



# SAN RAFAEL

THE CITY WITH A MISSION

Community Development Department – Planning Division

**Meeting Date:** September 15, 2020

**Agenda Item:** 3

**Case Numbers:** GPA16-001 & P16-13

**Project Planner:** Barry Miller, Consulting Project Manager (415) 485-3423

## REPORT TO PLANNING COMMISSION

### **SUBJECT: Progress Report on San Rafael General Plan 2040/Downtown Precise Plan**

A progress report and update on General Plan 2040 and Downtown Precise Plan will be presented to the Planning Commission. The report will include a recap of work completed to date, outcome of the General Plan committee work, organization of the new plans, major draft policy changes that will be included in draft plans and schedule/tasks anticipated for the upcoming release of the public review draft of the Plans and associated Environmental Impact Report (EIR); Case Nos.: GPA16-001 & P16-013.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In late 2017, the City initiated an update of the San Rafael General Plan 2020, moving the time horizon forward to 2040 and amending the document to reflect current issues, trends, and State laws. The City subsequently received a grant to prepare a Downtown Precise Plan, which was incorporated into the overall General Plan Update work program. Work on the Precise Plan was initiated in January 2019. A program-level Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is being prepared covering both Plans. The three documents (General Plan, Downtown Plan, EIR) will be released this Fall. The Planning Commission is tasked with holding public hearings on the documents and making a recommendation to the City Council.

This is an informational item only. Given that the Draft General Plan 2040, Downtown Precise Plan and EIR have not yet been released to the Commission or to the public, comments on the specifics of the Plans are not appropriate at this time. The purpose of the September 15<sup>th</sup> Progress Report is to review the work completed to date, highlight the work done by the General Plan Steering Committee, identify the organization and content that will be included in the Draft Plans, and discuss the schedule for Planning Commission review. The Commission will be provided with a framework for the upcoming review process following release of the plans. Public comment will be accepted, but comment on content of the plan should be deferred to the upcoming hearings after the Drafts are released.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Planning Commission take the following actions:

1. Receive a status report on the General Plan, Downtown Plan, and EIR
2. Consider public comments and testimony
3. Accept the informational report

### **PROJECT BACKGROUND**

#### **General Plan 2040 Overview:**

Every city and county in California is required to prepare and adopt a General Plan for its future development. San Rafael's current General Plan was adopted in 2004. The Plan has been amended

several times since then in response to specific issues, new State laws, and related plans. The Housing Element of the General Plan was comprehensively updated in 2014 to cover 2015-2023. It will be updated again in 2021-2022 as required by State law.

The General Plan Update was launched in December 2017. While the update is primarily a “refresh” of the existing plan rather than a brand new plan, changes were needed to address the evolving state of the city and region, and to cover global issues such as climate change, social equity, and emerging transportation technology. The three-year planning process included gathering and analyzing data on these issues, auditing each goal, policy, and action in the existing General Plan, drafting new and updated policies, and working with the community to identify issues and vet potential new policies.

The General Plan is organized into “elements” or topical chapters. Eight elements are required by state law, but San Rafael’s existing Plan also includes “optional” elements on topics of local importance. A comparison of the elements in General Plan 2020 and the new General Plan 2040 is provided below:

General Plan 2020	General Plan 2040
Land Use (*)	Land Use (*)
Neighborhoods	Neighborhoods
Community Design	Community Design and Preservation
Conservation (*)	Conservation and Climate Change (*)
Air and Water Quality	
Sustainability	
Parks and Recreation	Parks, Recreation and Open Space (*)
Open Space (*)	
Safety (*)	Safety (*)
Noise (*)	Noise (*)
Circulation (*)	Mobility (*)
Infrastructure	Community Services and Infrastructure
Culture and Arts	Arts and Culture
Economic Vitality	Economic Vitality
Governance	Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (*)
Housing (*)	Housing (*)

(\*) mandatory element

As noted above, General Plan 2040 maintains most of the 2020 elements, but includes a few changes. The Governance Element has been replaced by an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Element, meeting new State requirements to address these issues (as well as environmental justice) in the General Plan. The Sustainability Element from General Plan 2020 is treated as a “thread” that runs throughout the General Plan, with policies and programs distributed over several elements. The Infrastructure Element has been expanded to also cover Community Services, and the Community Design Element has been expanded to more comprehensively cover Historic Preservation.

