

# Central San Rafael Neighborhoods

The neighborhoods of Central San Rafael form a crescent around Downtown, extending up the slopes of hills and valleys in the San Rafael Creek watershed. These neighborhoods include some of the City's oldest residential areas, beloved parks and community facilities, and historic institutions such as Dominican University. A few Central San Rafael neighborhoods feature distinct architectural styles and lot patterns, but most are eclectic, giving this part of the City a "hometown" feel that is cherished by residents. The area's character is further enhanced by its picturesque natural setting, including a mature urban forest and views of Mount Tamalpais, San Francisco Bay, and Downtown San Rafael.

Ten individual neighborhoods are profiled below. Some represent a mosaic of smaller neighborhoods and subdivisions that share common natural features, issues, and goals. Over the years, Central San Rafael neighborhoods have formed associations and organizations that advocate on the community's behalf. Many neighborhoods have organized programs related to emergency preparedness, neighborhood beautification, and traffic safety. These associations also work closely with the City on planning and development issues, both individually and collectively through the Federation of San Rafael Neighborhoods.

Central San Rafael neighborhoods are identified in Figure NH-1. Collectively these neighborhoods cover roughly 4.5 square miles, or about 25 percent of the City's land area. They are home to 20,000 residents, or about one-third of the City's population. The neighborhoods are mostly comprised of single family homes but include a variety of housing types, ranging from rural estates to high-density apartments and condominiums. The area relies on Downtown (including the Montecito Commercial area) and Southeast San Rafael for most of its commercial services. However, it includes shopping and business districts along the Miracle Mile and Lincoln Avenue, as well as long-established neighborhood businesses.

For the purposes of this Element, neighborhood policies are presented clockwise in the following sequence:

- West End
- Sun Valley
- Fair Hills
- Lincoln / San Rafael Hill
- Dominican / Black Canyon
- Montecito/ Happy Valley
- Bret Harte
- Picnic Valley
- Gerstle Park

The final section addresses *unincorporated* Central San Rafael, including California Park.

## **WEST END**

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The West End neighborhood is located between Downtown San Rafael and San Anselmo. It includes Fourth Street's "Miracle Mile" and extends up the hills on both sides of Fourth to the ridgetops. The neighborhood consists primarily of single family homes, along with several apartment buildings. West-enders take pride in being a friendly neighborhood, with social events that encourage neighborhood unity. The neighborhood includes smaller subareas created by historic development patterns and topography, such as the tree-lined walkable Greenfield Avenue, the Spanish Mediterranean homes on Santa Margarita Drive, and hillside homes shaded by redwoods.

West End residents enjoy their proximity to Downtown, its walkable streets, and the neighborhood's comfortable small-town feel. The neighborhood has its own identity, distinct from Downtown San Rafael and the West End Village area, a separate neighborhood located to the east. Residents seek to maintain

the established scale of the West End, with smaller buildings and local-serving stores along Fourth Street, generous front yards along residential streets, and tree planting that enhances neighborhood character. The community has also expressed a desire for pedestrian and bicycle safety improvements such as wider sidewalks, closing gaps in the sidewalk network, more clearly marked crosswalks, and pedestrian pathways and easements that make the neighborhood more walkable. Other priorities include maintenance of medians along the Miracle Mile, additional tree planting, and tree protection when new development takes place.

Development potential in the West End is limited, but there are a number of opportunity sites along Fourth Street and West End Avenue where older non-residential uses could be replaced over time. There are also a few undeveloped hillside properties on the neighborhood's southern slopes. The scale of future projects along Fourth Street constrained by heavy and fast-moving traffic and limited ingress and egress to Fourth Street. Where commercial or mixed development does occur, neighborhood-serving uses (rather than regional or "drive-thru" type uses) would be most appropriate on the ground level. Design should avoid "strip mall" style buildings and instead feature pedestrian-friendly features. A limited amount of housing in mixed use projects also would be desirable here.

#### **Policy CN-1: Miracle Mile Land Uses**

Retain the Miracle Mile as a vital neighborhood commercial district. Improve the area's appearance, parking, landscaping, and vehicular access from side streets. New development or redevelopment should be of a scale and intensity consistent with existing development.

***Program CN-1A: Neighborhood Plan.** Develop a neighborhood/ corridor plan for the Miracle Mile in the event that significant changes to currently allowable land uses or densities are proposed in the future.*

#### **Policy CN-2: Miracle Mile Circulation**

Improve circulation, provisions for cross-traffic and "U-turn" movements, bicycle and pedestrian safety, and traffic controls along Fourth Street, especially at intersections with side-streets.

***Program CN-2A: Ross Valley Intersection.** Consider reconfiguring the traffic signal at Ross Valley Drive and Fourth Street to incorporate Santa Margarita Drive, thereby improving safety.*

#### **Policy CN-3: Noise Abatement**

Consider the benefits and practicality of noise abatement techniques when designing or implementing capital improvements or approving new development along the Miracle Mile and adjacent Second/Third Street corridors.

