

MONT MARIN/SAN RAFAEL PARK NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION
MMSRP_ADMIN@MONTMARIN.ORG
PO BOX 6662, SAN RAFAEL, CA 94903

May 17, 2022

Tricia Stevens
Contract Planner
City of San Rafael
Tricia.stevens@cityofsanrafael.org

Comments on Design Review Committee item for Northgate Town Square Project

Dear Tricia,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to review and comment on the application materials. This letter supplements comments made in our April 13, 2021 letter.

The Mont Marin/San Rafael Park Neighborhood Association Board of Directors reviewed the materials. Rachel Kertz, a member of the Board recused herself from our discussions and from providing input on this letter.

This letter reflects a summary of comments from various members of the Board. Overall, there is support for investment and revitalization of the Northgate Mall. However, we still find the application package and staff analysis did not contain enough information for us to understand the objectives and analysis.

The City web pages states: "staff continues to work with the project applicant on how the design and layout of the project can be optimized to best contribute to the creation of a vibrant and successful long-term project that blends with and enhances the fabric of the surrounding neighborhood and the City as a whole." This is important. How is that being done? Why isn't there any analysis or recommendation by staff?

Is there an opportunities and constraints analysis of the site? For example, the community is surrounded by beautiful hillsides, are there view corridor opportunities? Are those enhanced at a second story level? What else can be leveraged? What does the community feel the needs are? What does the developer's marketing studies show? Are those in alignment? How can the City craft a win-win? Are planning staff and key stakeholders involved in charrettes with the applicant? How is creativity being encouraged?

What is the site's vision? What are the architect and landscape architect public oriented objectives? How are those proposed to be addressed? Is there a planning document that provides that overview?

At the last DRB meeting, the City introduced consultant Chris Beynon. Where is his analysis?

We look forward to learning more through the development process and in responses to these questions.

HOUSING

With one parking spot per unit, how will overflow parking be addressed. How many total cars are the residents expected to own collectively?

RETAIL

The mall is mostly vacant today. What tools does the City have to reduce tenant vacancies during this period? With over 1200 condos proposed, we would expect absorption to be pretty slow, therefore there will be a transition of demos and construction over many years. And the entitlement process is city taking a few years. There is a strong desire from our Board not to have vacancies lingering during this period. What can the City do about that?

The “Farmer’s Market” looks very small. Is this a relocation from the Civic Center?

How much seating will there be in front of the stage? What’s the capacity? How does this compare to the outdoor music seating currently at the Oak Tree Plaza and Marinwood Community Center?

Are the restaurants indoor and outdoor seating oriented towards the plaza? Will retailers be displaying products in front of their stores – outdoor sales? These liven the space.

On L-11, there is a public lawn that can’t see the stage. Should the parking and Town Square be flipped? Should the stage be at the northeast corner instead of the middle to minimize performers looking into the sun? Has shading from the adjacent buildings been considered, particular in the non-summer seasons when the sun is low?

On L-12, the retail store frontage looks very cramped.

On L-19, Section S shows a 5’ walk zone with vehicle overhangs reducing it further. This is too narrow.

On L-17, need cross sections for all retail frontages to see the active space and walk zones. Need to review functionality of each.

CIRCULATION

On L-3, why no bike parking at Rite Aid?

What’s the basis for Class III vs. Class I bike parking totals?

On L-22, currently the right shoulder of Northgate Drive allows parking – it is not a parking restricted bike lane. The proposal should be clear that parking will not be permitted.

Sincerely,

Craig Tackabery
Board member

Copy: April 13, 2021 comment letter

MONT MARIN/SAN RAFAEL PARK NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION
MMSRP_ADMIN@MONTMARIN.ORG
PO BOX 6662, SAN RAFAEL, CA 94903

April 13, 2021

Steve Stafford
Senior Planner
City of San Rafael
Steve.stafford@cityofsanrafael.org

Comments on Formal Application for Northgate Town Square Redevelopment

Dear Steve,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to review and comment on the application materials.

