



# ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

Agenda Item: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mtg. Date: 4/28/09

TO: Planning Commission

DATE: April 23, 2009

SUBMITTED BY:   
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SUBJECT: Downtown Area Plan

## RECOMMENDATION

That the Planning Commission recommend City Council adoption of the Downtown Area Plan by making the following motion:

Approve Planning Commission Resolution 2009 (3) Recommending City Council Approval of the Downtown Area Plan and Associated General Plan Amendments and Certification of the Mitigated Negative Declaration.

## DOWNTOWN PLAN

### *Intent of Document*

The intent of the Preliminary Draft Downtown Plan is to give the City Council, Planning Commission, members of the public and City staff an indication of the major initiatives which will take place in the Downtown over the course of the next 10 – 15 years. The Downtown Plan will be used to identify and prioritize future city efforts as these individual efforts are discussed.

The Downtown Plan consolidates many city efforts which have been previously discussed as separate items: downtown parking facilities and management; use of city properties such as the Workers Resource Center on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the former Kinko's site at 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue; Central Park improvements and design.

The Downtown Plan also incorporates the following reports:

- Economic Research Associates' (ERA's) Downtown Economic Analysis.
- Preliminary Analysis of Lease Options of City's Kinko's site (ERA).
- Downtown Plaza Analysis (ERA)
- San Mateo Downtown Parking Efforts.
- Central Park Charette.

Links to these documents, as well as all previous workshops and study sessions can be viewed on the City's web page here: <http://www.cityofsanmateo.org/index.asp?nid=1113>

The Downtown Plan is an area plan, rather than a specific plan. This approach was used in the City's Rail Corridor Transit-Oriented Development Plan (Rail Corridor Plan). This allows some flexibility on the part of the City regarding the content and format of the plan. However, a General Plan policy referring to the downtown plan will be used to indicate that conformance with the plan will be used as a basis for evaluation of all future downtown projects and initiatives.

The Downtown Plan is intended to provide a framework for future decision making. Rather than be prescriptive in terms of implementation, the Plan instead sets forth criteria for making future decisions. For example, while the corner of 2nd Avenue and San Mateo Drive has been studied to examine the factors needed to establish a downtown plan, the Plan indicates that other areas could be considered. However, the Plan goes on to state that "Any downtown public plaza should complement adjacent uses, provide a pleasant and useable space, enhance the downtown's pedestrian environment and add value to downtown as a whole."

This approach was used successfully in the 1993 Downtown Plan. For example, the Plan at that time stated that the old Main Street Garage should be demolished upon provision of replacement parking and determination of a suitable reuse. After adoption of the Plan, the City and Redevelopment Agency initiated a process to further study the area, resulting in the Century Downtown Cinema and new Main Street Garage structure.

### ***Document Format***

The Downtown Plan is not organized by specific topics, such as Land Use, Transportation, etc, as previous versions. Instead, general downtown goals are stated in Chapter 1, and specific policies implementing each general goal are listed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2 includes downtown priorities for further action and implementation. These priorities are based on the plan's goals and policies and demonstrate specific ways these goals and policies can be implemented. Nevertheless, it is not intended that they are all inclusive. For example, the priority for a downtown plaza mentions the vicinity of 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and Ellsworth Avenue, as analyzed by Economic Research Associates' (ERA's) report. However, this would not preclude an alternative location should a preferable location be determined.

The plan's listed priorities, as outlined in Chapter 2 of the document:

1. Establishment of a Civic Plaza.
2. Provide for Nontraditional Housing Opportunities within the Retail Core.
3. Development of the former Kinko's Site.
4. Replacement or Reconstruction of Central Park Tennis Court Garage.
5. Fourth Avenue Pedestrian Improvements.
6. Implementation of a New Financing Mechanism for Downtown Parking.
7. Support of the Downtown San Mateo Association in the Creation of a Property Based Improvement District for downtown improvements and maintenance.
8. Establish a Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Zone within close proximity of the Downtown Transit Center

## ***Revisions to Draft Document***

The Draft Downtown Plan was reviewed in a joint Planning Commission/City Council Study session on November 3, 2008 (Administrative Report attached). This study session followed an October 8, 2008 meeting with the Downtown San Mateo Association Board of Directors regarding the Draft Plan. The City Council also held a study session on February 2, 2009 to discuss downtown priorities; at that meeting, several comments were made regarding the Downtown Plan.

