

MEMORANDUM

TO: Menlo Park Planning Commissioners
FROM: John Kadwany, Vince Bressler
SUBJECT: Structuring the MP Visioning Process Stage II (Specific Plan Development)
DATE: October 6, 2008

This memorandum describes a planning approach intended for City staff, the El Camino Real Visioning Phase II Committee, the Planning Commission, Council, and the general public for Phase II of the El Camino Visioning project. The final output from the Phase II process will be a range of different scenarios for redevelopment, complete with comprehensive impacts and benefits, that may be presented to Council for a vote. This memo summarizes a comprehensive approach to structuring those choices and the public deliberations leading to them.

By discussing this document tonight, we are providing input to staff and the RFP selection committee. The role of the Phase II consultant is not yet set, nor is the role of the Visioning Committee or the Planning Commission. We hope to provide input into these decisions via tonight's discussion. The memo is somewhat formal but the content can be more easily communicated using appropriate graphics, with supporting detail or data used as needed.

1. Introduction

The RFP and Final Vision Plan summarize possible changes to land use, transportation, and circulation in the Vision Plan area. A transparent and defensible Specific Plan requires simplification of a complex planning problem into smaller pieces; description of estimated benefits, costs and tradeoffs; and formats for useful for Council, MP citizens, the PC, and other stakeholders. This memo summarizes an approach for all that in the spirit of MP's new approach to community engagement. The approach is mostly analytical, but can be used in summary form to facilitate public dialogue and deliberations of Vision options and their outcomes. The tools below are meant to be useful for both the public and Council, using a shared vocabulary with more precise operational meanings, and greater structure, than found in the recent Vision Plan.

2. Products of the Specific Plan process

The Specific Plan process has two ultimate products which are very different, but depend on each other in critical ways. These products include development options; and zoning, policy, and implementation guidelines.

Development options are defined in terms of land use changes; building styles and uses; roadway, parking, and sidewalk modifications; public space utilization; etc. These options also include associated financial packages, partnerships, or other arrangements enabling development to occur. In the City context, desired changes also require associated policy choices. That includes zoning, financing (e.g. bond measures), policy, and use of other institutional tools. The two main products of the Visioning process are very different, but depend on and interact with one another. Their roles are very different, and both have to be thought of both in their own terms, and how they further community goals.

In the end, new policies and regulations will be proposed which are intended to help the development options become real. To justify these choices, there needs to be a clear ways of

justifying their benefits, costs and tradeoffs. The following sections are intended to do that, by describing conceptual tools needed to structure this complex planning decision. The tools are intended to be useful for the entire community for creatively thinking of options which achieve desired goals.

Comment. The Final Vision Plan does not, to the best of my knowledge, anywhere characterize just what a “Vision” is, how it is structured, its component parts, etc. While that may have worked well enough for the earlier planning phase, the Specific Plan process needs to be precise about its process and products. Also, the Specific Plan development also has additional goals, like enabling community participation, constructive dialogue, development of trust, etc. These are as important as the “product” focus taken here. The approach discussed here supports those goals considerably, but is only part of an overall engagement plan.

3. Organizing the planning decision

What’s needed are ways of simplifying planning choices in a way that allows any possible choice to be easily built up from easily understandable component parts. In effect, these are pieces of the “decision analysis” step in the community engagement process. The following are an absolute minimum:

- Problem framing and context
- Disaggregating the Vision Plan area into smaller, interacting, but somewhat independent geographical areas
- Identifying the fundamental benefits, costs and impacts representing all stakeholder interests—also called “values”
- Structuring planning options in terms of simple common features shared by all options
- Defining metrics for the fundamental values and used to evaluate any option
- Identifying and dealing with major uncertainties

3.1 Problem framing and context

This component can be tailored to different meeting types, documents, participants, intended audiences, progress-to-date, etc., and especially particular meeting or media/document needs and goals. As the decision process becomes more defined, particular assumptions (“givens”), key uncertainties, or stakeholder concerns can be included as needed. Much of this may be described in terms of the following components, using useful graphical techniques as needed or helpful. Standard items which can be included here include: identification of key stakeholders and decision-makers; overall timeline; major uncertainties; regulatory issues; ultimate planning products; local planning in historical context; opportunities for stakeholder involvement; expectations and roles for participants.

3.2 Vision Area Planning Units/Areas

This first tool has nothing to do with costs and benefits. It is merely a conceptual model of the planning area.

The Vision Plan area is large and heterogeneous. It can be broken down into:

- Several major parcels, or areas;

- A single shared “connection” network of sidewalks, paths, and roadways connecting them.