The Mont Marin/San Rafael Park Neighborhood Association Board of Directors reviewed the materials. Rachel Kertz, a member of the Board recused herself from our discussions and from providing input on this letter.

This letter reflects a summary of comments from various members of the Board. Overall, there is support for investment and revitalization of the Northgate Mall. However, we found the application package and staff analysis did not contain enough information for us to provide specific comments. We look forward to learning more through the development process and in responses to these questions.

HOUSING

The Description indicates 5% affordable housing plus an unspecified component, that could include an in-lieu fee. There is ample opportunity to provide affordable housing onsite, so the use of an in-lieu fee does not seem appropriate. Also, affordable housing should be front loaded, its anticipated the project will be built in phases, and support that the early buildings contain above the affordable percentage.

A total height of 60' would be helpful to understand with some scale. The materials show the current highest building is Macy's at 54'. Will they be erecting story poles for the new buildings?

The description of 1356 units is very vague without size details. The reaction was that sounded like too many units. We would want to insure that there is adequate parking provided and traffic will not exacerbate nearby intersections.

It would be helpful to understand the monthly salaries of the employees projected to work at the mall versus the projected rents if the goal is to provide workforce housing – which we support. Its expected that the bulk of the units would need to be small, like 350 to 600 square feet, to be able to be rented by

employees at the typical target rate of 30% of their monthly salary. To understand traffic impacts, this jobs/housing balance needs to be quantified. Workforce housing is a different issue from the affordable housing set aside, which can be market sized units with rents capped.

The application indicates a tentative map, but one was not included. If condos are proposed, it seems difficult to support since they would likely be priced beyond the reach of employees.

The application supports bicycle use. To be effective, each unit will need secure lockable bike storage at the ground level. Bike racks are not adequate.

How will the City insure the residential units are well-maintained after construction so that the “town center” continues to be an attractive place to visit?

RETAIL

The application proposed reduction from 775,667 square feet to 246,667. This is a substantial change. It would be helpful to get perspective, what is the square footage of nearby Northgate 1 and 3? The malls in Corte Madera?

There is concern that there is not a need for another grocery store in the neighborhood. Northgate 3 used to have a store that closed. The County is under contract for a permanent market nearby. [Farmers Market Agreement OK'd by Supervisors \(marincounty.org\)](#). There is a concern that any additional market here will further disrupt other retail centers which will lead to their decline, potentially closing Scotty's and Marinwood Market. Provide a market analysis.

It looks like the proposal is for chain retailers, which are more of a regional attraction than a local attraction. That will attract more traffic and is not consistent with the objectives of the General Plan. Other communities have addressed this issue [Formula Business Restrictions – Institute for Local Self-Reliance \(ilsr.org\)](#). The Council should adopt a cap on formula businesses, and encouraging more unique retailers.

For examples of the type of retailers desired in our town center we can look nearby. Downtown has T&B Sports, which has informed sales people and is engaged and connected to the community and local sports teams. Northgate 1 has Big 5, a formula retailer that is the complete opposite – no enthusiasm for the products or local engagement. Another example, Northgate 1 has Silverman's Ice Cream – an institution in Terra Linda that regularly has new creative flavors, and is connected to the local community. Downtown has Cold Stone Ice Cream, a formula retailer which focuses on upselling your order with add-ins and has no community connection.

Great examples of venues exist in our nearby communities like Hopmonks outdoor concert venue in Novato, Brewsters open air seating in Petaluma, Sweetwater concert hall in Mill Valley, Fish in Sausalito with its ever-changing menu of fresh fish, Marin Comedy Show at the Barrel Room inside Trek Winery in Novato, etc. At a recent presentation by the developer, Dave and Buster's was mentioned as a tenant.

That type of use seems more appropriate at a Pier 39 type development, the “town center” should focus on entrepreneurial community serving businesses like those mentioned.

