

REPORT TO GENERAL PLAN 2040 STEERING COMMITTEE

Subject: Downtown Precise Plan Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the General Plan Update, the City is preparing a Precise Plan for Downtown San Rafael. A Working Draft of that Plan has been completed and is being reviewed by City staff. The City has asked Opticos Design to provide a preview of the Plan to the Steering Committee before it is finalized in June. The Committee's feedback will be incorporated in the Public Review Draft. Additional opportunities for Committee members to comment on the Plan will be provided after it is released and before it is considered by the Planning Commission and City Council.

REPORT

Background

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 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.

In 2018, the City received a \$500,000 ABAG/MTC grant to complete the Downtown Precise Plan. Work on the 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 documenting existing conditions was prepared in June 2019. A Downtown Options Report was prepared in September 2019 and discussed by the Steering Committee at its October 2019 meeting. The Options Report explored key land use, community design, and transportation concepts for Downtown.

Overview

The Working Draft of the Precise Plan is organized into nine chapters (see Attachment 2A). Chapters 1 and 2 provide the context for the Plan. Chapter 3 provides guiding principles and policies. Chapters 4-7 provide the major recommendations, organized along thematic topics such as historic preservation and transportation. Chapter 8 covers implementation, including future actions. Chapter 9 is a "Form Based Code," intended to replace the existing zoning districts that apply to Downtown San Rafael.¹

¹ The Steering Committee discussed Form Based Codes (FBCs) at its meeting in October 2019. A series of interactive FBC videos (YouTube webcasts) is being prepared by Opticos for release later in May 2020 to further explain how this concept will work Downtown. The Steering Committee will have access to these videos.

The Precise Plan is accompanied by a 400-page technical appendix, including prior project reports and presentations, as well as background data.

Chapter 1: Vision Summary

Chapter 1 is the Introduction. It includes the following components:

- An explanation of the Plan’s Purpose and Timeline
- A definition of the Plan’s regulatory authority, and its relationship to the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance
- An overview of prior plans for Downtown and citywide plans that provide direction for Downtown
- A description of the Plan’s organization and contents
- A high-level “birds eye view” diagram showing major physical planning concepts for Downtown

Chapter 2: Existing Conditions

This chapter consists of excerpts from the Downtown Profile Report, which the General Plan Steering Committee reviewed in June 2019. The chapter summarizes:

- Downtown’s natural setting and relationship to the region
- Downtown’s historic resources (a more complete discussion is included in Chapter 5)
- Demographics in the Plan Area, including the number of households, residents, jobs, income, means of transportation, etc.
- Downtown real estate market conditions
- Downtown’s built form, including lot patterns, building heights and coverage, community features (parks, civic buildings, etc.)
- Downtown circulation system, traffic volumes, and parking resources. This section also describes the pedestrian and bicycle network, and the transit system.
- Hazards and climate change issues in Downtown, including fire, flooding, and sea level rise
- The state of Downtown’s infrastructure and utilities.

Chapter 3: Community Engagement and Design Principles

This chapter outlines the community engagement process, including the May 2019 charrette. It summarizes opportunities and challenges and lays out six key design principles. Each principle includes a series of guiding policies. These are summarized below.

Principle 1: Establish a distinct Downtown experience and identity by focusing development at key nodes. This principle envisions a Downtown comprised of unique “districts.” Development standards in the Plan are tailored to the character of each district, reinforcing their identity and respecting the existing built form.

Principle 2: Reinforce Downtown gateways and design a Transit Village to create a sense of arrival. This principle recognizes the opportunity to focus new development around the transit center (and SMART) and improve the look and feel of this area as a gateway to San Rafael. It calls for improved signage, bike

and pedestrian improvements, and other amenities that make this a more attractive and welcoming part of Downtown.

Principle 3: Strengthen multi-modal connectivity, prioritizing pedestrian and bicycle safety and access. This principle recognizes opportunities to improve street design and make Downtown a safer place to walk, cycle, and drive.

Principle 4: Create a cohesive public realm through an interconnected network of streets and civic spaces. The guiding policies recognize opportunities to improve the quality of public space and add public art, landscaping, and streetscape improvements.

Principle 5: Support mixed use development to promote economic vitality, the City's goals and the community's vision. The guiding policies seek to attract more housing to Downtown to meet regional needs, support local businesses, and create a more dynamic neighborhood.

Principle 6: Enrich downtown's identity by balancing historic preservation with new development that is sensitive to its context. This principle focuses on safeguarding Downtown's historic buildings, both through preservation and reuse, and compatible development on adjacent sites. It also seeks to raise awareness of Downtown's history and cultural heritage.