***Program CN-3A: Noise Improvements.** Use the capital improvement program and development review process to consider noise abatement techniques for the Miracle Mile and adjacent thoroughfares, including the use of attractive fencing, trees and landscaping, and sound-absorbing pavement.*

#### **Policy CN-4: Development of Remaining Vacant Residential Lots**

Ensure adequate provisions for emergency vehicle access and water supply prior to constructing additional homes on vacant lots in the West End, especially on narrow and substandard streets and in hillside areas.

## **SUN VALLEY**

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Sun Valley extends along the floor and slopes of a box valley extending to the northwest of Downtown San Rafael. It is a beautiful neighborhood with a proud past and a shared vision for its future. The oldest area of the neighborhood was subdivided between 1882 and 1916. The Sun Valley subdivision was built after World War II. Rafael Highlands and Racquet Club were built in the 1960s and 70s, while Grove Hill and Shannon Lane were built in the 1980s. More recent development has consisted of small infill development and individual homes.

The neighborhood primarily consists of residential and open space uses. There are a few non-residential uses along Fifth Avenue, including the historic copper-domed San Rafael Improvement Club, West End Nursery, Andy's Market, Sun Valley School, and Mt. Tamalpais Cemetery. Sun Valley is also home to Rotary Manor, an affordable senior housing complex. There are a number of small apartments, triplexes, and duplexes, but most of the community's homes are single family residences.

A major topographic feature of the neighborhood is Sun Valley Slope, which serves not only as a wildlife corridor but also as the neighborhood's largest open space. It provides a hiking connection to Terra Linda, San Anselmo, and the Terra Linda/ Sleepy Hollow Open Space Preserve. The Slope was purchased in 1985 through the combined efforts of local residents, the City of San Rafael, the County Open Space District, and the Marin Trust for Public Land. Mahon Creek also has its headwaters in Sun Valley, meandering through open space and backyards along its upper reaches before entering an underground culvert.

A Neighborhood Plan for Sun Valley was adopted in 1980, in part to establish development standards for 170 acres of undeveloped land. In 2020, the only significant undeveloped parcels remaining are the Camgros and Duca properties, comprising about 5.5 acres. These parcels are the last vestiges of the area's agricultural past and remain in unincorporated Marin County.

As part of General Plan 2040, Sun Valley residents outlined a vision for their neighborhood that included goals for 2040 (see text box). Sun Valley seeks to retain its character as a residential neighborhood with diverse housing choices, beautiful open spaces, and a strong appreciation for its history. The neighborhood has also expressed a commitment to reducing its carbon footprint, promoting renewable energy, encouraging native landscaping, and encouraging more sustainable transportation modes. Sun Valley strives to retain existing gathering places and neighborhood businesses, while creating a new community center for education, emergency preparedness, culture, and environmental understanding.

### **Policy CN-5: Sun Valley Neighborhood**

Maintain the scale, diversity, and small town character of Sun Valley, including its affordable housing stock and scenic open spaces. Housing shall continue to be the dominant land use in the neighborhood.

***Program CN-5A: Neighborhood-Serving Commercial Uses.** Encourage retention of existing neighborhood commercial uses. Allow new commercial uses only if they benefit the neighborhood, will not impair its residential character or impact health and safety, and have been vetted through a community process.*

### **Policy CN-6: Neighborhood Sustainability**

Adapt existing buildings, energy, and transportation systems to reduce the neighborhood's carbon footprint, improve energy self-sufficiency, phase out gas-powered utilities and vehicles, reduce overhead wires and service lines, increase awareness of natural systems, and improve environmental health.

### **Policy CN-7: Natural Features**

Conserve Sun Valley's natural environment, including clean-up and maintenance of Mahon Creek.

### **Policy CN-8: Sun Valley Development**

Ensure that new development and significant remodels retain neighborhood character, especially in areas of smaller or historic homes. Development should support the City's sustainability and wildfire prevention goals.

**Program CN-8A: Camgros/ Duca Properties.** *Ensure that any future use on these properties supports and sustains neighborhood character. The neighborhood has expressed that it supports acquisition of these sites for a neighborhood/ community cultural center, or dedication of land for such a site in future development. Such a center could also provide for outdoor education, emergency response and training, community functions, and delivery of local services. The potential for housing on this site also must be recognized. In the event residential development is pursued, clustering of the allowable units should be encouraged to preserve open space areas. Development should comply with the City's Hillside Guidelines and should establish a wildlife corridor and protected riparian area along a restored Mahon Creek.*

### **Policy CN-9: Sun Valley Circulation**

Improve circulation for all modes of travel in Sun Valley, with an emphasis on improvements for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users. This should include provisions for safer sidewalks and footpaths, new bike routes, public transit, and traffic flow improvements along Fifth Avenue.

