The Plan provides for a certain capacity, so perhaps the issue is that we won’t reach that until beyond 2040.*
- (a) You mentioned that whatever is listed as an implementation action is “required”—how will that work? (b) Lot consolidation has been a goal for a long time—curious what you are proposing; (c) The text says this doesn’t include Montecito Plaza but the drawings show redevelopment at the site. How do those get reconciled. *Lot consolidation information is in the appendix and has helped frame how we’re making decisions on the zoning envelope. We’re looking at ways to make it more financially feasible. But we’re also looking at ways to make development more feasible on smaller lots. Re: Montecito, the redevelopment is a longer term project. The goal is to focus the program in the core and transit center area, and assume the shopping center gets developed in the longer term. The owner is not really ready to redevelop the site yet; it would occur near the end of the planning horizon.*
- There’s a lot to absorb. The economic analysis will be really important—if it doesn’t make sense, then none of this is likely to happen. We zoned Hetherton in the 1990s for a lot of development, but nothing happened. The graphics need to be more readable (color shifts are subtle and the streets are not labeled). I notice that Courthouse Square area doesn’t have a lot of height in it, even though it’s where our tallest buildings are now. *There are constraints around development feasibility—the cost of development is prohibitive unless the project is very large. This is true across the Bay Area. Our recommendations take a longer-term view.*

Module 2: Chapters 5-8

Stefan noted that the second module covered historic preservation, transportation, affordable housing, and implementation. He described the recently prepared historic context statement and field survey of 572 properties, including roughly 65 properties that are potentially historic. Chapter 5 indicates there is enough historic resource integrity Downtown to support two historic districts and four conservation districts. He described the difference between these two terms. He reviewed options for how alterations to historic properties could be reviewed in the future (e.g., new Commission, etc.).

Stefan described the Mobility chapter of the Downtown plan. He reviewed the framework map for vehicle streets, pedestrian streets, bicycle streets, and transit streets. He then walked through the priority maps for pedestrian improvements, bicycle improvements (including segments for future study), and vehicle street

improvements (including converting B, C, and D to two-way streets). He reviewed the Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Strategy (Chapter 7) and explained its purpose and key recommendations, including tenant protection strategies and affordable housing incentives. He described Chapter 8, which describes four key subject areas for implementation: placemaking projects, infill development projects, pilot projects (quick build), and strategies to retain community character. Timing and priority for each project is discussed in the Plan. This chapter also includes an economic development strategy and specific actions for housing, historic preservation, and infrastructure.

The following question and comments were raised (*staff or consultant responses are in italics*):

- On the pedestrian, bicycle, vehicle and transit diagrams, it's hard to see how the different modes are being accommodated on each street. How does the Precise Plan accommodate changes in how we think about transportation? How much flexibility? Are we looking at "slow streets" where we convert streets to bicycles, peds, and local traffic only? *Yes, there is flexibility built in to our approach. The Plan does anticipate something similar to "slow streets" around the transit center, including 4th Street being a shared street that could occasionally be closed for festivals, etc. We are not being prescriptive in how we are treating streets, but are acknowledging that there is competition for the right of way and certain modes get priority on certain streets. We recognize that there are some streets that require further study—particularly Second and Third, and along the Tamalpais corridor.*
- I love that the organization starts with location and natural setting and then moves to historic origin. There's a natural flow.
- One of the slides showed a shuttle. What is the intent? Transit Center to West End to Montecito? *Yes, that is the intent, although the Plan doesn't describe an actual route in detail.*
- Since the pandemic, most people are traveling by car and they are very skeptical of transit due to hygiene. Is it responsible to increase our reliance on transit? Also, the plan places a lot of emphasis on SMART, but SMART is in financial jeopardy—so should we encourage planning around a transit mode that may fail? Perhaps leave the transit center where it was. Be realistic and take a common sense approach. *The references to the transit station area are as much about the Bettini bus facility as the SMART station; we agree that the train alone is not substantial enough to create a TOD—it's the fact that is a hub for buses. We share the concern about transit viability, in part because the pandemic has shown us that is viable for many people to work from home, thus reducing potential ridership. Downtown has a grid of streets—the City can manage that space to adapt to changing conditions. As long as we don't change the footprint of our streets, we can continue to adjust the design to reflect our evolving priorities.*
- Are we looking at timing all the signals to improve movement? *Yes, that's included.*
- The addition to the Carnegie Library should not be considered historic.