Like General Plan 2020, the updated General Plan retains a “Neighborhoods” Element. This Element allows citywide policies to be expressed at a more fine-grained level by referencing specific locations and priorities within approximately 30 distinct geographic areas. The General Plan also includes an Introduction and a new “Framework” chapter that summarizes major trends shaping the city as well as Guiding Principles.

The updated General Plan also retains the same basic outline for each Element. An initial section provides “existing conditions” information about the topic. This is followed by numbered goals, policies, and programs. The goals are broad, aspirational statements. The policies provide general direction on day to day activities. The programs indicate specific actions to be carried out to implement the policies.

Maps are included throughout the document to communicate policies spatially or provide background data. The Plan also includes several appendices, including a Sea Level Rise Adaptation Report and an Implementation Matrix identifying responsible parties and timing for key Plan programs.

As required by State law, General Plan 2040 also includes a future Land Use Map. The Map uses roughly 20 color-coded categories to illustrate the land uses and densities (or intensities) permitted across the San Rafael Planning Area. The Map provides the basis for San Rafael's zoning map. Several changes to the category definitions have been made through the General Plan Update, and a number of categories on the 2020 General Plan Map have been merged. These changes will have little effect on the built environment and very few substantive changes are proposed.

General Plan 2040 recognizes that San Rafael is a mature and mostly built out city. It does not propose major changes to San Rafael's physical form and reinforces existing land use policies. Future development is focused on infill sites in Downtown, the Northgate (North San Rafael Town Center) area, and the Southeast San Rafael commercial and industrial districts. A "sea level rise" overlay has been added to the map, showing areas that may be impacted by sea level rise by 2050.

*Key Work Products Now Available for Review*

A project website ([www.sanrafael2040.org](http://www.sanrafael2040.org)) was created at the start of the General Plan Update process and has been updated regularly throughout the project. The website includes a "[Documents](#)" tab that includes a number of work products currently available for review.

The most important of these documents is a "[Compendium of Policies](#)" that includes the goals, policies, and programs in General Plan 2040 as of May 2020. Minor revisions have been made to the "Compendium" in response to public input received over the Summer (including comments from the General Plan 2040 Steering Committee), but most of the content is current. The website also includes the Draft Neighborhoods Element policies, which build on policies from General Plan 2020 with updates that reflect input from neighborhood groups across the city. Also on the website is a series of "Existing Conditions" reports covering topics such as land use, parks and recreation, demographics, and environmental justice. The website also includes the [Draft 2040 Land Use Map](#), which the Planning Commission discussed in February 2020.

**Downtown Precise Plan Overview:**

In 2018, City of San Rafael received a \$500,000 grant from the Association of Bay Area Governments/ Metropolitan Transportation Commission (ABAG/ MTC) to prepare a Precise Plan for Downtown San Rafael. The intent was to update the existing Downtown Plan, which had been prepared in 1993, and to incorporate the more recent Station Area Plan (2012) as well as other plans and studies for Downtown completed over the last few years (Parking and Wayfinding Study, Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, etc.). The grant created "collateral" opportunities, such as updating the inventory of Downtown historic resources, and developing new zoning regulations for Downtown that are more responsive to the area's context and scale.

The City retained Opticos Design as the Downtown Precise Plan consultant in January 2019. Opticos surveyed existing conditions and convened a four-day design "charrette" in May 2019, soliciting input on Downtown's future from several hundred participants. They subsequently developed design concepts and ideas, tested these ideas through a community process, and developed a draft Precise Plan. Concurrently, an updated field survey of Downtown historic resources was completed, facilitating future historic preservation activities while creating development streamlining opportunities on non-historic sites. A Working Draft Plan for staff review was completed in April 2019. The Draft is currently being revised for public release.

The Draft Downtown Precise Plan includes nine chapters. Following an introduction and “existing conditions” discussion, the Plan provides design principles for Downtown and an overall design vision for the area. It identifies four Downtown subareas: (a) Transit Village; (b) Downtown Core; (c) West End Village; and (d) Montecito Commercial area. Illustrative design concepts for each subarea show public improvements such as new plazas and bike paths and private improvements such as infill development and adaptive reuse of historic buildings. The Plan estimates the capacity for roughly 2,200 new housing units and 2,000 new jobs in the Downtown Precise Plan area, representing roughly half of San Rafael’s projected growth for the next 20 years. The overall intent of the design vision is to make Downtown more walkable, attractive, economically successful, and sustainable, in part by infusing a large amount of new housing in an area that has high-quality transit and is potentially less auto-dependent than other parts of the city. Plan concepts include restoration and sea level rise adaptation activities along Mahon Creek and the San Rafael Canal, and improvements to Irwin Creek (beneath the US 101 viaduct).