**Program CN-9A: Neighborhood Circulation Concepts.** *Pursue the following circulation improvements in the Sun Valley Neighborhood:*

- a) *Potential roundabouts at Fifth/ California and Fifth at Happy Lane or River Oaks (would require additional right-of-way).*
- b) *Removal of hazardous crosswalk at Fifth Avenue and I Street.*
- c) *Completion of sidewalks along both sides of Fifth Avenue, and removal of sidewalk hazards.*
- d) *Designation of alternate evacuation routes in the event Fifth Avenue is blocked.*
- e) *Potential bike route along Center Avenue.*
- f) *A new sidewalk on California Street from Fifth to Windsor.*



### **Sun Valley Speaks**

As part of General Plan 2040, a group of about 20 Sun Valley residents gathered to share their vision for the neighborhood's future. Working in collaboration with the Sun Valley Neighborhood Association, they presented the following goals for 2040 to the City, with the overarching goal of adapting to the global climate crisis:

- Develop a local, self-sustaining source of electrical energy
- Underground electrical lines and fiber optic internet
- Develop environmental health and safety policies regarding any new technology that seeks to use neighborhood airwaves
- Build new/renewed multi-use sidewalks
- Develop new designs for traffic flow, for daily life and emergencies
- Develop policies for new and renovated homes and businesses
- Develop collaboration among neighborhood, city, school, and business
- Develop a robust neighborhood center
- Involve a significant majority of stakeholders when alternative land uses are proposed
- Maintain an active neighborhood association

Sun Valley residents developed more prescriptive goals and policies for housing, environment, development, circulation, economy, culture, design, and emergency preparedness. Some of these goals are captured in the policies in this Element and others are reflected in citywide policies elsewhere in the General Plan.

- g) *New trails through neighborhood open spaces and connecting to the West End neighborhood.*
- h) *Consideration of shuttle or jitney service from Downtown along Fifth Avenue.*
- i) *Alternatives to meeting neighborhood parking needs.*

**Policy CN-10: Sun Valley Gathering Places**

Sustain existing neighborhood gathering places in Sun Valley. Pursue opportunities to create new places where Sun Valley residents can meet, learn, play, and build a stronger sense of community.

***Program CN-10A: Community Center.*** *Consider the feasibility of a community cultural and environmental center in the Sun Valley area. In addition, strengthen the function of Sun Valley School and Sun Valley Park as neighborhood gathering places. This includes continued agreements with the School for access to the school yard after hours as well as access to the Dan Abraham Trail. These agreements could be expanded to allow for community meetings, emergency response, and other activities on school property.*

**FAIRHILLS**

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The Fairhills neighborhood is located northwest of Downtown San Rafael. The neighborhood combines easy access to Downtown with a picturesque natural setting and some of San Rafael's most distinctive homes. The southern part of the neighborhood includes gracious Victorians and craftsman bungalows over a century old. The northern part of the neighborhood includes larger lots, winding streets, and newer hillside homes, many with panoramic views. No two homes are the same and there is much architectural diversity. The Fairhills Neighborhood Association represents about 180 homes in this area.

Most of Fairhills is single family residential, with the exception of lower Forbes Avenue, which includes a few duplex and triplex buildings. Other features of the neighborhood include the former Red Rock Quarry, a visually significant topographic feature that has been developed with single family homes. For planning purposes, the neighborhood boundaries include Marin Academy, the Falkirk Cultural Center, and the Elks Lodge, all on the north side of Mission Avenue.

Fairhills abuts Boyd Park and Mountain Park, two large public open spaces. Wildfires have originated in this area in recent years, creating an ongoing concern for residents. The community is actively involved in fire prevention and seeks continued vegetation management and restrictions on open fire sources. Fairhills residents also support continued investment in the community's older homes. Some of the original homes from the 1940s and 50s are dated, and owners are likely to modernize or replace them in the coming decades. Residents generally support construction that is compatible with the neighborhood, conforms to Hillside Design Guidelines, and addresses parking and other issues.

**Policy CN-11: Fairhills Neighborhood**

Retain the character of Fairhills as a scenic hillside neighborhood. Development and remodeling should respect and enhance the character of the neighborhood and maintain those homes with historic value. Continued efforts should be made to reduce fire hazards and ensure adequate emergency access.

***Program CN-11A: Hillside Construction.*** *Ensure that hillside areas are protected by continuing to apply the Hillside Design Guidelines for new construction and major remodels. The siting, height, and design of new or expanded structures should be carefully evaluated to ensure adequate emergency vehicle access, slope and foundation stability, adequate surface and sub-surface drainage, and erosion control. Buildings that are out of scale, damage the natural landscape, cause excessive tree loss or habitat destruction, or obstruct scenic vistas from public vantage points, should be discouraged.*





## **LINCOLN / SAN RAFAEL HILL**

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Lincoln/ San Rafael Hill extends north from Downtown San Rafael along the west side of Highway 101. Lincoln Avenue forms the spine of neighborhood, running parallel to the freeway between Downtown and the other side of Puerto Suello Hill where it becomes Los Ranchitos Road. This is one of the oldest neighborhoods in San Rafael, although development has occurred gradually and organically. Lincoln Avenue itself is eclectic, with single family homes, apartments, offices, motels, social services, churches, and other small businesses and commercial services. Some of the offices are in converted single family homes; others are in more traditional office buildings.

