



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Council Meeting Date: March 17, 2009
Staff Report #: 09-033

Agenda Item #: A1

STUDY SESSION: Consideration of Goals, Challenges, and Priorities for the El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan

The purpose of this item is to provide the City Council with an opportunity to give feedback on goals, challenges, and priorities for the El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan.

BACKGROUND

Menlo Park is currently developing a long-term plan for the El Camino Real and Downtown areas. In 2007 and 2008, the community conducted a visioning process (Phase I), which culminated in the acceptance of the El Camino Real/Downtown Vision Plan on July 15, 2008. The Vision Plan established 12 broad and inspirational goals for these commercial and mixed-use areas at the heart of Menlo Park, and discussed potential objectives and implementation measures to achieve the goals.

The visioning process has led into the preparation of a Specific Plan and associated Environmental Impact Report (Phase II). Environmental and fiscal review will be integrated into the process, so that potential benefits (such as tax revenue) and impacts (such as traffic) of different scenarios will be considered as the community refines the Vision Plan. The completed Specific Plan will contain elements such as detailed land use regulations, design guidelines, infrastructure plans, and implementation measures. Broad public outreach and participation continues to be a key element of the project. This process will continue to engage a wide range of community members, including those who may not currently be involved in civic activities.

The project is being guided by the planning and architecture consulting firm Perkins+Will ("the consultant"), with the close assistance of City staff. The project is currently in the "Existing Conditions Analysis and Vision Refinement" stage. The focus of this stage is on clarifying and refining the Vision Plan's goals and objectives; understanding the benefits, costs and tradeoffs of potential improvements; and formulating policies and strategies for implementing public and private improvements in the project area. The research currently being conducted will inform the first Community Workshop, which will take place on Thursday, April 16, 2009.

ANALYSIS

This meeting of the City Council will be directed at understanding, refining, and prioritizing the issues, goals and objectives identified in the Vision Plan. A Vision Plan excerpt, featuring the vision statement and 12 goals, is included as Attachment A. Hard copies of the full Vision Plan have been previously distributed to the City Council, and an electronic version is available online at the following location:

http://www.menlopark.org/departments/pln/ecr-d/ecr-d_vision-plan_final.pdf

To focus the discussion, Council Members should consider the following questions in advance of the meeting.

1. In your view, what are the three most important goals of the Phase I Vision Plan for the El Camino Real/Downtown project area?
2. What are the greatest challenges to achieving the goals (from a community, political, economic, planning and/or physical perspective)?
3. What should the priorities of the consultant team be at this time? What areas should the consultant team focus on to bring clarity, discussion and agreement to the Specific Plan planning effort?

The consultant and staff recommend that the City Council, after first soliciting public comment, discuss these questions in a structured way, such as by each Council Member providing responses to the three questions. These detailed individual comments may be followed by a general group discussion, and the consultant and staff will be on hand to answer any questions. However, the consultant and staff remind the Council that the focus of this preliminary session is on understanding, refining, and prioritizing the goals and focus of the Vision Plan. In addition to the upcoming Community Workshops and Oversight and Outreach Committee meetings, the project schedule includes four additional full City Council meetings, at which the project will be discussed in greater detail.

On March 9, the Planning Commission conducted a similar meeting focused on understanding, refining, and prioritizing the issues, goals and objectives identified in the Vision Plan. In addition, the Oversight and Outreach Committee has already conducted one meeting on February 10 and will convene again on April 2, in advance of the first Community Workshop on April 16.

IMPACT ON CITY RESOURCES

The Specific Plan will require both staff resources dedicated to the project, as well as appropriations of \$830,550 from the General Fund Reserve for consultant services, \$78,400 for transportation and traffic analysis contingency, and \$25,000 for related City costs, for a total appropriation of \$933,950. At the City Council meeting of December

16, 2008, the Council approved the overall scope of work and made a General Fund Reserve appropriation of \$380,000, which represents an estimate of the cost for the first year of the project. Future appropriations will be required as the project progresses. Based on the approved scope of work, the appropriations are estimated at \$450,000 for fiscal year 2009-2010 and \$100,000 for fiscal year 2010-2011.

The City Council prioritized planning work on the El Camino Real/Downtown areas during the project priorities process. Planning fee changes approved by the City Council on November 25, 2008 include overhead allocations for General Plan and Zoning Ordinance Amendments, which could be applied to this project. In addition, costs for the Specific Plan preparation could be applied directly to future development in the project area through fees, although this would require future study to allocate the costs appropriately.

The Vision Plan (Phase I) required both staff resources dedicated to the project as well as a General Fund reserve appropriations of \$176,500 for consultant services and \$50,000 related City costs (initial outreach, speaker series, printing and mailing of the project newsletters, meeting documents and refreshments, and contingencies).

