



SAN RAFAEL

THE CITY WITH A MISSION

Community Development Department – Planning Division

Meeting Date: January 12, 2021

Agenda Item: 3

Case Numbers: GPA16-001 & P16-13

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

REPORT TO PLANNING COMMISSION

SUBJECT: Public Hearing on Draft Downtown San Rafael Precise Plan

The Planning Commission will conduct its first public hearing on the Draft Downtown Precise Plan on January 12. A second hearing covering the Draft Form Based Code will take place on January 26 and a third “wrap-up” hearing will take place on February 9. The purpose of each hearing is to receive public comments on the Draft Plan and to discuss the Plan’s recommendations. Continued public comment on Draft General Plan 2040 also may occur at these meetings. Case Nos.: GPA16-001 & P16-013.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City has prepared a “Precise Plan” for Downtown San Rafael concurrently with the General Plan 2040. The Plan replaces “Our Vision of Downtown San Rafael” (1993) which has served as the guiding policy document for Downtown for the last 27 years. The Precise Plan provides a design vision for Downtown, direction on land use and building heights, and new standards and guidelines for historic preservation, transportation, affordable housing, and economic development. The Plan anticipates 2,200 housing units and approximately 2,000 additional jobs in Downtown San Rafael during the next 20 years.

The Downtown Precise Plan includes a Form Based Code (FBC), which will replace the current zoning regulations for Downtown San Rafael. While traditional zoning focuses on allowable land uses and densities, the FBC focuses on the physical form of new development. The FBC emphasizes context-sensitive design, compatibility of building scale and mass, pedestrian-orientation, and integration of private development with adjacent public spaces such as streets and sidewalks.

The January 12 hearing will cover Chapters 1-8 of the Precise Plan and will include a presentation by Opticos Design, Inc. on the new Plan. The January 26 hearing will cover Chapter 9, which is the FBC. On February 9, the Commission will hold a “wrap up” hearing on the Downtown Precise Plan and General Plan 2040. Following that hearing, staff will prepare revisions that respond to public comments. A hearing on the just released [Draft Environmental Impact Report \(DEIR\)](#) for General Plan 2040 and the Downtown Precise Plan is scheduled for March 9. A subsequent hearing in April will provide further opportunity for revisions before the Plan is forwarded to the City Council for action.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Planning Commission take the following actions, following the presentation on the Downtown Precise Plan:

1. Open the public hearing on the Downtown Precise Plan
2. Receive public comments and testimony
3. Discuss Draft Chapters 1-8 of the Precise Plan
4. Continue the hearing to January 26, 2020 for further public testimony and discussion of Chapter 9.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Downtown San Rafael has been the focus of planning studies for the last three decades. In 1993, the City adopted “Our Vision of Downtown San Rafael.” The Vision included a land use plan that provided the framework for new zoning districts that remain in effect today. In 2009, Downtown was designated a Priority Development Area (PDA) by the City Council, recognizing its potential for sustainable, transit-oriented growth and making it eligible for planning grants and transportation investments.

Following the PDA designation, a number of studies and plans were completed, including the SMART Station Area Plan (2012), “Good Design Guidelines” recommendations (2017), and the Downtown Parking and Wayfinding Study (2018). There are also Downtown-focused recommendations in the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan (2018), the Housing Element (2014), the Climate Change Action Plan (2019), and the Third Street Rehabilitation and Safety Studies (2019-20). Collectively, these plans and studies point to the need for a higher-level framework that updates the 1993 Plan and synthesizes policies for Downtown into a single, cohesive document.

During the early phases of the 2040 General Plan Update, the City of San Rafael pursued and secured a \$500,000 grant through ABAG’s One Bay Area Grant (OBAG) program to update the Downtown Plan. There were “economies of scale” associated with doing this work concurrently with General Plan 2040, including a combined EIR addressing the impacts of both projects and a coordinated public outreach effort.

The City determined that a “Precise Plan” was the best plan format for communicating an updated vision for Downtown. A Precise Plan is an accepted, multi-purpose planning tool used in many California cities to express policy recommendations and development standards for smaller areas within the jurisdiction. Like General Plan 2040, the Precise Plan has a 20-year planning horizon. Since it covers a smaller geographic area than the citywide Plan, its focus is more granular. The area covered by the Precise Plan is 265 acres, extending from the 2nd/ 4th Street intersection on the west to Montecito Plaza on the east, and from Mission Avenue on the north to First Street/ Albert Park on the south. Much of this area falls within the designated PDA (e.g., a one-half mile radius from the SMART Station). However, the Precise Plan includes the West End Village, which is outside the PDA.