Away from Lincoln Avenue, the neighborhood primarily consists of single-family homes, including a mix of older cottages, mid-century homes, and more contemporary construction. The narrow, winding streets and hilly terrain afford panoramic views and create a strong sense of neighborhood character. Closer to Downtown, there are charming smaller apartment buildings along Laurel Place and nearby side streets. Boyd Park and Mountain Park form the western edge of the neighborhood. The threat of wildfire has been an ongoing concern.

In addition to fire safety, planning issues in the neighborhood include traffic congestion and pavement maintenance along Lincoln, traffic speed and safety, parking on hillside streets and limited parking along Lincoln Avenue. There are a number of development opportunities along Lincoln Avenue, particularly on older commercial sites where existing uses may no longer be economically viable. If these sites are redeveloped, the neighborhood seeks to retain the existing three-story height profile and avoid the “canyon” effect of having taller buildings on both sides of the street. Residents also seek a small neighborhood park, as there are no improved park areas in the vicinity.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, there are vacant lots on some of the hillside streets west of Lincoln (Fair Drive, Chula Vista Drive, etc.). These areas should develop in a way that protects natural resources, reduces hazards, and respects the scale and character of nearby homes.

**Policy CN-12: Lincoln/ San Rafael Hill**

Maintain low-density development in the hillside areas above Lincoln Avenue, consistent with existing densities and with access, fire hazard, and environmental constraints. Ensure that residents of the areas above Lincoln Avenue are engaged in plans for development along Lincoln itself.

**Policy CN-13: Lincoln Avenue Corridor**

Allow higher density residential development along Lincoln Avenue between Hammondale Court and Mission Avenue, recognizing the availability of public transit along this corridor and the established pattern of development. Where development occurs, landscaped setbacks and tree planting should be required to visually reduce the “wall effect” along Lincoln Avenue. Underground parking should be encouraged to reduce overall building height and mass. Consolidation of smaller lots into larger parcels should be encouraged, in order to create more viable development sites, meet parking needs, and minimize the number of ingress/egress points to Lincoln Avenue.

***Program CN-13A: Lincoln Avenue Development Standards.** Maintain development standards that preserve the character of Lincoln Avenue, including:*

- a) 36-foot (three story) height limit<sup>1</sup>*
- b) 15’ front yard setbacks*
- c) Continued allowances for multi-family residential and office uses. This includes continued a prohibition on the conversion of existing residential space to office use unless replacement residential units are provided.*
- d) Prohibition of most new retail uses (while allowing existing uses to continue)*
- e) Requirements to mitigate noise impacts from SMART, the freeway, and Lincoln Avenue traffic, where appropriate.*

***Program CN-13B: Lincoln / San Rafael Hill Park.** Pursue opportunities to develop a small neighborhood park in the northern part of the Lincoln/ San Rafael neighborhood.*

**DOMINICAN/ BLACK CANYON**

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Located in the geographic center of San Rafael, Dominican/ Black Canyon is a pleasant residential neighborhood with a wealth of history and outdoor beauty. The centerpiece of the neighborhood is Dominican University, an historic California institution. Single family homes, a number of which were built in the late 19th and early 20th Century, surround the campus. The neighborhood has a parklike character, created by large and abundant trees, landscaped yards, and attractive architecture. The Dominican area also includes duplexes, a few condominiums, Coleman Elementary School, the Marin Tennis Club, and Marin Ballet. Black Canyon lies just north of the University, with Mountain View Avenue extending up the valley floor.

The neighborhood is bordered by Highway 101 on the west, and large hillside open space areas on the north and east, including Barbier Memorial Park/ Gold Hill. Hillside trails provide spectacular views of San Rafael and the surrounding area. Creeks originating in the open spaces flow through the residential areas and the Dominican campus, with riparian areas providing natural habitat.

The Convent of Dominican Sisters has been a presence in the community since 1889. In 1915, the Sisters opened a junior college, which soon became the four-year institution known as Dominican College. The college expanded through the 1920s, adding academic buildings and residence halls, and purchasing Forest Meadows for athletics. Another wave of expansion occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s with new properties acquired and new buildings added. In 2000, Dominican College became Dominican University of California. Today, Dominican has more than 1,700 students on its 80-acre campus.

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<sup>1</sup> Subject to density bonuses for affordable housing



In 1998, the City approved a Master Use Permit and Campus Plan for Dominican's development, including a four-phase expansion. Projects completed under this Permit included the 29,000 square foot (SF) recreational facility and pool at Forest Meadows, a 35,000 SF science building, a 9,000 SF chapel, a 40,000 SF residence hall, and a soccer field and amphitheater expansion. Parking and landscaping improvements were included with each phase. The Master Use Permit was amended in 2008-2010 to allow conversion of Magnolia House to academic use, renovations to the Edgehill Mansion, historic landmarking of both buildings, and addition of an 18.7-acre forested hillside to the Campus Plan area. Improvements called for by the Master Use Permit have largely been completed. Further improvements on the University's properties are possible and should be closely coordinated with the neighborhood.