The parcels could be, e.g., El Camino Southeast, El Camino Southwest, Train area, Santa Cruz & Downtown, El Camino Northeast, El Camino Northwest. In addition, since these all have to connect to the City, and “connection” is so important to this plan, there can be a single “connection network” (better names may be possible) consisting of ECR itself, sidewalks, Santa Cruz Avenue, parking areas, bikeways, intersections, etc. The connection network is the physical infrastructure necessary to get anywhere and do anything in the plan area. Defining a global “Plan perimeter” area might also be useful to integrate the Vision Plan areas with adjacent neighborhoods and the City as a whole.

With these smaller planning units, options can be described for each one, or together as needed, or as reflecting individual interests. The main point is that these are real parts of town where buildings are built, cars drive, people walk. They are the sites for the choices to be made, and fit together like puzzle pieces.

This first tool illustrates the importance of breaking the planning problem into smaller units which can be more easily analyzed, compared and combined as a whole. Policy options may differ by planning units and then compared for consistency, total City impacts, and so forth. Interested parties can focus on individual areas, the entire planning area, transportation, etc., as they need to. Priorities between and within planning units can also be considered. Given limited resources for Specific Plan development, the planning areas can be addressed in terms both near-term and long-term Council objectives.

3.3 *Fundamental values*

Stakeholders care about the Visioning Plan because they have various interests relevant to MP’s development. “Values” is shorthand for the benefits, costs, and impacts associated with these interests. The set of fundamental values is the means by which stakeholder interests are represented and summarized. They specify what matters to stakeholders, or why they have a stake in this decision at all. These values express the “bottom” line of who gets what. Examples of values include “residential dwelling units,” “new retail square footage,” “additional City revenue,” “pedestrian sidewalk width,” “parking spaces,” “elderly housing,” “energy consumption,” “bicycle connectivity,” “residential character,” “business opportunities,” etc.

Each such value is just a *category*, and are defined *completely independently* of other outcomes. So, all else being equal, *everyone* will agree that more (or less if a cost or impact) of a given category is a good thing. Values categorize ranges of valued outcomes, with a preferred “direction” of better and worse. A value category does not imply “how much is right,” or even any particular outcome at all. These value categories just define benefits or costs to be estimated for different options. Nor is anything implied here in terms of what values count more or less. This is merely a list which should represent *all major stakeholder benefits and costs*. The value categories don’t even specify how they are to be measured, which is usually harder than identifying them.

The fundamental values are organized in three main groupings. For clarity, all economic or financial costs and impacts (e.g. on schools) are separated out. The individual listed items would all be broken out with their own metrics (e.g. residential space, retail space, residential tax, retail

tax, etc.). Following is a preliminary organization using three major groupings, which is only necessary to aid understanding and discussion:

A. *Land use*. This includes building usage (numbers/amounts of residential, commercial, retail spaces, density, etc.); design and aesthetics (size, appearance, sightlines); availability and usage of public space (amounts of open, recreational, park, etc.); interactions with neighborhoods (access and separation, noise, sight lines, etc.); interactions with the connection network (ease of access by different modes, parking).

B. *Connection network use*. This includes automobile, pedestrian, and bicycle *flows* (how many/much), *safety*, *connectivity* (getting from A to B), *amenities* (sidewalk comfort, uses), *aesthetics* (trees, finish work, frontage, etc.), *parking*. (Parking will be a major piece on its own, but it fits here.)

C. *Revenues, costs, and impacts*. Revenues and costs include all those to developers and the City over some long-term planning horizon. Also included are various business, retail, residential taxes. Impacts include those on city services, schools, energy usage, etc. Revenues, costs and impacts can easily extend beyond MP stakeholders or the Plan area (e.g. Caltrain riders, Stanford). Mitigation options may also be identified here, e.g. “parking lot subsidy.”

Ultimately, *any proposed plan should have estimates of these benefits, costs, and impacts*. To do that, we need metrics, or measures, as discussed below.

Comments. For each category, measures may be “positive” or “negative.” For example, a proposed change might reduce pedestrian traffic in one area, but increase it elsewhere. Revenues which benefit the City can also be a taxpayer cost, and so on. All the matters for this listing is that all principal stakeholder interests are included. The principal benefits, costs and impacts, associated with any possible planning choice should be in the list. This addresses the problem of identifying “all stakeholders.” A proposed set of fundamental values can be tested by seeing if *any* stakeholder interest or issue can be reformulated using the given categories. Even for people who are not direct participants, it should be straightforward to ensure their interests are represented by value categories. Their *preferences* will show up by considering a sufficiently broad range of *options*, as discussed below. Organizing the many individual values into three categories does not imply “equal importance,” or even that preferences will be expressed at such a high level. By themselves, the values simply identify broadly related, and valued, outcomes.