Following a request for proposals and interview process in Fall 2018, the City selected Opticos Design, Inc. of Berkeley to develop the Precise Plan. Opticos is nationally known for its pioneering work on Form-Based Codes as well as planning for “missing middle” (moderate density/ moderate income) housing types in American cities. Work on the Precise Plan began in January 2019. The City Council expanded the scope of the General Plan 2040 Steering Committee to include vetting of the Precise Plan. Several introductory meetings with the Steering Committee were held to identify Downtown’s strengths and weaknesses and develop a forward-looking vision. Existing conditions data was collected on Downtown land uses, design features, transportation, housing, demographics, economics, business trends, and natural features. An in-depth survey of historic properties was also launched.

On May 8-11, 2019, the City convened a design charrette to solicit input on the Plan. The charrette included focus groups, a walking tour, an opening presentation and workshop, storefront design exhibits, brown bag lectures on Downtown topics, interactive design and feedback exercises, and a closing workshop. More than 100 people participated. Later in 2019, the City convened a Downtown “pop-up” workshop at the Thursday night Farmers Market and another “pop-up” at the Friday Downtown Art Walk. Presentations were made to the Planning Commission, the Citizens Advisory Committee for Affordable Housing and Economic Development, and the General Plan 2040 Steering Committee.

The planning process included field surveys, which helped identify development opportunity sites and informed estimates of development capacity. Opportunity sites include vacant lots, surface parking lots, and underutilized sites. Through this process, a “buildout” estimate of 2,200 new housing units and 700,000 square feet of non-residential space was developed for Downtown. This includes projects that are under construction and projects that are approved but not yet built, as well as potential future projects. The buildout estimate provided the basis for the EIR analysis for Downtown and effectively represents a “cap” for Downtown development over the next 20 years.

Following the existing conditions studies, the planning team considered different options for Downtown’s future. This information was communicated in an Options Report ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) published in September 2019. The Options report identified Downtown subareas and included illustrative plans showing different building and public space configurations. It also explored different ways to complete the Downtown bicycle and pedestrian network, alternatives for addressing sea level rise and hazards, and potential capital improvements. In general, the Plan focuses more heavily on housing than prior Downtown plans, recognizing market demand, the evolving nature of retail and office uses, and the benefits of meeting the City’s housing needs on underused sites near transit rather than in established lower-density neighborhoods.

Opticos completed an Administrative Draft of the Precise Plan in April 2020. Given the size and breadth of the document, evolving economic conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the introduction of the Form Based Code, staff determined that additional vetting was needed before releasing the document as a Public Review Draft. A six-person sub-committee of the General Plan Steering Committee was created, and additional meetings were convened in July and August to revise the document. Among the key issues addressed were building heights and bonuses, historic preservation requirements, market feasibility, and parking. Further economic analysis of the Plan also was conducted, including pro-formas for three prototypical developments. The analysis found that San Rafael faced obstacles shared by cities throughout the Bay Area, including land, labor, material, and construction costs that made it difficult for projects to “pencil out.”

The Public Review Draft Precise Plan was published on December 23, 2020. Notification of the Plan’s availability and the January-February Planning Commission meetings were sent to a mailing list of approximately 380 recipients.

ANALYSIS

The Draft Downtown Precise Plan provides the following functions:

- It is a policy document guiding a 20-year vision for Downtown.
- It is a regulatory document for reviewing and permitting future development and changes to existing buildings. It replaces many regulations and provisions of the San Rafael Municipal Code Title 14 – Zoning.
- It incorporates design guidelines, which are typically a separate document and an advisory tool.
- It incorporates specific recommendations for improvements to streets and public spaces.
- It creates a predictable development review process to facilitate project streamlining.
- It helps the City meet its future housing needs by providing substantial capacity for new residential development.

The following pages highlights the contents of Downtown Precise Plan Chapter 1-8. Hyperlinks to each chapter are included. Chapter 9 (Form Based Code) will be covered in the January 26 staff report.

[Vision Summary](#): This is a short high-level summary of the Plan, explaining what the Precise Plan is and highlighting its key areas of focus.