Beyond the University properties, development potential in Dominican-Black Canyon is limited. New residential development may occur on the remaining vacant lots, and through limited subdivision of several large private properties. There may also be opportunities for further open space acquisition. Longstanding priorities for residents include developing a neighborhood park and playground, reducing the impacts of freeway noise, and minimizing the impact of the university on surrounding residential areas. The neighborhood is also concerned about reducing wildfire and landslide hazards and is working to improve emergency preparedness and response.

**Policy CN-14: Dominican University**

Sustain Dominican University as a valued community institution and contributor to San Rafael's economy and culture. University operations and events should be compatible with surrounding residential areas, and the impacts of facilities, activities, and events on the neighborhood should be minimized. Continue to foster a cooperative relationship between the University's students, faculty, visitors, and residents.

***Program CN-14A: University-Neighborhood Coordination.** Maintain on-going coordination between Dominican University, the Dominican-Black Canyon Neighborhood Association, the City of San Rafael, and campus neighbors to address concerns such as traffic, parking, noise, and vegetation management in the University area. In the event future development or campus expansion is proposed, amendments to the Master Use Permit shall be required. Creation of neighborhood advisory committees to advise and collaborate on proposed development projects and address issues of concern is strongly encouraged.*





**Program CN-14B: Dominican Hillside Parcels.** Work with Dominican University and neighborhood residents to plan for the undeveloped hillside parcels located east of Deer Park Avenue and south of Gold Hill Grade. Much of the property is steep and heavily wooded. Other portions have the potential for housing, including student housing and faculty/ staff housing, which is a significant local and community need. In the event housing is pursued, the permitted density should reflect site constraints. Development should conform to the City's Hillside Design Guidelines and include provisions for substantial open space. The neighborhood should be involved in the planning and review process, which would include an amendment to the Master Use Permit and the PD-district zoning.

**Policy CN-15: Dominican/Black Canyon Area Resources and Hazards**

Proactively work to conserve and restore natural resources and reduce environmental hazards in the Dominican/ Black Canyon area, including wildfire, landslide, and noise hazards.

**Program CN-15A: Emergency Preparedness.** Continue collaborative efforts to improve emergency preparedness, including vegetation management on public open space and private property, evacuation and emergency response, and community awareness and training.

**Program CN-15B: Noise Reduction.** Continue to work with Caltrans to reduce freeway noise in the Dominican-Black Canyon area. This should include maintenance of landscaping along the freeway sound wall, noise-reducing pavement, and other sound absorption technologies.

**Program CN-15C: Open Space Dedication.** Consider offers to dedicate vacant sites, including the 17.9-acre parcel at the end of Dominican Drive (also with frontage on Glen Park Avenue), as public open space. If City ownership is infeasible, consider dedication to Marin County Parks.

**MONTECITO**

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Montecito/ Happy Valley is nestled in two valleys located north of the San Rafael Canal and northeast of Downtown. It is one of San Rafael's oldest and well-established neighborhoods and features a beautiful natural setting, mature street trees, a convenient location, and a diverse mix of housing types and uses. Housing ranges from elegant historic homes and smaller bungalows to multi-family complexes, condominiums, and a retirement community. Residents enjoy easy access to Downtown, shopping centers and services, Highway 101, and public transportation.

A neighborhood plan for Montecito-Happy Valley was adopted in 1996. The plan reduced development potential in the neighborhood, primarily by reducing the extent of multi-family zoning in areas developed with single family homes. The vision expressed in the neighborhood plan is to maintain Montecito-Happy Valley as a beautiful, desirable place with diverse architecture, pleasant shaded streets, community gathering places, and a variety of uses within walking distance. This continues to be the vision today. Area residents will continue to work together to keep the neighborhood secure, clean, safe, and attractive, and to celebrate Montecito's success as a strong and diverse community.

While the residential portion of Montecito-Happy Valley is mostly built out, the adjacent commercial district functions as the east end of Downtown San Rafael and will evolve as a mixed-use neighborhood in the coming decades. New development in this area has the potential to make Downtown's east end more attractive and walkable. However, the area is heavily congested, has limited street parking, and provides essential services such as grocery stores to much of Central San Rafael and the San Pedro Peninsula. As development occurs, it will be essential to address traffic impacts, keep the streets safe for pedestrians and bicyclists, maintain important neighborhood-serving uses, and ensure that the scale of new projects is compatible with the residential heart of the neighborhood.

San Rafael High School has been a continuous presence in Montecito-Happy Valley since 1924. In addition to classroom buildings, the 32-acre campus includes Madrone Continuation High School, several

athletic fields, a recently refurbished track and football field, a pool and gymnasium complex, parking, and the School District corporation yard on Union Street. A long-standing planning concept has been to relocate the corporation yard and repurpose the land for affordable housing and/or a neighborhood park. Montecito currently lacks a park, despite having a large number of apartment dwellers with limited options for outdoor play and relaxation. This concept remains valid and should be pursued with the School District.

