



January 12, 2020

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San Rafael Planning Commission  
14 Fifth Avenue  
San Rafael, CA 94901

**RE: Comments on Downtown Precise Plan**

Honorable Commissioners,  
Sustainable San Rafael has reviewed the revised Downtown Precise Plan, and we offer the attached comments for your consideration. Among the major themes that emerge:

**Greater residential densities at higher elevations**, including 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, upper Lincoln Avenue, and 4<sup>th</sup> Street at E.

**Plazas at key nodes**, including the 'Transit Plaza,' A Street, E Street, and the West End.

**A walkable downtown**, with all streets and paths providing ample space for a safe and pleasant pedestrian experience, and with traffic calming improvements especially on 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

**Enhanced connection to nature**, including street trees, bio-swales, creek and wetland restorations, and preserving sunlight along the north side of 4<sup>th</sup> Street.

**A stronger waterfront**, adapted to sea level rise.

**Enhanced historical resources**, including in the gateway district and along 4<sup>th</sup> Street and B Street.

**Code improvements supporting more downtown housing** development, especially affordable workforce housing.

Overall, we believe that the Downtown Plan provides a solid blueprint for the future of the heart of San Rafael. We look forward to a robust discussion of ways to continue evolving a vital and welcoming Downtown.

Sincerely,

William Carney  
Board President

Comments attached

Copies:

*Paul Jensen, Alicia Giudice, Barry Miller*

## **Downtown Precise Plan Comments**

(1/11/21 SSR comments on 12/20 Downtown Plan Public Review Draft)

### I. Transit Station Area

I-a. **'Transit Plaza' gateway** along West Tamalpais, centered on low-scale Depot building, is promising. Allow sale of air right TDRs to compensate Whistlestop, while preserving the Depot. Extend north to Mission and south to 2<sup>nd</sup>. Consider multi-use path (instead of bike-only) to maximize space for pedestrians.

I-b. **Use existing portion of Bettini Center** on the east side of West Tamalpais between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> (west of the train tracks) to extend 'plaza' treatments, while integrating them with potential bus stops and/or passenger drop-off zones.

I-c. **One-way portion of West Francisco** could be converted to bicycles and pedestrians only, especially if 'urban wetland' is implemented.

I-d. **'Urban wetland' concept for Mahon Creek.** Valuable precursor of potential adaptations to sea level rise, extending the Montecito waterfront into the gateway district. Integrate with the 'paseo' walkway concept (as shown along the south side of 2<sup>nd</sup> between W. Tamalpais and Irwin), the proposed Irwin Creek restoration, and the walkway at the east elevation of the Biomarin garage.

I-e. **Extend downtown parking district** east to Hetherton, relieving pressure to deaden ground floors with cars and incentivizing development.

I-f. **Show the two opportunity sites west of Irwin** at 4<sup>th</sup> Street. These could be key for connecting 4<sup>th</sup> Street retail and pedestrians into Montecito. (Fig. 4.24)

I-g. **Consider denser residential up Lincoln** north of Mission, extending 'downtown housing' within a 10-minute walking radius of the transit center.

I-h. **Consider dense 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue residential** corridor from W. Tamalpais to C Street (especially on north side), welcoming residential downtown and starting long-term sea level rise adaptation with "higher densities at higher elevations." Create residential enclave and pedestrian streetscape by discouraging through traffic on 5th east of Court Street.

### II. Downtown Core

II-a. **'Shared Street' concept for 4<sup>th</sup> Street.** Consider extending treatment another block west (to B Street), better capturing the true 'core' of downtown and connecting to the most important north-south pedestrian corridor. Or consider limiting the treatment to emphasize the 'town center plaza' at A to Court and the 'gateway plaza' at W. Tamalpais to Hetherton. Or start with these key places to pilot 'shared street' concept and discourage 4<sup>th</sup> St. through traffic.

II-b. **'Courthouse Plaza' Revision.** Revisions like some of those shown (p. 89) could transform this existing green space into a true commons at the center of downtown—especially the simple steps up from sidewalk to grass along this entire frontage. But keep it simple and avoid structures in the open space.

II-c. Note role of large well-maintained **street trees** to humanize the scale of 4<sup>th</sup>.

