



# Introduction + Community Engagement

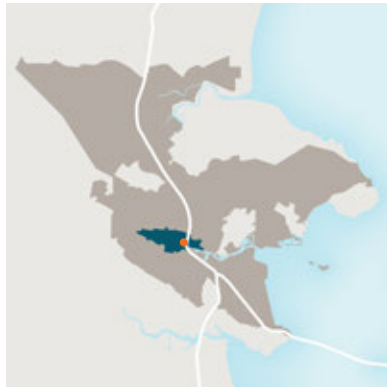
CHAPTER

1

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# 1.1 Purpose and Timeline



**Figure 1.1 The Precise Plan Area within San Rafael**

*Downtown San Rafael has good access from US-101 and the SMART rail line, and enjoys a central location within the City and Marin county.*

- City of San Rafael
- Downtown Precise Plan Area
- Transit Center and SMART Station

**The Downtown San Rafael Precise Plan implements the community’s vision to create opportunities for reinvestment and future development that is feasible, predictable, and consistent with the community’s priorities and aspirations.**

## Background

The Downtown San Rafael Precise Plan (Precise Plan) builds upon a legacy of previous planning efforts undertaken by the City of San Rafael (City) over the past 25 years. In 1993, the City adopted a study titled “Our Vision of Downtown San Rafael and Our Implementation Strategy” that laid the foundation for new zoning districts and many of the policies that shaped Downtown development over the next decade. In 2004, “Our Vision” was incorporated into the 2020 General Plan.

Downtown has been the focus of several planning efforts, and was designated a “Transit Town Center” Priority Development Area (PDA) in 2009. In 2012, the City adopted a Downtown Station Area Plan, establishing a vision for land use and circulation improvements in the area around the new Downtown SMART station.

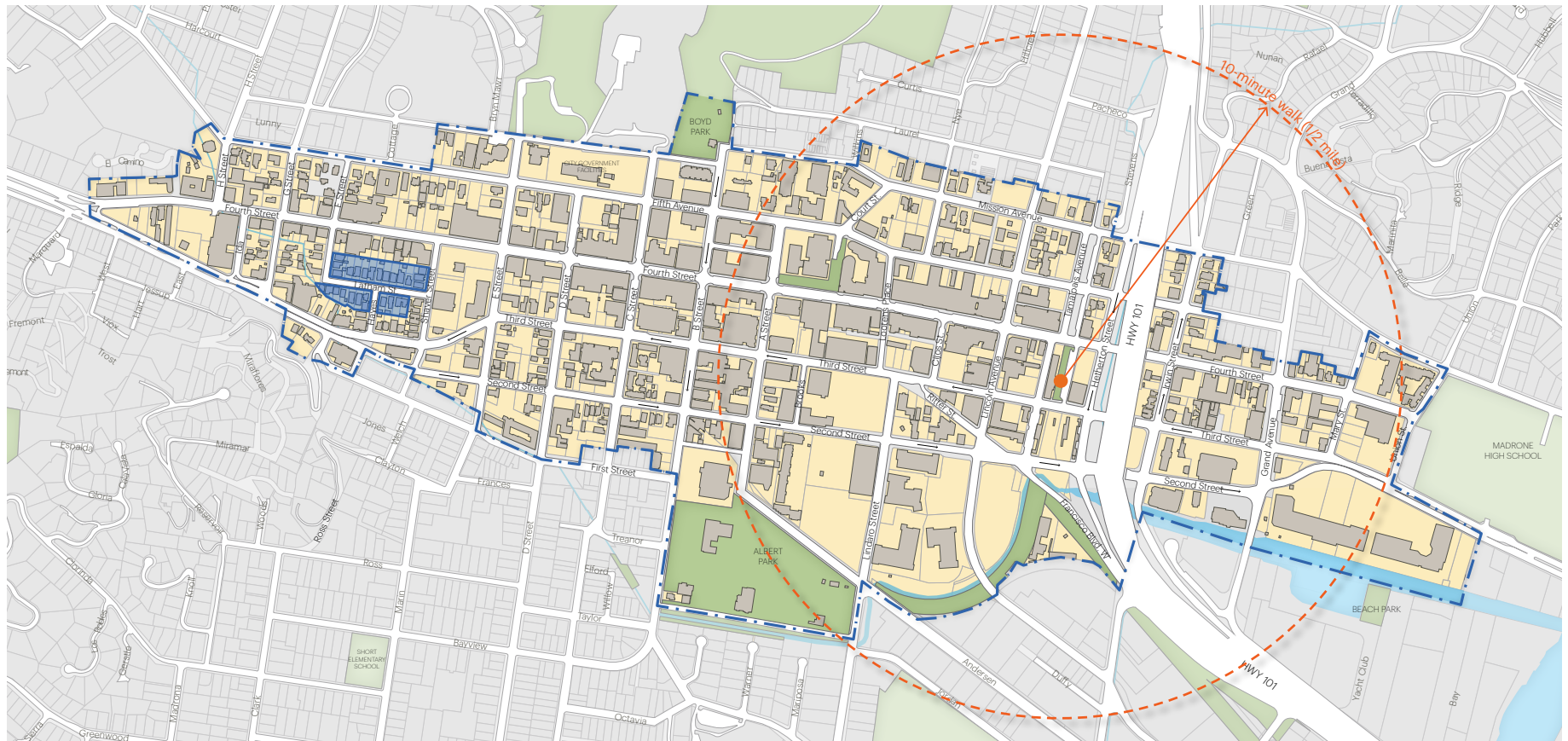
At the time the Precise Plan was prepared (in 2020), it was against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the long-term impact of the pandemic on cities and downtowns is difficult to predict with accuracy, the Precise Plan will be implemented over a 20-year timeframe, and its recommendations are expected to remain relevant even as adjustments may be required in the near term.