Chapter 5 of the Precise Plan covers historic preservation. The chapter describes the findings of the 2019 historic resources survey, identifies areas with high historic resource opportunities, and presents recommendations for amending the City’s Historic Preservation Ordinance. It includes strategies to effectively preserve historic resources, and to ensure that adaptive reuse of older structures makes economic sense. Some of the recommendations are design-oriented and are later codified in the proposed Form Based Code (Chapter 9).

Chapter 6 addresses Transportation and Parking. It evaluates the Downtown circulation system and identifies improvements to make walking and bicycling safer and more convenient. It also responds to vehicle circulation issues, and the need to improve access to transit (including “last mile” trips to and from the Transit Center/ SMART station). The Plan incorporates the recent conversion of C and D Streets from one-way to two-way traffic and recommends similar changes to B Street. It also incorporates recent recommendations from the Third Street corridor improvement program and the 2018 Parking and Wayfinding study. Among the Plan’s recommendations are improvement of Tamalpais Avenue as a bicycle and pedestrian greenway and public space connecting the Puerto Suello Hill bike path and the Mahon Creek bike path. The Precise Plan provides a menu of potential strategies to improve curbside management and respond to emerging transportation technologies.

Chapter 7 of the Precise Plan includes an affordable housing and anti-displacement strategy. The chapter recognizes the importance of affordable housing to Downtown and the need to preserve existing affordable housing resources in the area, which are substantial. The Plan incorporates density bonus incentives for affordable housing and encourages 100% affordable projects as well as mixed income projects throughout the area. Chapter 8 of the Plan provides an implementation strategy, including economic development actions and potential capital improvements.

The final chapter of the Precise Plan is a Form Based Code. The Code is intended to replace existing zoning regulations for Downtown, and is focused on the physical form (height, mass, bulk, setbacks, etc.) of buildings rather than the uses that occur within those buildings. In some respects, the Code is more flexible than the existing Code (particularly with respect to uses). In other respects, it is more prescriptive, as it identifies specific requirements for building frontages, setbacks (recessing of upper floors), and treatment of historic properties. The trade-off for the prescriptive requirements is a streamlined review process for conforming projects, and a more pedestrian-friendly building form that respects and enhances the character of Downtown. The Form-Based Code includes numerous graphics and illustrations of desired outcomes in each new zoning district.

*Key Work Products Now Available for Review*

The Downtown Precise Plan has not yet been released, but a number of interim and supporting work products are available on the General Plan website. These include the [Downtown Profile Report](#), the [Downtown Options Report \(part 1\)](#) and [\(part 2\)](#), and a [PowerPoint presentation](#) highlighting the

recommendations of the proposed Plan. In addition, Opticos has prepared a [six-part video tutorial](#) on Form Based Codes for the City, which is available on [YouTube](#).

**EIR Overview:**

As noted earlier, a program-level Environmental Impact Report (EIR) is being prepared to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and address potential impacts and mitigation measures associated with adoption of the General Plan 2040 and Downtown Precise Plan. The EIR evaluates the impacts of adding approximately 4,400 housing units and 4,100 jobs across the San Rafael Planning Area over a 20-year period. These figures are roughly consistent with regional growth forecasts for San Rafael. All required CEQA topics are addressed in the EIR. Where potential significant impacts are identified, mitigation measures are identified. The EIR reflects recent State requirements for addressing transportation impacts (SB 743), which prohibit the use of Level of Service (LOS) as a metric for evaluating significant impacts and instead require the use of Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT). The City Council has held several hearings in the last year to discuss this transition.

Once the Draft EIR is released, a 60-day public comment period will begin. The Draft EIR will be circulated to state agencies, as well as other local governments, service providers, special districts, and Native American tribal representatives. Public comment also will be invited during this time. At the conclusion of the comment period, written responses will be provided to comments and appropriate revisions to the Draft EIR will be identified. A Final EIR (FEIR) will be prepared for Planning Commission consideration and Council adoption.

**Community Engagement:**

A 24-member Steering Committee was appointed by the City Council in December 2017 to guide the General Plan Update process. The City Council also appointed 22 alternates to backfill Committee positions in the event of an absence. Commissioner Davidson represented the Planning Commission on the Committee. Former Commissioner Schoppert was the designated Alternate, prior to his departure from the Commission.