Chapter 1: [Introduction and Community Engagement](#). This chapter explains the purpose of the Plan, its legal foundation, and its relationship to the General Plan and zoning regulations. Past plans for Downtown are described to provide the context for the document. The chapter also describes the community engagement program and highlights key milestones in the planning process.

Chapter 2: [Existing Conditions](#). This chapter provides background data on the Downtown Precise Plan area, including its location, demographics, and market conditions. It provides a historical timeline for Downtown, tracking its evolution over the last 200 years. Maps and narrative text describe the area's built form (building heights, lot sizes, frontages, community institutions, etc.). The chapter provides an overview of the circulation system, including traffic counts, commute data, and a summary of the bicycle, pedestrian, and transit networks. It includes an overview of natural hazards, including sea level rise and wildfire. The chapter culminates with six key challenges for Downtown and three key opportunities.

Chapter 3: [Design Principles and Guiding Policies](#). Chapter 3 lays out the following eight overarching principles to guide Downtown's future:

1. Strengthen Downtown's identity and sense of arrival by focusing development at key nodes and gateways.
2. Coordinate placemaking improvements to make Downtown interesting, safe, and inviting for everyone.
3. Provide a safe, well-connected transportation network for all modes, supported by a progressive parking strategy.
4. Establish a network of attractive and welcoming streets and civic spaces.
5. Enable mixed-use development in Downtown to increase housing, strengthen local businesses, and diversify the economy.
6. Reinforce Downtown's eclectic character with historic preservation and new context-sensitive development.
7. Develop growth and adaptation strategies to increase Downtown's resilience to climate change.
8. Promote housing access at all income levels and establish strategies to prevent homelessness, gentrification, and displacement.

A set of guiding policies is included under each principle; these are similar to General Plan policies. To better express the intent of the policies, a list of expected outcomes is provided for each principle listed above.

Chapter 4: [Design Vision](#). The design vision includes two major sections. The first half of the chapter provides areawide guidance for land use, building height, transitions between uses, and public realm improvements. This includes the "Regulating Plan" for Downtown, which effectively serves as the new Downtown zoning map. An illustrative diagram showing development footprints on potential opportunity sites also is included. While the diagram is hypothetical, it provides a useful tool for visualizing how Downtown might grow and change in the next 20 years. The second half of the chapter provides guidance for four subareas—Downtown Gateway, Downtown Core, West End Village, and Montecito Commercial area.

Key recommendations are summarized below:

- The framework for the Form-Based Zoning Code is provided, including four new zoning districts. These districts reflect different levels of development intensity, and a distinction between "Main Street" areas such as Fourth Street and "Neighborhood" areas such as Fifth Avenue. Building types are broadly classified as "house form" or "block form," with different standards applying to each.

- A new height map is adopted for Downtown. The map identifies maximum “base heights” ranging from 30 to 70 feet, as well as potential height bonuses for projects incorporating affordable housing or providing community benefits. The bonuses range from 10 to 20 feet and vary by area. State law provides more generous bonuses for housing development near the SMART station if 100% of the units are affordable.
- Density and Floor Area Ratio (FAR) limits will no longer apply in Downtown. Development intensity is guided by the height map, setback and parking requirements, and the design standards of the Plan itself.
- The chapter emphasizes the importance of public space (including streets) to the quality and success of Downtown. Opportunities for specific improvements are highlighted, including a transit plaza adjacent to the SMART station, improvements to Fourth Street (especially between A Street and Court Street), enhancement of Downtown alleys, a West End Village pocket park (on Fourth St), a promenade along the Canal, and an “urban wetland” that facilitates sea level rise adaptation in the area south of Second Street near Francisco Boulevard West. More generally, the Plan encourages small pocket parks and urban plazas as components of new private development.
- For each of the four Downtown subareas, the Plan provides a summary of existing conditions, a statement of design intent, a description of the area’s character and uses, a buildout estimate, a summary of public realm improvements (including streets and civic space), a summary of historic resources, and additional recommendations.
- In general, growth is concentrated in the Downtown Gateway and Downtown Core areas. New buildings in this area will typically range from four to eight stories, with lower scale development adjacent to historic resources. Lower scale development (generally three to four stories) is envisioned in the West End Village and Montecito commercial areas.
- The Plan recognizes uncertainties associated with relocation of the Bettini Transit Center. The three site options now under consideration are described, and potential outcomes related to each choice are discussed. The Plan provides the flexibility for any of these three sites to be selected but acknowledges that this decision may impact buildout capacity and future circulation needs.
- The Montecito Shopping Plaza is presumed to remain for the duration of the planning period. However, the Plan supports the idea of eventually redeveloping the shopping center as a mixed-use development. Such a development would feature ground floor commercial uses, upper floor housing, reconfigured streets and blocks, a waterfront promenade, and various design features responding to anticipated sea level rise.