Principle 7: Develop growth and adaptation strategies that are resilient to climate change, in particular sea level rise and wildfire. Guiding policies address adaptation to sea level rise and other measures to reduce flooding.

Principle 8: Promote a diverse downtown by increasing access to housing and establishing strategies to prevent gentrification and displacement. The text recognizing opportunities for new "missing middle" housing as well as programs to reduce displacement and address the needs of Downtown's lower income residents.

Chapter 4: Design Vision

This chapter introduces the idea of Downtown being comprised of four "districts": the Transit Village, the Downtown Core, the West End Village, and the Montecito Commercial area. It includes overarching guidance for the entire Downtown area as well as guidance for each of these subareas. The chapter introduces and explains the concept of using a "form based code" to regulate future development (the code itself appears in Chapter 9). It explains how the code works and defines the new "zones" that will replace the existing zoning districts for this area. A new zoning map is included. An open space map is also included, explaining the possible locations of future plazas, paseos, natural areas, and other spaces that connect Downtown and respond to natural conditions. General guidelines for the design of these spaces are provided.

The intensity of future downtown development will largely be regulated by height limits. A new height map shows the allowable building height on every parcel, inclusive of all possible bonuses. Each parcel has a "base" height allowance that is lower than the maximum, and the potential for "bonuses" awarded for providing specific amenities (such as affordable housing). The bonuses may not exceed the maximum heights shown on the height map.

Chapter 4 describes existing conditions and the design intent for each of the four subareas. The chapter also describes the expected future character of each area (including an illustrative plan) and discusses proposed changes to the street system, provisions to protect historic resources, and additional recommendations. Numerous illustrations, photos, and renderings are woven into the text, including examples from other communities where the recommended design concepts have been successfully implemented.

A development program is presented for each subarea. This is based on a rough estimate of the amount of development each area could potentially accommodate on vacant and underutilized sites under the Form Based Code. The development program is not intended as a “prediction” of what will happen by 2040, but is rather a benchmark to be used for planning and environmental review. The Plan’s Environmental Impact Report (EIR) will use the development program as the basis for the analysis of the Plan’s potential impacts, and the need for measures to mitigate these impacts. If development exceeds the thresholds before 2040, a new or amended EIR would be required.

The development program totals, which include already approved projects, are as follows:

	2020-2040 Residential Units	2020-2040 Non-Residential SqFt	2020-2040 Jobs	Comments
Transit Village	830	210,000	640	Includes 77 approved assisted living and 120 units at 703 3rd St
Downtown Core	620	373,000	1,020	Includes 67 approved units (Eden Housing), 41 units under const (B St), BioMarin (207,000 SF), Corporate Center (72,000 SF), AC Marriott
West End Village	360	70,000	200	Includes several small approved infill projects
Montecito Commercial	390	45,000	140	Excludes potential redevelopment of Montecito Plaza
Total	2,200	698,000	2,000	

Chapter 5: Historic Resources

The chapter begins with a historic “context statement” for Downtown San Rafael. The statement describes how Downtown has evolved since its initial settlement and provides a framework for evaluating the historic significance and integrity of each Downtown building. The chapter includes a summary of existing historic preservation regulations in San Rafael.

The findings of a 2019 field survey of Downtown’s historic resources are presented. This was the first comprehensive survey of historic resources in nearly 35 years, and it involved several “tiers” of evaluation, generally using US Secretary of the Interior standards for the evaluation of historic properties. The first tier was a field assessment covering 572 properties in the Precise Plan boundary, including 79 properties that were listed in the 1986 Historical/Architectural survey, 344 properties with listed construction dates of 1969 or earlier, and 149 properties without listed construction dates. Properties with buildings known to have been constructed after 1969 were excluded. Of the 572

properties, 160 were identified as requiring further evaluation (the other 412 properties generally had lesser historic significance). A second tier evaluation looked at each of the 160 buildings. Approximately 70 of these properties were determined to be potential historic resources. More detailed assessment of these properties is underway through a third tier evaluation, including the preparation of DPR 523 forms used by the California Office of Historic Preservation to consider historic significance.

As an outcome of the survey, the Draft Downtown Precise Plan recommends the creation of two new historic districts and four conservation districts in the Plan Area. The “west” historic district would include the area along 4th Street from roughly A to E Streets and the area between A and B Streets from 4th Street south to Safeway. The “east” historic district would include the area along 4th Street between Court and Lincoln. The four conservation districts would include: (a) the areas along Fifth Avenue west of E Street, (b) the West End Village commercial core (extending roughly from Shaver Street west to 2nd Street), (c) the Latham Street area in the West End Village, and (d) an area along Fifth Avenue and Mission Avenue between roughly Court Street and the SMART tracks. Properties in these areas would be subject to specific standards in the Form Based Code to maintain the character-defining features of each district. There are also specific provisions in CEQA that apply to designated historic districts.