The Steering Committee met 25 times between January 2018 and June 2020. The last three meetings took place virtually as Zoom webinars. All Committee meetings were open to the public and included a public comment period. Each meeting was three hours long and included discussion of key planning issues as well as existing and proposed goals, policies, and programs. Policies were developed through an iterative process involving multiple rounds of review and comment by Committee members.

The Council's appointments to the steering committee were structured to include a wide range of advocacies within the City, in order for various opinions to be considered in the process. Given the makeup of the Committee, a wide-ranging diversity of viewpoints was expressed at the Committee meetings. As a result, not all policies represent a "consensus" opinion. One of the objectives of vetting the Plan with the Committee through a process that included more than 75 hours of public meetings was to reduce the burden of managing this process on the Planning Commission. Staff's expectation is that the Planning Commission will rely to a great extent on the excellent work done by the Steering Committee, rather than revisiting issues that have already been heavily debated and discussed.

In addition to the Steering Committee meetings, Staff also convened community workshops on the General Plan, including formal meetings at community centers and informal "pop-up" workshops at Farmers Markets and the Downtown Art Walk. The outreach program also included storefront exhibits, youth participation exercises, and attendance at numerous meetings of neighborhood associations, civic organizations, and City boards and commissions. As previously noted, the City has maintained a website for the project, including a link to a related [interactive website](#) where interested parties can subscribe and weigh in on long-range planning issues. More than 300 residents are currently subscribed to the website. Staff has also solicited input from other public agencies, such as the County, the School

Districts, the Transportation Authority of Marin, and other cities. Community engagement also included a Spanish language engagement program conducted in collaboration with Canal Alliance, with the outcomes summarized in a [survey report](#).

## **TENTATIVE SCHEDULE FOR COMMISSION REVIEW AND DISCUSSION**

Staff has developed a preliminary schedule for release of the public review draft General Plan, Downtown Precise Plan, and Environmental Impact Report. The Planning Commission is the formal hearing body for these three documents and will make a recommendation to the City Council (via a series of Resolutions) at the end of its hearing process. The City Council will then conduct additional hearings and is ultimately responsible for adopting the Plans and the EIR.

While it is anticipated that all three documents will be adopted concurrently, staff is proposing staggered publication dates. Specifically, the updated General Plan will be released on or around October 2, 2020. The document will be posted to the project website at that time and may be downloaded by the public. We anticipate release of the Draft Downtown Precise Plan and the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) on or around November 13, 2020. The DEIR will be filed with the State Office of Planning and Research (OPR) Clearinghouse at that time, beginning a 60-day public comment period that will conclude on January 14, 2021. These dates are tentative and are subject to change.

At this point, staff is proposing five to six Planning Commission hearings (excluding this briefing provided on September 15). Staff anticipates that the Planning Commission will conduct its first public hearing on the General Plan on October 27, focusing on the first half of the document. Its second public hearing will be on November 12, covering the second half of the document (and follow-up to questions or earlier comments about the first half).

The Commission will take up the Downtown Precise Plan at its December 15 meeting. The December meeting will also provide an opportunity for follow-up on issues raised at the October and November hearings on the General Plan. An opportunity to provide comments on the EIR will be available at the January 12, 2021 meeting. The January 12<sup>th</sup> meeting will also provide an opportunity for follow-up discussion on the Downtown Precise Plan, primarily on the Form Based Code. If needed, another meeting on the Form Based Code and final direction on the Downtown Plan will be scheduled for January 26, 2021.

Commission action on resolutions forwarding your recommendation on the General Plan, Downtown Precise Plan, and EIR to the City Council would occur in March 2021, following completion of the Final EIR and any necessary revisions to the General Plan and Downtown Precise Plan. It is expected that major issues will be resolved through the Commission hearings, allowing for a smaller number of Council hearings. Council hearings are projected to occur in April and May, with adoption in May.

City Council input would also be solicited through at least two progress reports that would occur concurrently with the Planning Commission hearings (October 2020 and February 2021). The progress reports provide a forum for City Council input, an opportunity to update the Council on the Planning Commission hearings, and another forum for public comment.

## **CORRESPONDENCE**

No correspondence has been received on this Staff Report.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

While there are no attachments to this Staff report, the report itself includes numerous web links to work products developed over the course of the project that may be of interest.