Again, pretty much everyone wants to maximize benefits and minimize costs and impacts. Keeping those in mind can help “work backwards” to solutions which achieve acceptable tradeoffs—how much of value A vs. B and C. If you want to describe a tradeoff, you just need to have relevant underlying value categories and be able to measure them. Some rules need to be followed in defining the fundamental values. One is not to double-count, e.g. “connectivity” and “pedestrian access.” Another rule is not to confuse values with options (“develop vacant car dealer spaces”), nor uncertainties (“likelihood of new Caltrain tracks”).

A fundamental finding of decision-making research is that people deal poorly with large “holistic” decisions, but do much better when effort is expended to simplify the problem into manageable tasks. So here, value categories are first introduced; these are distinguished from metrics used to evaluate levels of benefit and costs; options or choices are another separate category which finally describe what can be done; as explained below, options also need to be

broken down into more manageable pieces. “Decision analysis” is basically this methodical simplification, and is identified as an early step in the new community engagement process. Putting the pieces back together in a reasoned choice typically involves more judgment and roles for hard tradeoffs.

An important idea here is that *values* come first, *not* options. Options are just means for getting what we want—housing and office space, income revenue, desirable public space, convenient parking, etc. Divisive public debates, in contrast, often involve stakeholder attachment to favored choices. Before addressing measurement, let’s then identify those choices, or decision options.

3.4 Options

These are concrete planning choices, and can be described “locally” for each smaller Vision Area Unit.

Land usage:

- What parcel(s) are being used?
- What is to be built and how is it to be used?
- What is done with unbuilt land?
- How does the land usage interact with sidewalks and roadways?
- Who are expected developers and what is the City’s role in working with them?

Connection network:

- What area(s) of the connection network are involved?
- What physical modifications or new routes are being made for sidewalks, paths, roadways, or parking?
- How are the new sidewalks, paths, roadways, or parking areas to be used? How is that ensured?
- Who does the City work with to develop these connections and ensure their intended use (e.g. business owners, Caltrans)?

Finances and economics:

- What sort of financing, economics, partnership, mitigation, or other arrangements are needed/planned for this option? Who and what is involved?

Policy profile:

- What zoning, regulatory, or other policy provisions are needed to make the above feasible?

(Consideration of the policy product “half” isn’t discussed here, but needs some similar simplifying organization.)

This structure shows that choices themselves are complex, and so can be broken down into separate sub-choices. If the several option dimensions are thought of as matrix columns, then a “path” through various “settings” for each column defines different *strategies*. One such strategy is just the status quo, or “do nothing” option, in place right now. An implicit goal of the

planning process is to create a robust *strategy table* of options covering useful ranges for key planning areas and outcomes. Creating those strategies, without being overwhelmed by complexity, is a key planning goal. Different strategies may be developed for different parcels, there may be overlap and differences, etc.

The breakdown into the three big categories (land, connection, finance) should encourage thinking which combines land use, connectivity, and economics. All options discussed to date appear to be captured here, and the dimensions indicated are also fairly minimal. Options also include, possible policies, like, “allow late night retail,” “increase housing density ratio to x units/acre,” “no free parking,” etc.

The option features above also don’t reflect the role of *time*. But a project can start quickly or years from now; can depend on resolving some uncertainty (Caltrain tracks); or rely on some policy choice (allowing parking meters). These provisions can be identified as needed. Additionally, some options may include *pilot* versions, like various parking options; the final completed choice may only occur after the pilot is complete.

With a planning option (or strategy) given, and known *categories* of benefits and costs, the next (big) step is measurement.

3.5 Metrics (i.e. measurement criteria)

Given some option (build Design A in Parcel B and make changes to Roadway C and do nothing in Parcel D), it has to be evaluated. That means estimating the costs, benefits and impacts identified as fundamental values. If some key outcome has not been so identified, or can’t be defined in terms of existing values, a new value category can likely be introduced in a “modular” way. Metrics are just a way of quantifying or otherwise rating *estimates of valued outcomes*, like “office square footage,” “yearly City revenue,” “direct City capital cost,” “net downtown parking spaces,” etc.