The Historic Resources chapter also includes a number of procedural recommendations. These include the creation of a Historic Preservation Commission, providing incentives for preservation, and alignment of the City’s Preservation Ordinance with Secretary of the Interior Standards. These recommendations are all preliminary and will be subject to further discussion and potential revision before the Public Review Draft is released.

Chapter 6: Transportation

The Downtown Precise Plan includes specific recommendations for the Downtown transportation network, as well as more general programmatic guidance for how to manage Downtown circulation and balance the needs of motorists, commercial vehicles, bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit users. It recognizes the challenges posed by Downtown’s circulation system, including the function of several streets as high-volume regional arterials carrying traffic to and from US 101. The Plan recognizes that some streets (such as 2nd, 3rd, Irwin, and Hetherton) will continue to primarily serve as vehicle streets, while others (such as 4th, A, etc.) will be enhanced as streets for cycling, walking, or transit. Different modes of travel are prioritized on different streets, which help determine the design standards that will apply to each street in the future.

The chapter provides a broad menu of potential pedestrian and bicycle improvements that may be considered, including strategies for sidewalk design, safety improvements, better signage, wider sidewalks, pedestrian crossings, and more. The pedestrian improvements are focused in the areas around the transit center/SMART, the east-west street crossings beneath the 101 viaduct, the length of 4th Street, and along 2nd Street in the West End Village. The bicycle improvements generally follow the direction provided by the City’s adopted Pedestrian and Bicycle Master Plan.

Proposed bicycle projects include a north-south bikeway along Tamalpais between Mission and 2nd, new bike lanes on 4th Street west of E Street, an east-west bikeway on 5th Avenue (between E and Grand), a north-south bikeway along Grand Avenue (between 5th and 2nd), a bikeway along the south

side of 2nd Street in the West End Village, and bike lanes on A Street and through Albert Park. Some of these improvements would result in the loss of on-street parking spaces. As such, they are described in the Precise Plan only as concepts to be studied in the future, subject to further technical studies, cost estimates, and community feedback. The Plan recognizes that parking demand is fluid and may change as transportation technology (including ridesharing and autonomous vehicles) evolves over the next 20 years.

The Plan also proposes changes to the vehicle circulation network. Segments of B Street, C Street, and D Street are proposed for conversion from one-way streets back to two-way streets. A segment of Francisco Boulevard south of 2nd is proposed for conversion from two-way to one-way. Intersection and ramp operational improvements are proposed in the Hetherton/Irwin area to improve ingress and egress to Highway 101. Realignment of the 2nd Street/ 4th Street intersection (at the western gateway to Downtown) is proposed. A series of cross-sections is included in the Plan showing how specific street segments might be reconfigured over time to make them safer, more attractive, and easier to navigate, especially for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users.

This chapter also covers transit improvements, including relocation of the Bettini Transit Center to one of three sites now under consideration. It recommends a Downtown “circulator” shuttle, measures to prioritize bus movement (such as transit signal preemption), enhanced bus stops, and technology enhancements to facilitate more efficient transit service.

The Transportation Chapter addresses the potential impacts of self-driving vehicles, ridesharing, and “micro-mobility” (scooters, e-bikes, etc.) on the Downtown transportation system. It also addresses curbside management strategies, recognizing the growth of delivery services and the evolving nature of parking. Parking management strategies are presented under the following broad categories (a) maximize use of existing parking; (b) parking information and technology; (c) zoning and development standards; (d) parking administration and operations; (e) additional public parking. The Plan endorses the concept of partnering with private developers to add new publicly accessible parking within future Downtown developments, especially near the SMART station.

Chapter 7: Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Strategy

The Plan includes an Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Strategy. This strategy was a condition of the ABAG grant for the Precise Plan but is especially relevant given Downtown’s demographics and existing housing resources. The strategy explores tools for reducing displacement, as well as ensuring that a substantial number of the new units added Downtown are affordable.

This chapter begins with an overview of existing housing policies and programs in the City and existing affordable housing resources Downtown. These resources include 286 existing subsidized housing units, some of which could be “at risk” when the subsidies expire. There are also roughly 320 units of housing approved but not yet built (or under construction) Downtown. Roughly one-quarter will be “below market rate” affordable units. The chapter provides a summary of City requirements such as inclusionary housing (a requirement to include a specific percentage of affordable units in new projects), in lieu housing fees, and the first-time homebuyer program. It also describes tenant protection programs, such as mandatory mediation and just cause eviction.