The existing plaza area hosts Concerts by the Oaks. Generally, the quality of the performers is high and we have observed the crowds have steadily grown over the years. However, the site architecture does not connect well to the adjacent businesses, and the formula retailers don’t engage with the event. They completely ignore it, instead of being entrepreneurial and engaging. We need a different type of retailer in our town center, not formula chains.

A small grocery store onsite that provides essentials for residents seems fine, like Andy’s Local Market at the Tam Ridge apartments in Corte Madera.

The application proposes a tentative map and shows lots. There is a lack of support to sell different buildings to different owners. The site is so integrated, it needs to work as a collective whole. If the subdividing was proposed for financing, another mechanism should be pursued.

The site proposes bicycle use. Those uses that provide outdoor dining need bike parking adjacent and highly visible from the tables. Marin’s bicyclists will not park their expensive bikes at bike racks that are out of the way. For the theaters or retail stores bicycle parking will need to be in secure lockers or a secure facility for patron use; there are systems in use at BART for example.

Pad 1 and Pad 4 show drive thru restaurants. This supports freeway travelers, not the north San Rafael community. There is a lack of support for this.

The Promenade was a good idea but not well implemented. It is not integrated into current land uses, and that concept continues with the proposed plan. All the buildings ignore it, instead of embracing it. It is not used much now and that will continue. Why would someone want to walk between a busy street and a parking lot? It should be the pedestrian boulevard through the town center.

The cinema is way bigger than needed to serve the north San Rafael community. It would be much better to have a variety of entertainment venues, including performing arts and music.

The outdoor seating near restaurants looks way too small. It would be helpful to show how many seats are in each area. They should be a focal point.

The plaza looks too small to be a cultural center as shown on Page 13 of the application for 2025. Why not add the entire parking area between Shops 2A and 3 to the plaza and provide for some expansive outdoor uses that will attract the surrounding community? Even worse, Page 21 for 2040 shows the plaza completely eliminated. Provide some detailed event and activity planning to confirm this is adequately sized.

Why not include a play area for children, of a scale like nearby Hartzel Park for residents and guests to use within viewing distance of outdoor seating?

The buildings are very tall. A shading study during different seasons is needed to show whether the outdoor seating and plaza will be blocked from the sun.

CIRCULATION

The application shows bicycle routes along the perimeter. None of those routes currently have bike lanes. Please add more detail. Bike lanes are especially needed along Northgate Drive near Las Gallinas where today onstreet parking fills the shoulder and bicycles must share the travel lane with cars. With limited offstreet parking proposed for the residential uses, proposed onstreet parking areas should be highlighted. The existing promenade while well intended, was not designed by someone who understands bicycle travel. It is not currently used much by bicyclists who continue to travel in the street along Las Gallinas, provide adequate onstreet bicycle facilities.

The circulation plan should be expanded to show the connections required in General Plan policy NH-139.

In addition to the traffic analysis required in the EIR, an analysis of intersection delay is needed for the merits review of the project. Scenarios that look at different residential unit totals would be helpful. Unit size and auto commute to offsite workplaces versus onsite work assumptions should be clear.

The pedestrian connection along Merrydale Avenue from the site to the SMART station pathway on the west side of 101 is not inviting and could use improvement. At night it is particularly dark.

SOLAR

There is support inclusion of solar panels on rooftops and over parking areas.

DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT

The application proposes a Development Agreement. This seems a reasonable request to freeze the development terms for an extended period for this long-term development. This concession, and relinquishment of the opportunity to address issues by future City Councils is to be mitigated with community benefits over and above those required during the normal development process. Additional details are requested to provide comments on the proposal.

2020 GENERAL PLAN

The application does not contain reference to a general plan amendment, so it's assumed these policies will be implemented. There is an understanding that a zone change is an ordinance and is not subject to the Permit Streamlining Act, and the action will need to be consistent with the General Plan in place at the time the City Council acts on the ordinance. Therefore, the review process will need to look at both the 2020 and 2040 General Plan's since we don't know which one will be in effect. Items in bold are not well addressed in the current application. A similar analysis is needed for the draft 2040 General Plan.