To estimate outcomes, reasonable metrics need to be used to estimate all benefits, costs and impacts. For building use, that includes standard measures like *retail square footage, number of single-bedroom below-market units, building heights, daylight planes, square footage of public space in area X with landscaping quality Y*, etc.

More challenging are the connection network metrics. These should be defined separately for automobiles, pedestrians and bicycles, indicating the dimensions (or similar ones) listed above. For pedestrian connectivity, measures may include sidewalk width, proximity to moving traffic, etc. They might be summarized by an overall judgmental scale indicating general categories of preference. An important measure is “continuity” of travel for pedestrians and bicycles, indicating the ease by which useful routes (e.g. MP to PA, east-west transit, etc.) are followed. Some metrics may be “constructed” criteria, such as an “A-F” scale combining narrative and quantitative criteria into a judgmental scale displayed with relevant area graphics.

Finances and costs can be summarized using standard net present values, capital outlays, revenue estimates, etc. These can be for developers, the City, future building residents or tenants. Impacts to services, energy, etc. should have standard simple aggregate measures.

The metrics can be modified during the planning processing, but a reasonable set should be developed early in the plan process and communicated broadly. These define bottom line measures of stakeholder interests.

Comments

The current Vision Plan and RFP contain some ambiguities which can be easily sorted out at this stage. For example, should ECR have more of a “village” character? Presumably that doesn’t mean making it exactly like Santa Cruz Avenue, but rather connecting east to west, facilitating pedestrian use, encouraging certain uses, and so forth. If Santa Cruz is still to be the town “anchor,” that can be indicated by expected building uses, parking, and other key characteristics. The RFP concepts of “circulation” and “connectivity” are also not defined, but can also be spelled out here.

Measurement will be challenging, but must be done in some way. Best professional or stakeholder judgment will be essential in many cases. The metrics are a key site for “expert” input, in the form of financing or economic inputs, building designs and measures, transportation modeling, etc.

Ranges can be used when there is uncertainty, e.g. “between \$1-3 million/year,” “between 100-300 additional vehicles per day,” etc. Where there are major uncertainties, as with Caltrain, *separate* scenarios can be considered, e.g. “200 mph train through MP,” “modified regional trains, extra track.” etc. Choices may be made later based on assuming one scenario or another, but people should not get bogged down in arguments over what may or may not happen, when nobody knows with certainty. Extra scenarios mean doubling the work, but it may be necessary for some important factors. *Considering* such scenarios can be distinguished from *assuming* them, just as choices can be considered without being made. Developing a good set of metrics can be an iterative activity leading to an appropriate balance of *accuracy* (for a 10-20 year plan) and *effort* (e.g. a 1 year planning process with limited resources) are balanced.

4. What is a plan?

A plan now is easy to describe, at least in principle. A plan applies to some or all Planning Areas. It includes options for land use, the connection network, and finances. It may include policies (“use parking meters”), and may imply zoning changes, new regulations, etc. As mentioned, the latter need to be described better in a “parallel” process. For example, stakeholders will be interested in whether zoning changes apply only to certain planning areas, or all, and why (e.g. “is this equitable?”).

The costs and benefits of the option are all estimated using the metrics, reflecting uncertainty and judgment as needed. People should be able to agree on this plan description, though they may debate many estimates, e.g. City revenues or developer costs. If disagreement persists on the metrics, a range might be used. It can also be considered how much the final choice is influenced by particular values (e.g. \$1M vs. \$2M may not matter, but \$1M vs. \$10M may matter).

Any plan then can be summarized, possibly using icons, area maps, and summary tables of benefits and costs. Combined visual-numeric-descriptive summaries may help people consider interactions with neighborhoods, transportation, different plan areas, Caltrain, etc.

Tradeoffs implied by a single plan then are implied by all this information (e.g. *building design* vs. *developer cost* and *City revenues*; development codes for parcel A vs. parcel B). Different plans can be compared side-by-side according to their summary benefits, costs and comparative tradeoffs. Then individuals and Council can express their *preferences* and *choices*. These overall judgments can use some summary measures, like “total City revenues across all parcels,”

“additional dwelling units across all parcels,” “revenue per square foot,” etc. These would not be combined into a single figure of benefit. Rather, holistic judgments would be made to rank strategies (e.g. for each planning unit or parcel) using the value categories, key strategies, and estimated outcomes.

Critical *value judgments* mostly appear here, when individuals *compare* and *trade off* benefits, costs and tradeoffs. The rest is largely descriptive. Hence facts are separated from values, making choices more defensible and transparent. Importantly, *defining and discussing* a plan option does not mean supporting it or choosing it. Clarifying some *interim goals and products* for the Specific Plan process may help here also. The whole structure is modular and open to iterative learning.