## Precise Plan Purpose, Legal Authority and Timeline

The Precise Plan has been prepared to enable Downtown San Rafael to continue to grow and evolve as a regional mixed-use center while enhancing its unique identity and culture. It is a comprehensive effort to assess previous design and planning efforts, and update the Downtown vision based on the analysis of current conditions and community outreach. The Precise Plan serves as both a policy and regulatory document. It identifies growth and development opportunities, provides the principles, policies, and programs to guide investment; and establishes form-based zoning standards to regulate built character and uses in Downtown.

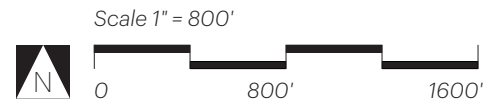
The Plan Area covers approximately 265 acres, and forms the commercial, civic, cultural and connectivity hub for the City and surrounding region. The Plan Area is shown in Figure 1.2. It includes the Downtown PDA and the adjacent West End Village neighborhood.

The San Rafael Zoning Ordinance will be amended concurrently with the adoption of the Precise Plan. The Precise Plan has a planning horizon of 20 years, through the year 2040.



**Figure 1.2 Downtown San Rafael Precise Plan Area**

- Downtown Precise Plan Area boundary
- Existing park/ open space/ school
- Parcels within the Plan Area
- Existing buildings
- Latham Street area (within Plan Area but will retain MR 2.5 zoning)
- SMART station
- 1/2 mile (10 minute walking distance)



# 1.2 Relationship to Relevant Plans, Policies and Studies

**The Precise Plan refines policies and sets design direction for a variety of topics in coordination with other plans and policy documents. It was prepared concurrently with the General Plan 2040 Update, and regulates development in the Plan Area with a Form-Based Zoning Code.**

## Relationship to the San Rafael General Plan 2040

The Downtown Precise Plan was updated concurrently with the General Plan and both processes shared a collaborative community engagement process.

The General Plan serves as the blueprint for the community's future growth and development, and includes actions and implementing policies. By law, the General Plan must address eight areas, known as "elements" that need to be internally consistent. The required elements are Land use, Circulation, Housing, Safety, Noise, Open Space, Conservation, and Environmental Justice. In addition to the required elements, the San Rafael General Plan 2040 has optional elements covering Neighborhoods, Community Design and Preservation, Economic Vitality, Community Services and Infrastructure, and Arts and Culture.