**Policy CN-16: Montecito Residential Densities**

Preserve the existing mix of single family, duplex, medium-, and high-density housing in Montecito-Happy Valley’s residential areas.

**Policy CN-17: High School Campus Plans**

Facilitate communication between San Rafael City Schools and the neighborhood on issues related to traffic, parking, noise, operations, and development on the high school campus.

***Program CN-17A: Corporation Yard Reuse.** Encourage relocation of the bus/ maintenance yard located on the northwest corner of the high school campus (Union and Mission), thereby allowing for development of:*

- a) Affordable multi-family housing. To the extent feasible, housing on the site should serve older adults and/or School District staff. Any development on this site should maintain, enhance, and protect the view corridor down Fourth Street to the High School’s west portico.*
- b) Montecito Neighborhood Park. A small neighborhood park and children’s playground should be included in any plans to repurpose school property. In the event a park is infeasible on the Union and Mission site, consider other locations on the campus where such a facility is possible, including a joint use park on the field east of the corporation yard.*

*If any part of the high school campus is closed or sold before the horizon of the General Plan, a priority should be placed on developing affordable housing or neighborhood parkland.*

***Program CN-17B: Joint Use.** Work with San Rafael City Schools to accommodate greater public access to open space and athletic fields at the High School during hours when school is not in session.*

***Program CN-17C: School-Related Traffic.** Work with San Rafael City Schools to improve the safety and effectiveness of drop-off areas at San Rafael High School. Encourage continued communication and cooperation to address access and scheduling improvements.*

**Policy CN-18: Architecture**

Maintain a mix of architecture styles in the Montecito/ Happy Valley Neighborhood, compatible with the character of the area’s attractive older buildings. Newer buildings should be well designed, blend well with existing homes and provide a pedestrian-friendly street front.

***Program CN-18A: Historic Inventory.** Update the City’s inventory of historic resources for the Montecito/ Happy Valley area. The neighborhood includes many buildings more than a century old that should be acknowledged and evaluated for historic importance.*

**Policy CN-19: Traffic Circulation**

Continue to develop solutions to neighborhood traffic congestion and safety. Local residential streets should be designed for low volumes with appropriate traffic control. Continued efforts should be made to improve circulation on streets in the adjacent commercial area and to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety through this area.

**Program CN-19A: Access to Downtown.** Provide safe access from the Montecito-Happy Valley area to Fourth Street, the Montecito Shopping Center, the Canal waterfront, and the transit center area. Streetscape improvements in the eastern end of Downtown should create an inviting, comfortable environment for walking.

**Program CN-19B: Pedestrian Improvements.** Improve the safety and condition of neighborhood sidewalks, including improvements to crosswalks, posting of speed limits, and improvements to pedestrian paths and rights-of-way. Work with the neighborhood to gather information on sidewalks and paths needing improvement.

#### **Policy CN-20: Parking**

Provide street parking that is convenient and does not dominate the neighborhood. New residential development should provide attractive and adequate off-street parking.

**Program CN-20A: Parking Improvements.** Continue to explore practical and cost-effective solutions to manage parking in the Montecito area. These measures could include residential permit parking, time limits on parking on specific high-demand streets, working with apartment owners to restore parking spaces being used for storage, working with property owners to add on-site parking where feasible, and posting no parking signs on narrow streets with access constraints for emergency vehicles.

#### **Policy CN-21: Downtown Transition Areas**

Ensure that future development in the Montecito commercial area respects the context, scale, and character of development in the adjacent residential neighborhood. Building height and mass along the north and east edges of Downtown should step down in order to minimize impacts on neighborhood character and well-being.

**Program CN-21A: Reuse of Commercial Properties.** Actively solicit input from Montecito-Happy Valley residents on plans for the reuse, redevelopment, and improvement of properties in the commercial area between US 101 and San Rafael High School, including the Montecito Shopping Center.

### **BRET HARTE**

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The Bret Harte neighborhood rises from Woodland Avenue to the crest of Southern Heights Ridge southeast of Downtown San Rafael. Once a dairy farm, the neighborhood was mostly developed in the 1940s. Land use in the neighborhood is primarily residential, with high density apartments along Woodland Avenue, single family homes in the heart of the neighborhood and large lot “view” homes on the top of the ridge. The neighborhood also includes significant public open space areas on its steeper slopes. Bret Harte Park is a central fixture of the neighborhood and the setting for many community events and activities.

The neighborhood has an active community association—the Bret Harte Community Association—that organizes multiple events each year designed to strengthen relationships between neighbors. While the neighborhood is small, it is close knit, with many long-time residents. Residents appreciate its affordability to young couples and families, central location, easy freeway and transit access, and sense of community.