Chapter 5: [Historic Resources](#). This chapter describes the history of Downtown San Rafael, identifies existing historic preservation regulations, and summarizes the findings of a 2019-20 field survey of Downtown historic resources. The field survey covered 572 properties within the Downtown Plan area boundaries—roughly 70 percent were determined to have no visible potential as historic resources. The remaining 159 properties were further evaluated, and about 100 were determined to meet eligibility criteria as historic resources. This includes structures that are already designated as historic landmarks, structures that were identified as potential historic resources in the City’s 1977 and 1986 surveys, and approximately 35 structures that had not been previously identified as potentially historic. In addition, the survey identified two areas as eligible for consideration as historic “districts” under the California Environmental Quality Act. The Precise Plan itself does not create new historic districts but recommends modified development standards in the eligible areas to protect the integrity of historic resources.

Chapter 5 includes specific recommendations for strengthening the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance, including aligning designation criteria with State and federal standards. Incentives for historic preservation are described. The Plan recommends a more formalized process for evaluating applications for alterations to historic structures. While a Historic Preservation Commission is listed as an option, the Plan recognizes that other options--such as a standing committee or on-call architectural historian—are more feasible.

Procedures for altering or demolishing potential historic resources, based on Secretary of the Interior standards, are included in the chapter. This is followed by a series of flow charts indicating the level of review required for various projects, as well as standards for development on or adjacent to eligible historic resources. In many cases, exceptions to the standards may be considered based on the recommendations of a qualified architectural historian and a decision by the Planning Commission.

Chapter 6: [Transportation and Parking](#). Chapter 6 begins by recognizing the multi-modal nature of Downtown's circulation system--- in other words, its layered network of roads, transit, bicycle routes, sidewalks, paths, and crosswalks. A "modal priority" map is presented, identifying priority routes for pedestrians, bicycles, transit users, and motorists. Design standards for each street vary depending on the travel modes they support. The Plan provides a menu of improvements for each mode. It also proposes a number of specific projects, including:

- Pedestrian and bicycle path improvements along Tamalpais Avenue, connecting the Puerto Suello Hill path to the Mahon Creek path.
- Fourth Street streetscape improvements, including enhanced crosswalks, lighting, and signage. The possibility of redesigning parts of Fourth Street as a "shared street" for vehicles, pedestrians, and bicycles (including occasional closures for special events) is discussed.
- Alley improvements to Walter Lane, Julia Street, and Commercial Street.
- Pedestrian improvements along east-west streets under the Highway 101 viaduct.
- Safety improvements along Second and Third Streets, consistent with the Third Street improvement studies.
- Bicycle improvements consistent with the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. The Precise Plan recognizes the possibility of east-west bike lanes on Fifth Avenue, but its focus is on improving bicycle safety along Fourth Street, developing bike lanes on Second Street in the West End Village and along A Street in the Downtown Core, and improving First Street as a bicycle boulevard.
- Converting B Street from one-way to two-way traffic (C and D have already been converted).
- Operational improvements to US 101 on- and off-ramps.
- Realigning the Second/Fourth/Marquard intersection in the West End to improve safety and reduce pedestrian crossing lengths.
- Converting Francisco Boulevard West (south of Second Street) from two-way to one-way (southbound).
- Considering a Downtown shuttle connecting the transit station area to the West End Village and Montecito Commercial areas.

- Adjusting traffic signals to establish transit vehicle priority along key streets.

The Downtown Plan includes illustrative cross-sections to show how certain streets may be redesigned over time to more safely and efficiently accommodate all travel modes. Cross-sections are included for Fourth Street, Tamalpais Avenue, B Street, and D Street.

The Plan also includes recommendations for parking, wayfinding, curbside management, and trip reduction. The parking recommendations (include reduced and consolidated parking standards for residential and non-residential uses) are drawn from the Downtown Parking and Wayfinding Study and include expansion of the Downtown Parking District to E Street on the west and Hetheron on the east, additional shared parking agreements, new bikeshare opportunities, inclusion of public parking in new private development, using technology to improve space utilization and efficiency, encouraging mechanical parking, and using more flexible off-street parking standards in new development.