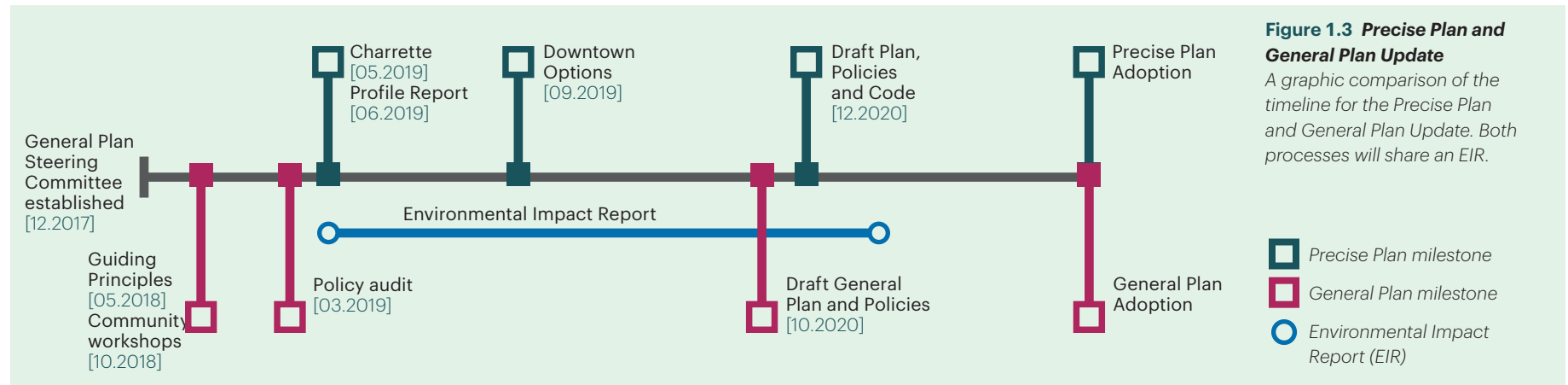
The General Plan establishes the Downtown Precise Plan Area as a land use designation on the General Plan Map. The designation encompasses the full range of uses envisioned by the Precise Plan, with Floor Area Ratio (FAR) standards that are consistent with the Precise Plan's height limits. The General Plan also includes a Downtown section

in its Neighborhoods Element, which is a high-level summary of the Precise Plan focusing on its policies and implementing programs.

## Relationship to Zoning Ordinance (Title 14)

The San Rafael zoning code had allocated zones to Downtown that reflected the 1993 "Our Vision of Downtown San Rafael" plan, and provided development and use standards including heights, density, setbacks, parking requirements, permits and procedures.

During the Precise Plan process, the existing zoning and standards were analyzed to determine if they could effectively implement the policy direction provided by the Precise Plan. It was determined that although there were 14 existing zoning districts (not counting "Public") applicable to Downtown, including six zoning districts developed expressly for Downtown and eight city-wide zoning districts that include parcels within the Precise Plan boundary, the existing zoning and standards lacked the details and comprehensiveness necessary to capture and predictably regulate the intended physical form and character described in the Precise Plan. With this in mind, a Downtown Form-Based Code (Downtown Code) was created and included as Chapter Nine in this document.



**Figure 1.3 Precise Plan and General Plan Update**

A graphic comparison of the timeline for the Precise Plan and General Plan Update. Both processes will share an EIR.

The Downtown Code consists of new zoning and standards that are organized into a coordinated set of articles. The new zones and standards apply to all parcels within the Downtown Precise Plan Area boundaries, with the exception of the Latham Street area, that will retain its MR 2.5 zoning. The intended physical form and character as described in the Precise Plan is implemented through four new form-based zones that replace the 14 zoning districts for Downtown.

In preparing the Downtown Code, a number of previous plans and documents were studied to get information about community-supported design direction for Downtown from previous efforts, in particular the 2017 “Good Design Guidelines for Downtown”.