Access to the Bret Harte neighborhood relies on often-congested interchanges along US 101 and I-580, and arterial streets passing through an industrial area. The SMART train extension to Larkspur has also impacted the neighborhood. Monitoring traffic along Woodland, Anderson, and varying cross-streets is important, and making adjustments to lessen impacts is a high priority. Bret Harte residents also are concerned about wildfire hazards, including hazards associated with unauthorized encampments on the wooded hillsides around the community.



## Bret Harte Speaks

As part of General Plan 2040, the Bret Harte Community Association conducted a neighborhood survey and invited residents to share their ideas for the area's future. Residents were asked the following question:

*As you visualize your neighborhood in 20 years, what major changes or improvements would you like to see?*

Some of the responses are listed below

- "I would like to see the park maintained and more play structures"
- "Better access to downtown on foot"
- "More flood control in the lower areas of the neighborhood"
- "Use parking permits so only residents can park on the neighborhood streets"
- "Improvement of drainage and sidewalks"
- "The SMART train being elevated above downtown intersections"
- "Would love all power lines to be underground"
- "Keep it clean, continue with events, no major changes"
- "More differentiation between residential and nearby commercial areas"
- "Speed bumps on upper Irwin above Bret Harte Park"
- "Would love the hill in the park to be landscaped to stop erosion"
- "A local shopping area with cafes / restaurants"
- "Rehab some of the surrounding light-industrial zone into retail for walkable services (grocery, drug store, etc)"
- "Upgrades to Woodland and Lovell area, especially upgraded sidewalks"
- "Attractive 'Welcome to Bret Harte' signs at end of DuBois and Irwin Streets--could be colorful mosaic tiles created by neighborhood kids"
- "Increased attention to potential slide areas and more proactive slide prevention"
- "I hope it doesn't change too much!"



Looking to 2040, new development in the neighborhood is expected to be limited to accessory dwelling units (ADUs), the expansion of existing smaller homes, and a handful of remaining vacant residentially zoned parcels. The neighborhood's hillsides should be protected as open space to the extent feasible. Parking should be carefully managed, as the Bret Harte area is impacted by employee parking from nearby industrial areas and parking from a growing number of ADUs. Maintenance of local access roads, including Irwin, Dubois, and Rose Streets, should continue to be a priority. Pedestrian safety improvements also are desired, particularly for students walking to nearby Davidson and Laurel Dell schools.

Bret Harte residents also seek proactive strategies to reduce the impacts of climate change on the neighborhood. Maintenance and improvement of gutters, culverts, and storm drains will be important to reduce flooding. Landslides from the open space above Irwin Street have caused significant damage to the area above Glenaire Drive in the past and continue to pose a risk. Aggressive vegetation management is needed to reduce the risk of wildfire, and emergency preparedness for local residents remains essential. Aging power lines represent another risk, given the abundance of street trees and high winds.

### **Policy CN-22: Bret Harte Neighborhood**

Maintain Bret Harte as a great neighborhood, with continued efforts to reduce hazards, preserve open space, enhance public facilities and infrastructure, and encourage reinvestment in the existing housing stock.

***Program CN-22A: Bret Harte Neighborhood Priorities.*** Recognize the following neighborhood priorities in planning and development decisions for the Bret Harte area:

- a) *Maintain strict limits on hillside development. Existing hillside open spaces should be reinforced and proactively managed to prevent future landslides.*
- b) *Encourage safety improvements to infrastructure, including undergrounding power lines and monitoring aging gas lines through residential yards.*
- c) *Improve bicycle and pedestrian access along Woodland Avenue, providing safer routes to school, and better access to Downtown San Rafael.*
- d) *Improve neighborhood aesthetics and landscaping, particularly at the neighborhood gateways at DuBois and Irwin Streets. Additional trees should be planted throughout the area, and existing trees should be maintained.*
- e) *Continue improvements to Bret Harte Park, including hillside landscaping to prevent erosion, community art projects, shade tree maintenance, completion of restroom improvements, and replacement of the water tank while preserving the historic wooden structure that surrounds it.*
- f) *Expand emergency preparedness activities, particularly for older adults.*
- g) *Encourage renovation of the Bret Harte Shopping Center.*
- h) *Monitor and discourage homeless encampments in the open space below Southern Heights Ridge.*

### **PICNIC VALLEY**

The Picnic Valley neighborhood is located south of Downtown San Rafael and includes the area between Davidson Middle School and the top of Southern Heights Ridge. The neighborhood takes its name from the Laurel Grove Picnic Grounds, the site of civic events and celebrations during San Rafael's early days. Picnic Valley is characterized by steep wooded hillsides traversed by winding, narrow streets and footpaths. Housing includes a mix of older bungalows and cottages, mid-century hillside homes, and modern homes, many with panoramic views. There are a number of apartment and condominium complexes in the Davidson School area and a few duplexes in the hillside areas. The neighborhood includes Laurel Dell Elementary School.