In response to comments made at these meetings, the following changes have been made to the January 2008 draft document:

***High Speed Rail*** – Consistent with the City Council’s comments at recent study sessions, the policy regarding rail alignment in the downtown has been revised (see policy VI.3 on Downtown Plan page 57). However, it does maintain the direction that any changes to the rail alignment are below grade. This policy has been amended to read as follows:

**VI.3 Railway Improvements.** *Depress the rail line through the downtown with street crossings remaining at grade as Caltrain service is increased and high speed rail through the corridor is implemented.*

*Any rail improvement should avoid physically dividing the community in “east” vs. “west” segments. All significant environmental impacts should be mitigated to minimize impacts on the adjacent community.*

*Consider alternative design solutions to minimize the additional right of way required to construct proposed improvements and reduce impacts on adjacent properties.*

The San Mateo County Transportation Authority, the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board and the California High Speed Rail Authority are examining improvements along the rail corridor in the City of San Mateo, as well as the rest of the San Francisco peninsula. Recent information from the California High Speed Rail Authority indicates the need to accommodate a 4 track alignment: 2 tracks for high speed rail, 2 tracks for Caltrain. All existing grade crossings would be converted to grade separated crossings along the entire length of the peninsula corridor, between San Francisco and San Jose.

The existing rail corridor is at its narrowest in the downtown primarily due to the existence of Railroad Avenue on the east side of the tracks. As noted above, depressing the rail would allow for grade separated crossings while at the same time minimizing noise, visual and other impacts on the surrounding community.

As the San Mateo County Transportation Authority, the Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Board and the California High Speed Rail Authority develop improvement plans, the criteria noted above should be used for evaluation of any proposed plans and alternatives

***Transit Oriented Development (TOD) Zone*** – The Downtown Plan does not designate a specific TOD zone. However, there are a number of goals and policies in this document that are consistent with TOD concepts (see Priority 8 on page 20 and Policy VIII.4 on page 62 of the Downtown Plan).

As noted in this document, plans for High Speed Rail (HSR) service along the Peninsula are under development. As a result, the final configuration of the rail in the downtown area and the surrounding environment has yet to be determined. As the HSR plans are finalized, the City should examine designation of TOD zones within 0.5 mile of the Downtown Transit Center. These TOD zones may extend beyond the boundaries of the Downtown Plan study area.

Existing high density residential, executive office, and commercial zoned properties within 0.5 mile of the Downtown Transit Center should be examined for potential TOD designation. However, existing low density and single family designations should remain in place, and those properties should not be considered for TOD designation. Additionally, properties within the Downtown Historic District should not be considered for TOD designation due to City policies that call for the retention of historically significant buildings.

Potential areas for TOD designation will be evaluated for consistency with the *City of San Mateo Rail Corridor Transit Oriented Development Plan* goals, which have been established to promote TOD in the City of San Mateo. These goals include:

1. Encourage well-planned, compact development with a range of land uses, including housing, commercial, recreation and open space uses, in proximity to train stations. Compact development shall minimize the need for automobile use and encourage walking and the use of transit;
2. Improve pedestrian, bicycle, shuttle, and vehicular access by creating direct connections to the train stations and other transportation facilities and local destinations;
3. Identify needed transportation and public improvements including train station enhancements;
4. Create opportunities for land use change that are compatible with and add value to surrounding neighborhoods;
5. Enhance economic development opportunities consistent with the City's Economic Development Strategy;
6. Improve local traffic conditions in study area;
7. Protect and improve neighborhood quality of life;
8. Create opportunities for land use change that are balanced with the circulation system.

***Reuse of the City owned site at 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenues (former Kinko's site)*** - The City owned property bounded by 4th, 5th, Railroad Avenues and Claremont Street represents an unique opportunity to provide a catalyst for downtown development on the east side of the railroad tracks.

A previous report prepared by Economics Research Associates indicated that development of condominiums on the site was the most economically viable use. The development would likely have underground parking with four to five levels of condominium units on top. However, there have been significant changes to the economy since the report's preparation in March 2007. As a result, the Downtown Plan (see Priority 3 on page 17 and Policy VII.1 on pg 58) now indicates that prior to initiating any efforts at redeveloping this site, the City should commission further analysis to determine the most appropriate, and economically viable, use for the property.