Housing production strategies introduced in this Element include enhanced density bonuses, parking reductions, community land trusts, streamlined development review procedures (for projects consistent with the Precise Plan), air rights development (i.e., housing above municipal parking lots), and seed funding through State grant programs. Other strategies include acquisition of older apartment buildings and their renovation as permanently affordable developments. Anti-displacement strategies in the Element include tenant relocation assistance programs, and a one-for one replacement requirement for any affordable units that are demolished or otherwise removed.

Chapter 8: Implementation

Chapter 8 identifies the “next steps” to be taken after the Precise Plan is adopted. It is divided into five major sections: (a) a list of capital projects to be pursued after the Plan is adopted; (b) an economic development strategy; (c) actions related to the affordable housing and anti-displacement strategy; (d) actions related to historic preservation; and (e) actions related to infrastructure (utilities) and climate change adaptation.

The priority capital projects are street improvements and public space improvements. The street improvements correspond to the pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicle circulation projects listed in Chapter 6. The public space projects correspond to the recommendations in Chapter 4. They include specific measures related to climate adaptation, such as the creation of an urban wetland in the area south of Second Street along Francisco Blvd West and green infrastructure improvements along Downtown streets. Other projects include improvement of the Canal promenade, a new transit plaza north of the SMART station, and pocket parks at several locations along 4th Street. Cost estimates and funding provisions for future projects are not included in the Plan but would be addressed in subsequent studies and programs.

The economic development strategy aims to support existing businesses, attract new businesses, maintain Downtown’s contribution to the City’s fiscal health, support new infill development, and strengthen downtown as a community and regional destination. A series of specific measures are laid out to achieve these objectives. The strategy also presents the findings of a pro forma analysis of three hypothetical developments to determine the feasibility of new development. The analysis found significant financial challenges for new Downtown development projects. However, it also highlights steps that can be taken to make development more viable. The strategy includes incentives to consolidate small parcels into larger more developable sites, and ideas for improving the economic viability of ground floor activities in older buildings.

The housing strategy summarizes the measures in Chapter 7 and the historic preservation strategy summarizes the measures in Chapter 5. Among the “next steps” in the preservation strategy are additional mapping of historic resources, more regular updates of the historic resource inventory, permit streamlining for reuse of historic buildings, and expanded preservation education and awareness. The infrastructure strategy focuses on coordination with service providers, and continuing efforts to adapt utilities to the increased risk of flooding and sea level rise.

Chapter 9: Form Based Code

While Chapters 1-8 constitute the “policy” component of the Plan, Chapter 9 is its “regulatory” component. The Form Based Code (FBC) would replace the existing zoning regulations for Downtown. The Code is organized into four Articles.

- Article 1 is an Introduction and explains the purpose of the Code, what it covers, and what types of permits are required for different activities (e.g., renovation, addition, new building, etc.)
- Article 2 establishes the new zoning districts and map. Each zone corresponds to certain design characteristics and features, and is distinguished based on the intensity of allowable development and whether it is a “neighborhood” or “main street” setting. Each zone includes measurable standards for building placement (location of the structure on the lot), encroachments (balconies, porches, canopies, etc.), envelope (the number of stories and stepback requirements above a certain height), adjacency standards (special requirements for projects next to historic resources), building form requirements, frontages, parking, and signage. The Code makes extensive use of graphics to illustrate how these requirements should be applied. Article 2 also includes a “use table” indicating the level of approval required for different uses (retail, office, etc.).
- Article 3 provides supplemental requirements. These includes standards for screening, landscaping, the location and design of parking, and standards for block size in the event streets are closed or realigned. It also includes requirements for building massing and the design of facades, including features such as windows and cornices. Specific standards for building frontages also are included, such as the location of stoops and porches on residential streets, and the location of building entries on commercial streets. Article 3 also includes standards for signage. Illustrations and photos are used to communicate the intent of the standards.
- Article 4 contains the definitions of the terms used throughout the Code.

NEXT STEPS

As noted earlier, the Administrative Draft Precise Plan is currently being reviewed by staff. Staff will be meeting with Opticos in in the coming weeks to walk through potential edits and revisions. Feedback from the Steering Committee (provided at the May 13 meeting) will be part of this discussion and help inform revisions as we move from an (internal) Administrative Draft to a Public Review Draft Plan.

Once the Downtown Precise Plan has been released for public review, we anticipate meeting with a subcommittee of interested Steering Committee members to discuss the Draft document in more detail. This would happen prior to Planning Commission hearings so that feedback from the Committee can be communicated to the Commission before they conduct their hearings. There will be additional opportunities to comment on the Plan at this time.

Attachments:

2A: Downtown Precise Plan Table of Contents