II-d. **Emphasize B St.** as significant pedestrian connection from 4<sup>th</sup> St. core south through historic district to Albert Park, and north to new hotel and Boyd Park. (See 'public realm framework,' p. 67.) Return to **2-way traffic on B.**

II-e. **Add Elks 'opportunity site'** for housing & estate historic district along Mission from Boyd House to Falkirk. Provide Boyd Park trail access up hill.

II-f. **Add 'pedestrian crossing safety treatments'** where identified 'pedestrian priority streets' cross 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets (B, A, Lindaro, Tamalpais & Grand, p.67).

II-g. **Solve west side Lindaro / 3<sup>rd</sup> St. crossing,** including consideration of making Lindaro one-way southbound between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. This would allow a west crosswalk where there is currently none, with a pedestrian-only cycle for all crosswalks, without changing the 3<sup>rd</sup> St. cycles and greatly increasing safety along this important route from the Biomarin campus and Whistlestop to 4<sup>th</sup> St.

II-h. **Enhance the Albert Park 'key pedestrian corridor'** by redesigning the south and east edges of the park to continue the Mahon Creek multi-use path and stream restoration to B St. (p. 67).

II-i. **Emphasize '4<sup>th</sup> Street Heights' residential node** extending from E St. east to D and west to Shaver. This 2-block zone could bracket both the Downtown Core and West End, modulating the mile-long linearity of 4<sup>th</sup> Street. The new residential development shown here (pages 87 and 93) should be centered on the intersection of E St. and 4<sup>th</sup> St. While continuing ground floor retail, the predominant character should be residential—vitalizing the street and well above the encroaching Bay. Consider extending the 60/80 height zone west to E.

### III. West End Village

III-a See '4<sup>th</sup> Street Heights' comments above (II-i.) Anchor this underutilized opportunity zone with a small open space at s.w. corner of 4<sup>th</sup> & E intersection.

III-b. Return to multi-use path along tight south side of 2<sup>nd</sup> (not bike-only path).

III-c. Call for enhanced boulevard treatment out 'Miracle Mile.'

### IV. Montecito Area

IV-a. **Create a real waterfront** by flipping the shopping center to face a generous, full-length plaza along the Canal. Step up plaza to elevate base of

building above projected sea level rise; step down plaza to water's edge to gauge its rise, tidally and as sea level rises. Create podium structure over existing parking area for service and several levels of parking, faced with small retail along 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Streets, and perhaps capped with residential. Reference Canal design plan for additional waterfront treatments and connections. Integrate with development of comprehensive citywide Sea Level Rise Adaptation Plan.

IV-b. **Suggest water taxi service** from plaza, connecting to Terrapin Crossroads, Canal Street, Pickleweed, Spinnaker, Shoreline Center and beyond.

IV-c. **Plan for houseboat developments** along reclaimed south side of Canal.

IV-d. **Increase pedestrian & bike amenities** along Grand Ave. and other 'pedestrian priority' and 'pedestrian corridor' streets (p.67) to help overcome dominance of cars and connect district to East Francisco and Dominican. But assure that bike-only lanes do not decrease space for pedestrians and trees.

IV-e. **Treat 4<sup>th</sup> St. as extension of downtown**, with similar pedestrian vitality, street improvements, and development standards (albeit lower scale to fit the Montecito neighborhood). Emphasize 4<sup>th</sup> & Grand intersection as a key node. Enhance pedestrian access and visual axis into SR High School.

## V. Urban Form & Codes (Chapters 4, 6 and 9)

V-a. **Consider increasing height/density bonuses** for key sites, districts & uses (e.g., 4<sup>th</sup> St. Heights; 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. residential enclave; Lincoln to Paloma transit residential.)

V-b. **Consider TDRs** to transfer residential densities from Bay shoreline to higher elevations.

V-c. **Require solar studies**, upper-floor setbacks & height adjustments on south side of 4<sup>th</sup> St. to preserve as much sun as possible along the north sidewalk.

V-d. **Eliminate FAR limits** when applying 'form-based' residential zoning.

V-e. **Complete Streets** must include adequate space for pedestrians and street trees and other landscaping. Bike-only "facilities" (pages 144 – 149) must not displace existing or proposed multi-use paths (e.g. those promised by SMART) or unduly constrain safe and pleasant walking. Walkability is key to the success of downtown retail and housing.