***Establishment of a Public Plaza*** – This language (see Priority 1, page 15) has been revised to indicate that due to the costs associated with creation of a public plaza, use of a public/private partnership agreement would be the most likely funding mechanism. This would allow for establishment of uses which would generate a sufficient economic return assist with funding. The Economic Research Associates study to examine the feasibility of a public plaza assumed it to be in conjunction with a mixed use development.

Language has also been added to indicate that any downtown public plaza should complement adjacent uses, provide a pleasant and useable space, enhance the downtown's pedestrian environment and add value to downtown as a whole.

A number of other minor revisions and language changes have been made to the document, as well as the addition and revision of photos, maps and other graphics.

### ***Other Downtown Plan Issues***

Two other issues related to the Downtown are as follows:

***Eliminate Required Retail East of the Railroad Tracks*** - The requirement that retail be provided on the ground floor is intended to maintain downtown's commercial vitality and continuity within the retail core. This requirement insures that any new development or reuse of a structure provides for ground floor retail uses. Uses within this area should enhance the pedestrian scale of the downtown core and allow for a compact walking environment in which all shopping opportunities are easily accessible.

Given the relative large size of the downtown, the requirement for retail on the ground floor is most appropriately concentrated in the retail core, the area west of the railroad track. As a result, the Required Retail Frontage Requirement along 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues east of the railroad tracks has been removed (see Required Retail Frontage Zone map following page 63 of the Downtown Plan).

Additionally, the tenant spaces of properties located on 3rd & 4th Avenues, east of the tracks, are relatively small. Eliminating the requirement for ground floor retail provides an opportunity to combine tenant spaces for uses typically occupying larger footprints (such as offices, museums, home furnishing centers) or for redevelopment of the properties with mixed uses.

This will allow for concentration of downtown retail to the west side of the railroad tracks. Retail will continue to be permitted on the east side of the railroad tracks, however, it will not be required.

***Downzoning of residential properties in the proximity of the downtown area*** - During the recent Land Use and Housing Study effort, a number of areas were suggested to be considered for downzoning as part of the Downtown Plan or General Plan revision effort. A summary of the areas to be examined as part of the Downtown Plan is attached.

Staff is recommending that these downzonings not be pursued for four principal reasons:

- The areas include a number of multi-family dwellings that would become legal nonconforming as a result of any downzoning.
- Several of these areas were previously downzoned as part of the previous 1993 Downtown Plan.
- To downzone these areas would result in low density residential immediately adjacent to high density residential, with no buffer in between.
- Some of these areas are located in close proximity to the downtown transit station, areas that would be conducive to TOD type development. The community has previously and consistently encouraged TOD development near transit stations.

However, at the request of both the Planning Commission and City Council, study sessions will be held to consider these areas as part of the City wide General Plan update which is currently underway. Should any land use designations be changed and downzonings occur as part of the General Plan effort, the Downtown Plan will be amended accordingly.

### **California Environmental Quality Act**

A Mitigated Negative Declaration was prepared. The 20-day public review and comment period was March 9 – 30, 2009. Public comment letters and City responses are attached. The Negative Declaration was revised after the conclusion of the public comment period, due in part to comments made by members of the Planning Commission during the public review period. Discussions with the City Attorney's office have indicated that re-circulation of the Negative Declaration is not required.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Following a recommendation from the Planning Commission, this item will be heard by the City Council in public hearing.

### **EXHIBIT:**

Planning Commission Resolution 2009 (3) Recommending City Council Approval of the Downtown Area Plan.

## ATTACHMENTS

1. Downtown Plan, Draft April 2009 (previously distributed to Planning Commission)
2. Downtown Plan Mitigated Negative Declaration (previously distributed to Planning Commission)
3. Public Comment on Mitigated Negative Declaration and City Response
4. Public Comments on Draft Downtown Plan Since Publication of First Draft on 9/12/08 (prior public comments were previously forwarded as an exhibit to Administrative Reports or attachments to othersummary reports).

cc: Downtown San Mateo Association  
United Homeowners Association  
Central Neighborhood Association  
Home Owners Association of North Central San Mateo  
Chamber of Commerce  
San Mateo County Association of Realtors  
Larry Patterson, Public Works Director  
Susanna Chan, Deputy Director of Public Works/City Engineer  
Gary Heap, Senior Engineer  
Martin Quan, Associate Engineer  
Sheila Canzian, Parks and Recreation Director  
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