Relevant standards applicable only to the Plan Area have been either integrated into the Downtown Form-Based Code (refer to Chapter Nine of this document), or incorporated by reference. A full list of references is included in Appendix I: References to Planning Regulations. Should there be any conflict between the zoning ordinance and the standards in Chapter Nine: Downtown Form-Based Code, Chapter Nine shall apply.

### City-Wide Zoning Map

The Precise Plan Area is shown as one zone named “Downtown zone” in the city-wide zoning map. The Latham Street area is excluded from the Downtown zone and retains its existing zoning.

### Relevant Regulatory and Policy Documents, Ongoing Plans and Studies

For the Precise Plan to be consistent with past planning efforts, a number of policy and regulatory documents were referred to, summarized in Table 1A.

Appendix I: References to Planning Regulations has additional information including a brief summary of each of these documents.

<b>Table 1A. Relevant Documents</b> [Refer to Appendix I for additional information]	
<b>Document</b>	<b>Relation to the Precise Plan</b>
<b>"Our Vision of Downtown San Rafael" Community Plan and Implementation Strategy</b> [1993]	Informs the Precise Plan.
<b>San Rafael Downtown Station Area Plan</b> [2012]	Design direction integrated into the Precise Plan policies, actions, and development standards for the Plan Area; including public realm and connectivity improvements, and design goals for the SMART station area.
<b>"Good Design" Guidelines for Downtown</b> [2017]	Design direction incorporated into the form-based development standards for the Plan Area.
<b>City of San Rafael Climate Change Action Plan</b> [2009, updated 2019]	Informs the Precise Plan, continues to apply city-wide including the Plan Area.
<b>Downtown Parking and Wayfinding Study</b> [2018]	Key recommendations incorporated into the Precise Plan actions, including the expansion of the Downtown Parking District and reduced parking requirements for new development in Downtown, in particular for ground floor commercial uses.
<b>San Rafael Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan</b> [2011, updated 2018]	Informs transportation-related policies, actions and development standards for the Plan Area.
<b>San Rafael Wildfire Prevention and Protection Action Plan</b> [2019, updated 2020]	Informs the Precise Plan, continues to apply city-wide including the Plan Area.
<b>Canalfront Conceptual Design Plan and Design Guidelines</b> [2008, 2009]	Where appropriate, proposed improvements for the Montecito area incorporated into the Precise Plan.
<b>San Rafael Transit Center Relocation Project</b> [ongoing]	The Precise Plan studied the three site options under review, and incorporated the flexibility within the design recommendations to be coordinated with this effort. See Chapter Four for more detail.
<b>Third Street Rehabilitation Project</b> [2019]	The Precise Plan supports the continued implementation of this project.
<b>Sea-Level Rise Adaptation Study</b> [ongoing]	The Precise Plan recommends the City use the study to set adaptation strategies and development guidelines specific to Downtown.

## Other City Policies

### ■ Affordable Housing and Density Bonus Program

Section 14.16.030 of the Zoning Ordinance of the San Rafael Municipal Code regulates affordable housing. The requirements apply to all new rental and ownership residential developments, with a few exceptions. At the time the Draft Precise Plan was published, new housing developments were required to set aside 10 to 20 percent of all units as affordable, depending on the size of the project. The City is actively considering reducing these requirements and providing more flexibility as to how and where they are met, including payment of an in-lieu fee. Affordable units for rental developments and resale restrictions for ownership units run with the land, and must remain for a minimum of 55 years.

The City of San Rafael allows a density bonus pursuant to State Law, as well as concessions or waivers on development standards, for provision of affordable units. The density bonus ranges from 20 percent (for five percent affordable units) to 35 percent (for 20 percent affordable units). In addition to the bonus units, projects meeting the bonus thresholds are entitled to additional incentives to assure the density bonus units can be developed. Among these additional incentives is a program providing additional height ranging from six to 24 feet, linked to the provision of specific amenities including open space, easements, public parking, and community facilities as well as affordable housing.