In theory, innumerable plans can be formulated, reflecting all possible combinations of building styles, functions, connection options, financing plans, negotiated agreements, tax schedules, etc. It’s impossible to cover them, and the process has to avoid paralysis by analysis. Considerable “screening” of options and measurement detail is essential throughout the process.

Nonetheless, emphasis should be placed on developing a robust *range of plans* representing broad areas of stakeholder interest, and some useful “thematic” or strategic choices. For example, It may be necessary to consider various options because of citizen interest, developer interest, expectations for Caltrain, etc. These can be individually defined. Thematic plans, or strategies, could include, “maximize connectivity,” “minimize impact on baseline ECR traffic flow,” “multi-modal transportation focus”, “downtown mixed use scenario,” “Santana Row model,” “hotel anchor,” “transit-focused development,” etc. Thematic plans and special options can then be blended as needed.

5. Final and interim products

We began with the Vision II products. The RFP seems to imply that a *single “scenario”* should be the outcome of this process. That may be, but it can be preceded by stages in which different strategies are available for discussion and comparison. These can be winnowed down, but also modified or added to, as the process proceeds. Council at various points can decide if options meet their needs: Do they represent the range of stakeholder interests? Are these all realistic and feasible options? Are options clear enough to define policy? Are metrics credible? Do we have resources to estimate these outcomes? Can we agree on proposals for certain plan areas? What policy issues already need to be addressed? Priorities may also need to be set to allocate scarce planning resources as the overall process proceeds.

The above ideas have focused almost entirely left out the formulation of needed regulations, zoning ordinances, policies. As indicated, those would be defined in parallel with the planning options as the latter take shape. These choices will also influence land use, connection, and finance options. This important parallel policy process may have its own requirements, especially when they affect option benefits and costs. So tax policy influences revenues and future business prospects; parking policy influences parking ease and revenues; etc. This memo has not identified these. But as indicated, policies are also planning options, and so need their own simple structure and organization.

6. Evaluating plan options

The structure described above can be used to standardize Vision plan descriptions, their assessment, and comparisons. The components can be used to represent community input as particular choices, value categories, measurement criteria, or uncertainties. The structure can also drive the formal process by which Council (and the PC) evaluate plan options to identify problems, make adjustments, combine options, and so forth. Given the complexity of this decision, and the limitations of public process (Brown Act, meeting size and length, etc.), a shared conceptual framework including some basic vocabulary and definitional standards could go a long way. Defensibility, transparency of decision-making should also be improved by more explicit definitions of what is meant by a plan, its costs and benefits, uncertainties, and tradeoffs.

Again, to compare options, it is not advised that an overall measure be used to calculate a cumulative figure of merit or benefit-cost. Doing that means using some kind of “weights” to combine individual measures, and that is usually a cumbersome and imperfect process. Instead, individuals can inspect individual plans and formulate comparisons in a more ad hoc way, something like comparing homes or cars. The modular structure presented here should make it easier to combine and modify desirable or undesirable elements, and describe and estimate tradeoffs. As much as possible, stakeholders should be encouraged to compare measurable outcomes, rather than A is more or less “important” than B. “Importance” tends to be an overused word in complex policy choices, and often leading to considerable ambiguity and miscommunication.

Finally, a word on equity and fairness. These are not well thought of as values. Instead, they will involve judgment about an overall balance of costs and benefits to various stakeholders which is hard to specify *in advance*. Typical equity or fairness issues can involve development opportunities, tax rates, fee structures, neighborhood or parcel policy differences, historical practices, negotiation options, etc.

7. Next Steps

Assuming some version of this values-focused and analytic approach is continued, possible next steps:

- Development of user-friendly graphic summary version (vs. text-heavy memos) suited to interpersonal communication
- Discussion of approach, rationale, major features, issues, and potential uses in focused sub-committee (or similar) setting
- Development of a preliminary working model, assessment of possible usage.

The last suggestion is not premature. Developing a decision model or framework is not the same as making a choice. Completion of the first Visioning phase has provided sufficient information to create a simple model, as described above. The approach is also sufficiently modular and flexible to work for any Specific Plan consultant and to incorporate their expertise (e.g. land use estimates, costs). Consistent with recent Council discussion of community engagement, the approach here provides a useful and appropriate mechanism for important decision-making roles to be assumed (and “owned”) by City staff, Council, commissions, and ultimately MP as a whole.