From the 2020 General Plan:

Vision of North San Rafael Commercial Center One of the key concepts in Vision North San Rafael is the development of a “**town center**” in the heart of the Northgate commercial area. As described in the Vision: A “town center” is a focal point where the values and history of the community are expressed and supported, where community identity is strengthened and neighborhood cohesion is fostered. It is a place where **residents and workers can gather—formally and informally—to share community life**. The Town Center will have public art, a wide variety of unique shops, many places to eat, and a number of entertainment options. Our town center will be a major destination point on the promenade, a place where everyone feels welcome, something is always happening, and strolling is a pleasure. It will also include one of North San Rafael’s principal gathering places—in the form of a town square! Over time, the Town Center would change, expand and evolve to become the **heart of the North San Rafael community**. The priority actions for the Town Center are to create a sense of enclosure, pedestrian-scale and easy accessibility and to provide high quality retail stores for local residents as well as the broader community.

NH-131. North San Rafael Town Center. Create an attractive, thriving heart for the North San Rafael community: a centerpiece of commerce and activity with a diversity and synergy of activities for all ages.

NH-132. Town Center Activities. Create a Town Center with high quality retail stores for local residents as well as the broader community. Broaden the appeal of the Town Center area by improving pedestrian traffic, increasing the number of local shoppers, and attracting a mix of high-quality stores, entertainment, and services. a. Encourage a distinctive commercial niche for the Town Center consistent with the area’s characteristics. b. Encourage a variety of stores and services to **foster local patronage**. Examples include a library; restaurants; a produce market; and music, book, family clothing, housewares, and variety stores. c. Encourage upgrading of anchor stores and specialty stores. d. Support an additional high quality retail anchor store if necessary, for economic vitality, consistent with traffic circulation. e. **Support nightlife activities**, such as a late-night restaurant, diner or coffee shops that harmonize with existing theaters and cultural activities.

NH-134. Outdoor Gathering Places. Encourage **outdoor public places** that support activities and facilities that will encourage people to gather (such as outdoor cafes with music, entertainment for children as families dine and shop, and periodic cultural and arts events), promote **a public plaza, a small music venue**, and/or a children’s feature, and provide outdoor cafes, **sidewalk restaurants**, or other uses that provide outdoor seating.

NH-139. Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety and Accessibility. Improve access and bicycle/pedestrian connections between Northgate One, the Mall at Northgate and Northgate Three. NH-139a. Promenade and Other Improvements. Through the development review process, encourage improvements consistent with this policy. Considerations include: 1. Support routing of the North San Rafael Promenade in the Town Center area to **include safer and more convenient pedestrian and bike crossings from the Civic Center to Northgate Three, Northgate Mall, Northgate One**, and along Freitas Parkway. 2. Support routing of Marin County **north-south bicycle route along Northgate Drive**, and increased availability of bicycle racks at the Town Center.

NH-140. Pedestrian Scale. Create a sense of enclosure, pedestrian-scale and easy accessibility by improving the pedestrian “feel” of the Town Center area. Examples include welcoming, pedestrian friendly entrances to the shopping areas; pleasant, landscaped walkways between the shopping areas as part of the North San Rafael Promenade; and a focal point at a **public plaza**.

Sincerely,

Craig Tackabery
Board member

Re: Northgate Town Square Project

[REDACTED]
Mon 5/16/2022 8:12 AM

To: Tricia Stevens <Tricia.Stevens@cityofsanrafael.org>

Thanks you. I am not against improving that Northgate mall. I am against having around 3,000 more people living down the hill from me causing congestion and creating a city with tall buildings. That is the antithesis of why I moved here in the first place.