*The Precise Plan and Downtown Form-Based Code establish provisions for bonus heights applicable to projects meeting the affordable housing requirements. Allowed heights in the Code have been refined to reflect current construction technology.*

### ■ Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Program

San Rafael's TDR program is described in Sections 14.16.330 (transfer of density among properties) and 14.16.335 (transfer of FAR between or among properties).

The code allows for transfer of development rights among properties under special circumstances, such as the preservation of historic structures or wetlands, etc. and requires review by the Planning Commission through the use permit process. The density transfer, once approved, is permanent and runs with the donating and receiving tracts. Transfer of FAR among properties is permitted only under special circumstances and requires approval by the City Council, with recommendation by the Planning Commission through the use permit process. For approval, the following must be true:

- The development of the beneficiary parcel must be consistent with the General Plan, except that FARs or maximum densities may be exceeded; and/ or
- The proposed development will comply with all applicable zoning and design parameters and criteria as well as traffic requirements; and a special condition is found to exist that would cause significant environmental impacts if the transfer is not allowed, and/or the development provides a significant public benefit, such as securing a park, school, library, fire station, police station, etc.

*The Precise Plan recommends using the TDR program where applicable and consider refining the program to help meet the Plan goals. The TDR program will continue to apply to the City, including the Plan Area.*

# 1.3 Community Engagement and Visioning

**Robust community engagement was an integral part of the Downtown San Rafael Precise Plan at all stages of its development.**

## Community Visioning Process

Community participation has been critical to the Precise Plan process. Its importance derives from the idea that a plan's legitimacy and longevity require community input and ownership. Not only do community members have a deep understanding of a place that adds value to the design process, but they also have an intimate stake in the future of the Plan since the outcome will directly

impact them over the Plan's lifetime. The community provided feedback throughout the process through a wide range of events, including pop-up workshops, focus group meetings, a multi-day Design Charrette, and engagement with the General Plan Steering Committee at key milestones. For additional information about the community engagement and feedback received, refer to Appendix III: Community Engagement.

## Public Engagement: Key Events

### March-April 2019



*Visioning Pop-Up Workshop at 2nd Friday Art Walk; General Plan Steering Committee Presentations #1 and #2*

### May 2019



*Multi-Day Design Charrette; Focus Group Meetings with Downtown Stakeholders*

### August 2019



*Downtown Options Pop-Up at Thursday Farmer's Market; General Plan Steering Committee Presentation #3*





**Figure 1.4 Downtown walking tour** was led by City staff and the consultant team and included members of the General Plan Steering Committee and interested residents.

### Focus Groups and Pop-Up Workshops

#### Visioning Pop-Up Workshop

The consultant team hosted a pop-up visioning workshop during the Second Friday Art Walk in Downtown. During this popular community event, the team staged a booth with base maps, dot exercises, and surveys. The pop-up event also promoted the upcoming Design Charrette.

#### Focus Group Meetings

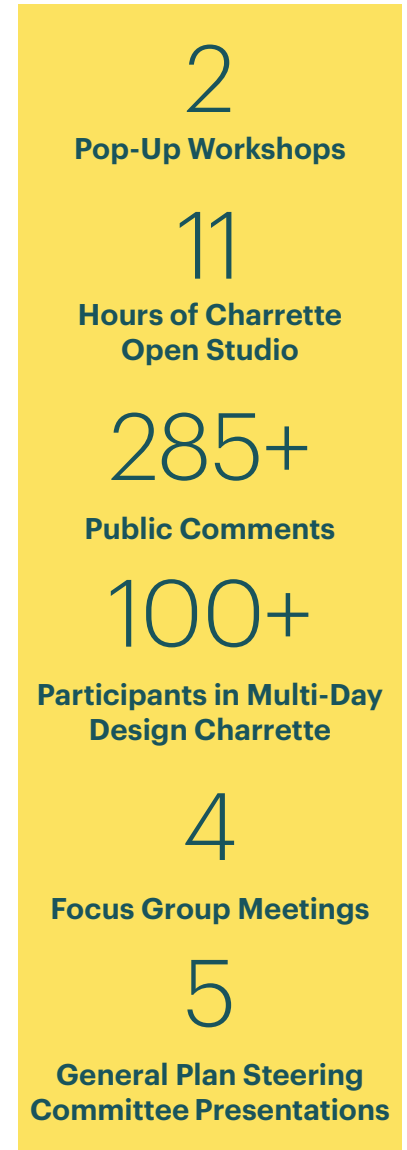
The consultant team met with Downtown stakeholders at a series of focus group meetings. The stakeholders represented a broad range of community interests, including business owners, service providers, residents, and property owners. Listening to their aspirations and priorities for Downtown helped to guide the design concepts developed during the Design Charrette.