Chapter 7: [Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement](#). One of the requirements of the OBAG Grant was that the Precise Plan include an Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement strategy. This recognizes the potential opportunities for affordable housing in the Downtown area as well as the potential for new development to cause direct and indirect displacement of low-income residents. Chapter 7 provides a profile of existing housing resources and needs, a summary of development projects in the pipeline, an overview of City housing programs, and implementation strategies.

Affordable housing production strategies include incentives (such as allowing additional building height for projects with affordable housing), elimination of residential density standards, reduced parking requirements, and streamlined development review procedures. The Plan also identifies opportunities for land write-downs (particularly on municipal parking sites), grants, multi-family acquisition and rehabilitation programs, and community land trusts.

Anti-displacement strategies are focused on tenant protection. These include relocation assistance requirements, no net loss requirements for rental units, and preservation of existing affordable housing.

Chapter 8: [Implementation](#). The Implementation chapter includes tables identifying specific projects and improvements to be made following Plan adoption. These are generally categorized as street/transportation improvements and civic space improvements. Implementation is intended to be long-term, with projects carried out over a 20-year period. Potential financing strategies and funding sources are described, including grants, fees, and a potential Enhanced Infrastructure Financing District (EIFD).

The Implementation chapter also includes an Economic Development Strategy, including 30 potential actions that can be taken following Plan adoption to strengthen Downtown's economic position. These include such items as using City-owned sites for infill projects, building on the Cultural Arts District designation, promoting San Rafael as a visitor destination, improving outdoor dining options, encouraging parcel assembly, and providing technical assistance to local businesses. This chapter further reports out on a pro-forma analysis of three hypothetical Downtown developments.

A summary of actions related to historic preservation and affordable housing is also included in Chapter 8, reiterating recommendations in Chapters 5 and 7. The Chapter also includes an evaluation of Downtown infrastructure (water, sewer, drainage), a discussion of sea level rise adaptation, and provisions for Plan monitoring and enforcement.

Chapter 9: Form-Based Code (FBC) – The FBC will be covered at the January 26 Planning Commission meeting.

Staff and Opticos are currently testing how several recently built or approved projects would fare under the proposed new regulations. The findings of this study will be provided at the meeting on January 26. Staff and Opticos are also working on a short video that explains the format and function of the draft FBC, and how it would be administered. As a reminder, the Planning Commission is encouraged to review the [videos prepared by Opticos](#) last summer providing more detail on Form Based Codes.

[Appendices](#) and [Historic Resources Summary](#): A glossary and eight appendices accompany the Precise Plan. The appendices include background materials prepared over the course of the project, including the Downtown Profile Report and Downtown Options Report, a summary of community engagement activities, the Affordable Housing and Anti-Displacement Strategy Working Paper, pro-forma results, and background information on transportation and parking. The appendices also include a Historic Resources Summary that describes the field survey methodology and includes “Fact Sheets” and findings for 159 individual properties in Downtown San Rafael.

CORRESPONDENCE

A letter from San Rafael Heritage was received on January 6, 2021 and is included as part of the agenda packet.

ATTACHMENTS

While there are no attachments to this Staff report, the Draft Downtown Precise Plan is available for review online at www.sanrafael2040.org.

SAN RAFAEL HERITAGE

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January 6, 2021

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Via Email

RE: Draft DOWNTOWN PRECISE PLAN – Initial Comments

Dear Barry,

Thank you for the opportunity to register our concerns regarding the DTPP Draft document. While our San Rafael Heritage DTPP subcommittee will continue to analyze the entire draft, we feel it is important to weigh in at the beginning of the public hearing process. First, we applaud the work that was done by the DTPP consulting team and are grateful for the inclusion of Chapter 5 with a comprehensive look at our City's historic resources.

What jumps out at us at first perusal are the "Key Issues" (Chapter 5.2, page 108). The 6th bullet specifies considering the Secretary of the Interior and State CEQA guidelines. We maintain that a historic building important to the local community may be protected as a local landmark, whether or not it qualifies for the Secretary of the Interior guidelines and the state's CEQA requirements. Additionally, we believe an 8th bullet should address establishing a clear application process for local landmark status, and include a sliding scale fee.

Meanwhile, we will continue our review and look forward to voicing our findings at future opportunities.

Yours truly,



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cc: SRH 2040 Subcommittee: C. Landecker, J. Rhoads, L. Simons, A. Likover