Karen

----- Original Message -----

From: Tricia Stevens <Tricia.Stevens@cityofsanrafael.org>

To: [REDACTED] >

Cc: [REDACTED] >

Subject: Re: Northgate Town Square Project

Date: Mon, 16 May 2022 14:57:28 +0000

Hello Karen,

Thank you for your comments. I will make sure the DRB receives your comments prior to the meeting.

Tricia Stevens, AICP

City of San Rafael Contract Planner

Email: Tricia.stevens@cityofsanrafael.org

Phone: (916) 698-4592

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Saturday, May 14, 2022 7:58 PM
To: Tricia Stevens <Tricia.Stevens@cityofsanrafael.org>
Cc: [REDACTED] >
Subject: Northgate Town Square Project

Dear Tricia,

My name is Karen [REDACTED]. My husband, Dr. James [REDACTED] and I are long term Terra Linda residents. One of the reasons we like living here is because it is not crowded and there are no real high rise buildings.

I just read through the plans for the Northgate Town Square Project. Some of it, I really like. That old mall needs to be revitalized and I certainly think that creating some new housing in Marin is a good idea, however, I am absolutely opposed to building high rise apartments. 4 story townhouse are fine, however, one reason that we like living in Marin is because there are not very many high rise buildings and no 7 story buildings in Terra Linda. 1440+ more units of people living down the street from us is very upsetting to me. The congestion alone makes us want to move. There is no way this can be achieved without also widening all the roads to accommodate all the extra traffic. This project is going to create problems for those of us who have lived here for years. I would not be opposed to

the project if there were around 600 more people living there. 1400 units could mean as many as 2800 to 3000 more people in that little square and that is way too many. I LIVE IN MARIN, NOT SAN FRANCISCO BECAUSE I DO NOT WANT TO LIVE IN OR AROUND A TALL APARTMENT COMPLEX. I was born in Manhattan, NYC. It was a great place to be from but not where I want to be now.

I will do everything that I can to lobby against having so many people living in such a small space, not only for selfish reasons but also as an environmentalist.. Again, I must state that I am not against revitalizing that area, however, to me, this seems as if some greedy developer is thinking of all the profit that can be made without considering all of us who have lived here for years.

There must be some sort of alternative plan that can provide for more housing. Certainly as long term residents we should have a say about what happens in our neighborhood. Also, as an environmentalist, I think that this will make a terrible impact on the land, animals who share our neighborhood, water usage, etc. This is not a good idea.

My best,
Karen

FW: Northgate (please send to PC)

Leslie Mendez <Leslie.Mendez@cityofsanrafael.org>

Tue 5/17/2022 10:45 AM

To: Tricia Stevens <Tricia.Stevens@cityofsanrafael.org>; Danielle Jones <Danielle.Jones@cityofsanrafael.org>

Cc: Jeff Ballantine <Jeff.Ballantine@cityofsanrafael.org>

From: Noël [REDACTED]

Sent: Tuesday, May 17, 2022 10:22 AM

To: Rachel Kertz rachel.kertz@cityofsanrafael.org

Subject: Northgate

Hi Rachel!

I thought I would reach out to you, and express my serious hesitation with the Northgate Mall expansion. I am very concerned that this proposed expansion is not taking on the myriad of issues and impacts to our local schools, roads, resources, and way of life.

This is not a straight-forward "make the mall viable" project. Rolled into it is the very large expansion of housing. I am definitely in favor of work force housing, but why make a behemoth of mixed use? Our neighborhood is not set up to accommodate such an incredible expansion, and how exactly will our schools support a possible large influx of new students? Not to mention our resources we do not have enough water as it is? The Freitas exchange is in need of upgrade (at the very least) right now to accommodate traffic. What about the incredible amount of traffic proposed?

I feel this is an opportunity for smart growth and well thought out solutions, and pushing a gigantic project like this through is not my idea of a sustainable Marin. Terra Linda deserves better.

I hope you and your family are doing well- thank you so much for listening.

Best Always-

Noël [REDACTED]