#### Downtown Options Pop-Up Workshop

Following the Design Charrette, the consultant team hosted a follow-up event during the Thursday farmer's market in Downtown. The team shared the vision developed during the Design Charrette and solicited public feedback on dozens of design elements and priorities presented through the lens of Downtown neighborhoods.

#### Design Charrette

The Design Charrette was a multi-day public design process in May 2019 that engaged stakeholder groups, community members, and City staff to solicit feedback. Each design iteration received immediate public feedback, enabling the design team to incorporate public input in the next iterations of the design concepts.



Topics that received broad community support included re-imagining key opportunity sites, encouraging residential mixed-use development, maintaining existing and creating new civic space, and preserving and integrating important historic buildings. The main Charrette events are described below.

### **Walking Tour**

The Charrette started with a public walking tour of Downtown led by the City, during which the group talked about pedestrian and bicycle safety issues, general Downtown conditions, and opportunity sites.

### **Opening Presentation**

Following the walking tour was the Opening Presentation to a large audience at the Whistlestop building. The event began with an overview of the project, an introduction to design themes, and a table map exercise in which the participants, working in small groups, provided their ideas and priorities for Downtown.

### **Brown Bag Presentations**

The consultant team offered lunchtime "brown bag" presentations on the topics of economics, transportation, and historic resources during the Design Charrette. These were opportunities both to share focused information and to solicit feedback on topics relevant to the Precise Plan.

### **Open Studio**

Throughout the Charrette week, the public was invited to drop in during "open studio" to talk with the consultant team and City staff, check in on progress drawings pinned up on the studio walls, and record their feedback.

### **Mid-Point Pinup**

An informal pinup halfway through the Charrette gave the public an opportunity to comment on the in-progress diagrams and drawings explaining key ideas and design principles.

### **Closing Presentation**

The Design Charrette concluded with a Closing Presentation summarizing the design vision that the team had developed with community guidance. The team presented urban design, transportation, and development opportunities illustrated with graphics, and hosted a group discussion to hear feedback and answer questions.

### **Engagement with General Plan Steering Committee and City Agencies**

The Precise Plan process has been guided at critical junctures by the 23-person General Plan Steering Committee that included representatives of the City Council, Planning Commission, various Boards and Commissions, and other stakeholder groups. A Visioning Workshop held in March 2019, followed by a Prioritization Exercise in April, helped to define key issues and design priorities leading up to the Design Charrette. The third meeting was a study session in October 2019 to discuss Downtown options, prior to starting work on drafting the Precise Plan and Code. In February 2020, the Steering Committee participated in a discussion on Historic Resources, and in May 2020, received a presentation on the Draft Plan and Form-Based Code.

A number of study sessions with the City Council, the Planning Commission, and the Citizens Advisory Committee for Affordable Housing and Economic Development, provided valuable feedback at key junctures.

"Turn the first parking space on every block into a bike parking area.

**Community Member**  
**Open Studio Post-It Comment**



“ The backside of Montecito Plaza, along the creek, is very underutilized. One can imagine walks, parks, and al fresco dining along both sides of the creek.”

**Community Member**  
**Open Studio Post-It Comment**



**Figure 1.5** The multi-day Design Charrette had a large number of participants who provided feedback in a number of ways.