POLICY ISSUES

The El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan will result in policy clarifications or changes related to land use and transportation issues.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The Vision Plan (Phase I) was a planning study and as such was not a project requiring environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The Specific Plan (Phase II) will include the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

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PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with this agenda item being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting. In addition, the City has prepared a project page for the proposal, which is available at the following address:

<http://www.menlopark.org/specificplan>. This page provides up-to-date information about the project, allowing interested parties to stay informed of its progress. The page allows users to sign up for automatic email bulletins, notifying them when content is updated or meetings are scheduled.

ATTACHMENTS

A. Vision Plan Excerpt: Vision Statement and Goals

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Attachment A
El Camino Real/Downtown Vision Plan
Excerpt: Vision Statement and Goals
March 17, 2009

Vision Statement

Downtown Menlo Park and the El Camino Real corridor through Menlo Park will continue to be known for the vitality and diverse range of activities that are available. It will become a place where people live, work and shop and a place that provides services and offers cultural opportunities. A unique identity can be created for the Vision Plan Area that builds on the attributes and opportunities that exist as community assets in the Vision Plan Area today. Those Menlo Park assets include:

- Santa Cruz Avenue: Menlo Park's "Main Street" is an intimately-scaled street with fairly wide sidewalks and a rhythm of storefronts that is conducive to pedestrian activity. City-owned parking plazas are accessible via a series of similarly-scaled cross streets and augment the on-street parking provided on Santa Cruz Avenue.
- The Menlo Park Train Station: Rail and bus service connects Menlo Park's downtown to the region; the station provides the opportunity for Menlo Park residents to access job opportunities elsewhere on the Peninsula as well as to bring visitors to existing and expanded opportunities in downtown Menlo Park.
- Menlo Park's Independently-owned Businesses: The range of services and goods provided by local businesses and merchants has been identified by several community members as a major contributor to the small town, or village, character in Menlo Park. One-of-a-kind retail businesses and services contribute greatly to making a downtown unique.
- Strategic Opportunities for Near-term Change: Vacancies and underutilization of the Plan Area's larger parcels, particularly those with the exposure that El Camino Real provides, offer the opportunity to envision future uses that are different than those that formerly occupied those key sites.
- City-owned Parking Plazas: These areas are integral to the health of businesses and merchants in the Downtown. However, the parking plazas are also the largest areas of City-owned land in the Plan Area, outside of public streets. A comprehensive redesign of these areas could provide the potential for a more efficient configuration and greater number of parking spaces, as well as shade trees in conjunction with plazas or small park spaces that could be components of a coordinated downtown pedestrian network.

- Future Railroad Conditions: Although precise determinations of future activities on the Caltrain tracks are unknown at this time, alterations or expansion of the tracks to accommodate high speed rail or future Caltrain needs seems likely. Acknowledging that such changes may occur provides the opportunity for the Vision Plan to propose ways to expand east-west connectivity across the tracks for bicyclists and pedestrians, in addition to vehicles, in conjunction with future track changes.
- Other Unique Community Assets: Menlo Park also contains a number of additional community assets, both in and outside of the Vision Plan Area. Allied Arts Guild, an architecturally unique complex, is located near the Vision Plan Area. Fremont Park, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Burgess Park and the Menlo Park Civic Center are also important community assets located just outside the Vision Plan Area. The Park Theater, now vacant, is located in the Vision Plan Area and is considered by some community members to be a significant cultural asset. The numerous trees of the city are also considered by many to be an important community asset.

Goals

1. Vision Plan Area Character: Maintain a village character unique to Menlo Park.
2. East-West Connectivity: Provide greater east-west, town-wide connectivity.
3. El Camino Real Circulation: Improve circulation and streetscape conditions on El Camino Real.
4. Neighborhood Context: Ensure that El Camino Real development is sensitive to and compatible with adjacent neighborhoods.
5. Vacant and Underutilized Parcels on El Camino Real: Revitalize underutilized parcels and buildings.
6. Train Station Area: Activate the train station area.
7. Santa Cruz Avenue Pedestrian Character: Protect and enhance pedestrian amenities on Santa Cruz Avenue.
8. Downtown Vibrancy: Expand shopping, dining and neighborhood services to ensure a vibrant downtown.
9. Housing: Provide residential opportunities in the Vision Plan Area.
10. Open Space: Provide plaza and park spaces.
11. Pedestrian and Bicycle Circulation: Provide an integrated, safe and well-designed pedestrian and bicycle network.
12. Parking: Develop parking strategies and facilities that meet the commercial and residential needs of the community.