Picnic Valley is a mostly built out neighborhood with only a few vacant sites. There are a number of development and redevelopment opportunities in the lower part of the neighborhood near Davidson School. The upper hillsides are constrained by limited access, narrow roads, and steep slopes. The neighborhood seeks continued improvement of older non-conforming streets such as Bungalow Avenue, and enforcement of parking regulations to ensure safety and emergency vehicle access.

## **GERSTLE PARK**

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Gerstle Park is located south and southwest of Downtown. The area developed in the late 1800s as one of San Rafael's first residential neighborhoods. Some of the earliest residences were summer homes for wealthy San Franciscans. The early 1900s saw the development of craftsman bungalows, many of which survive today. The flatter portions of the neighborhood are on the southern flank of Downtown and were zoned to allow apartments during an era when San Rafael was growing rapidly. Today these areas include a mix of single-family homes, apartments, and small offices, sometimes side by side. Most of the apartments were built in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. A Gerstle Park Neighborhood Plan was adopted in 1980.

Today, Gerstle Park retains its charm and takes pride in its historic housing stock, walkable scale, mature street trees, and well-kept properties. It is a quintessential hometown neighborhood, with many longtime residents and a strong sense of community. The area retains one of the largest concentrations of Victorian and early 20th Century architecture in Marin County. It also includes Gerstle Park itself, a six-acre estate and community park donated to the City by the Gerstle family in 1930. Short Elementary School is also located in the neighborhood.

As a mature, mostly built out community, the priority in Gerstle Park is maintaining and enhancing local streets, sidewalks, and infrastructure; supporting investment in the existing housing stock; and managing neighborhood traffic and parking. The neighborhood abuts the busy Second/Third Street corridor and is bisected by D Street/ Wolfe Grade. Continued efforts are needed to reduce cut-through traffic and speeding, beautify local streets, and address parking issues on neighborhood streets. Opportunities to refurbish and improve older apartment buildings so they are more compatible with neighborhood character are encouraged. Historic preservation should continue to be strongly supported. As in all parts of San Rafael, fire safety and emergency preparedness are essential.



### **Policy CN-23: Gerstle Park**

Preserve and enhance the residential and historic character of the Gerstle Park neighborhood by:

- a) Protecting the mixed-density residential area, strictly limiting rezoning to higher densities.
- b) Prohibiting additional non-residential development in Gerstle Park except as already allowed in zoning regulations.
- c) Protecting hillside ridges and the visual backdrop of the ridges on the edges of the neighborhood.
- d) Preserving and enhancing the distinctive design character of the neighborhood, including historic design features. New development or significant remodels should enhance and respect the architectural character of the neighborhood.
- e) Requiring that adjacent Downtown land use designations and developments are compatible with and do not negatively affect the neighborhood, and that sensitive transitions occur where Downtown development abuts neighborhood residences.

***Program CN-23A: Historic Preservation.** Update the City's historic resources inventory for Gerstle Park. The existing inventory is more than 30 years old and may not fully represent existing assets. As one of the oldest neighborhoods in San Rafael, Gerstle Park should be a priority area for an updated inventory.*

***Program CN-23B: Short School.** Coordinate with San Rafael City Schools on the future of Short Elementary School. Uses should be compatible with the surrounding residential neighborhood and sensitive to potential impacts on parking, traffic, noise, and similar factors.*

### **Policy CN-24: Natural Features**

Protect and enhance important natural features in the Gerstle Park area, including Mahon/ San Rafael Creek, mature street trees, and community open spaces, hillsides, and woodlands.

### **Policy CN-25: Pedestrian Linkages and Landscaping**

Improve bicycle and pedestrian linkages and landscape treatment of major gateways from Downtown.

***Program CN-25A: Gateway Improvements.** Provide landscaping improvements along B, C, and D Streets.*

## **UNINCORPORATED NEIGHBORHOODS**

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The only unincorporated neighborhood in Central San Rafael is California Park, which is located between the Bret Harte neighborhood and the 101 Freeway just north of the Larkspur city limits. A small portion of the Sun Valley area is also unincorporated and is addressed in the Sun Valley section of this chapter.

### **CALIFORNIA PARK**

The California Park neighborhood encompasses 103 acres in the southeast part of Central San Rafael. This is a single-family residential neighborhood with a handful of multi-family properties and a Montessori School. The neighborhood is situated on a bowl-shaped hillside surrounding a flat low-lying area along Auburn Street. The low-lying area, known as the Scheutzen Park subdivision, consists of over 200 antiquated 25' x 100' vacant lots, most of which have been consolidated into larger parcels. The Scheutzen Park area has a number of environmental constraints, including wetlands and flood hazards.

Residents of California Park value the small-town neighborly feel of their community, and its central, convenient location. Their vision for the community's future includes conservation of the Scheutzen Park wetlands and the neighborhood's hillside open spaces. Any development on the Scheutzen site should be clustered on upland areas so that the wetlands can be protected and enhanced. Residents seek to preserve the neighborhood's natural, informal feel while improving older properties, reducing nuisances and illegal dumping, and creating safer conditions for pedestrians.