Module 3: Chapters 9

Stefan noted that the third module covered the Form Based Code. He identified the various districts and clarified the difference between "zones" and "open zones." He noted that there were four basic zones corresponding to four basic building forms. Zones are summarized in a series of spreads in the document. There are 4 to 6 pages of guidance for each zone. This guidance addresses features such as building placement (setbacks), required open space, encroachments, height (with and without bonuses), and transitions between taller and lower buildings. It also includes minimum floor heights, parking, massing, and articulation standards but it is silent on architectural styles. There is some information in the code about building openings, massing, and special features (windows, towers, etc.) but doesn't dictate style. It provides guidance for adjacencies to historic resources (so buildings step down in height, etc.). The Code also provides detailed guidance for frontages.

The following question and comments were raised (*staff or consultant responses are in italics*):

- The Code seems very prescriptive. Our goal is to get things happening. Perhaps we can start out with maximum flexibility and add some of these requirements later on? *Understood—we know that Downtown will need to accommodate by-right housing projects with minimal public discretion. That compels us toward more objective development standards since there will be less discretionary review on these projects. Need to balance predictability and flexibility.*
- This sounds like a sterile off-the-shelf code that I’ve seen many times. I’m glad staff is reviewing it closely to make sure it works for San Rafael. I’m concerned that the building we all like at 4th and G could not be built under these rules. We need to make sure that viable buildings can be within the “box” that an owner gets—and we need to avoid corporate standardized design and “anyplace USA” appearance. *The 4th and G project could be built under the Code standards proposed. The Code makes that kind of project more feasible.*
- There seems to be tension between wanting to encourage growth and wanting to preserve historic buildings. These goals seem to be out of alignment. How would we get 2,200 units and 700,000 SF while at the same time preserving older buildings more aggressively. *Development is directed to key opportunity sites that don’t have historic resources. This allows both objectives to be achieved. The idea behind a preservation district is not to place the buildings in a “museum” that never changes, but rather to allow new development that respects existing development. Some of the growth could even take place in the historic buildings themselves. At the same time, we don’t want to tear down historic buildings to make space for new development. The development program has been tested and it is feasible.*
- One of the reasons San Rafael has had some good buildings recently is they were done by really good architects. Are there ways we can continue to support good architects and the contributions they make? Also, it’s important to recognize that part of our motivation for this code is State housing law and new rules about discretionary review. The Plan looks really good so far.
- I’m worried about the 8 story 90’ height limits along the freeway. What are the reasons a height bonus would be applied? It seems like everything gets a height bonus now—what does 90’ look like? How does it look beside the freeway? If we have an 8-story maximum, does that mean a by right development could add even more? *No, the maximum is 6 stories. The 2 stories (to reach 8) are the bonus. They are typically given for affordable housing. There are precedents for 8 story buildings in Downtown already. Also, you would not have an 8-story box. The top floors would be stepped back, and there would be more variation in the height.*
- *Raffi Boloyan, Planning Manager, noted that the Downtown districts currently allow 36’ – 66’ height limits, with height bonuses that range from 6 feet to 24 feet for different amenities. So, the 90’ is not really an increase because the code already allows 66’ + 24.’ We are simply showing the bonus embedded in the total height—you don’t get it automatically.*
- The transit center is critical for communities that have been disconnected from Downtown. Some of the options for the transit center provide less welcoming connections. What are the best options for transit center location—and how does the Downtown Plan handle that question. *The Plan presents the different options but does not specify which is best. It acknowledges that the decision will impact the buildout of the area. Some of the transit center sites are prime opportunity sites for other uses—that should be considered when an option is selected. It’s not just about what you gain, it’s also about what you lose when you give up a site for transit use. Joint development above the station looks very challenging.*

(6) COMMITTEE ALTERNATE COMMENTS

Alternate Joanne Webster had asked several questions during the presentation using the Q&A window, which Mitali Ganguly (Opticos) had responded to in real time in writing. These related to the impacts of being inside a conservation district or historic district—how does the added layer of regulation align with the City’s housing and economic development goals? What are the different tiers of historic significance in the Downtown?

Alternate Leslie Simons provided a comment on the location of the San Rafael baths.

(7) PUBLIC COMMENTS

Chris Hart provided a comment during the Q&A window. He indicated that speed and certainty were helpful for developers. Flexibility is key, and CEQA streamlining is a huge benefit for owners.

(8) GENERAL BUSINESS ITEMS

Barry announced that the final meeting of the Steering Committee would be on June 10, 2020. The meeting will be convened on Zoom. The Draft policies for General Plan 2040 will be distributed and discussed. This meeting will also include time for Committee members to share their thoughts on how the pandemic may affect San Rafael's future.

Staff is working with Opticos to revise the Working Draft Precise Plan for a possible late June release. We will be asking several members to assist in a review of the document before it is released. There will also be a series of video tutorials on YouTube that explain how the form-based code will work, with opportunities for public questions below. Also, staff will be returning to the City Council soon to present the recommended transportation standards.

Committee member Richard Hall asked to be on record as being opposed to the idea of a PDA designation at Northgate Mall.

(9) ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 8:15 PM.