



# PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

FOR THE PLANNING COMMISSION  
SPECIAL MEETING OF JULY 28, 2011  
AGENDA ITEM D1

**PROJECT:**                    **El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan  
Review of Draft Specific Plan  
Meeting 3 – Downtown**

## **BACKGROUND**

Menlo Park is developing a long-term plan for the El Camino Real and Downtown areas. The completed visioning process (Phase I: 2007-2008) has led into the preparation of a Specific Plan and associated Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and Fiscal Impact Analysis (FIA) (Phase II: 2009-2011). The culmination of the first phase of work was the City's Council's unanimous acceptance of the Vision Plan, which serves as the foundation for the Specific Plan. The completed Specific Plan will be a comprehensive, action-oriented set of rules, containing elements such as plans for open space and other public improvements, detailed land use regulations, design guidelines, and implementation measures.

The Specific Plan process is currently in Task 4 (*Draft Specific Plan, Fiscal Impact Analysis, and Draft EIR*), having completed the *Project Initiation, Existing Conditions Analysis; Vision Refinement, and Development of Framework, Concept Plans, Programs and Guidelines* tasks. Key milestones of the current phase of work were the release of the Draft Specific Plan on April 7, 2010, and the release of the Draft EIR on April 29, 2011, both to strong community interest. The Draft EIR comment period ran through June 20, 2011, and comments were received both in written correspondence and verbal remarks at a June 6, 2011 Planning Commission public hearing. Draft EIR comments that address the adequacy of the EIR or the City's compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) will be responded to in the Final EIR and can potentially result in changes to the Draft EIR text/analysis (non-environmental comments will be noted). The response to comments in the Final EIR will be reviewed at a future Planning Commission meeting.

With the conclusion of the Draft EIR review period, the project focus is the Planning Commission and City Council's review of, and recommendations/direction on, the Draft Specific Plan itself. The Planning Commission was originally scheduled to hold one meeting to provide direction on the Draft Specific Plan, but the Commission subsequently expressed an interest and willingness to hold additional meetings in order

to more fully explore and address comments, questions, and concerns, both from the Commission and the public, with the aim of providing clear and specific direction on potential improvements and refinements to the plan. The Commission formed a subcommittee (Bressler/Ferrick/Riggs) to propose a recommendation for an expanded review process, which was approved by the full Commission in November 2010.

The expanded review process includes one introductory/background session (intended to be the primary public comment opportunity), three meetings on specific geographic areas, and one wrap-up session (to be conducted at the end of the last geographic area meeting or as a standalone meeting). Each of the three geographic area meetings are intended to conclude with the Planning Commission making tentative recommendations on aspects of the Draft Specific Plan for that particular zone, which will then be finalized comprehensively at the wrap-up session. The Planning Commission's review will also incorporate review of the project's Fiscal Impact Analysis (FIA), which is pending.

The Planning Commission's recommendations will form the basis for the City Council's subsequent discussion and direction on the Draft Specific Plan. Each of the three geographic area meetings is being preceded by a 'refresher' summary on the overall plan and its history, as well as summaries of the public input made at the immediately previous session. Staff reports, presentations, and video for all meetings are available as part of the project web page.

The Planning Commission's review of the Draft Specific Plan commenced on July 11, 2011, with the overview/background meeting. On July 21, the Commission reviewed the Station Area. Summaries of public comment and tentative Planning Commission recommendations from this meeting are provided as Attachments A and B, respectively.

## **ANALYSIS**

### Downtown Review

The focus of the July 28 meeting is the Planning Commission's review of, and potential recommendations on, aspects of the Draft Specific Plan relating to the Downtown geographic zone. Recommendations are expected to generally take the form of direction such as the following:

- "Strengthen and expand on *Topic A*"
- "Modify *Development Standard B* from *Z* feet to *Y* feet (or *X* stories to *W* stories)"
- "Remove *Improvement C* from consideration"

While the Planning Commission's discussion has been broken up into geographic zones for the purposes of creating a manageable discussion, Commissioners should consider linkages between the various zones as the review proceeds. In particular, in and around the Station Area, Downtown and El Camino Real intersect and relate to each other closely.

Key elements of the plan relating to Downtown are summarized in this report and in the meeting presentation, although Planning Commissioners and the public are expected to have reviewed the source Draft Specific Plan in advance of the meeting, and Planning Commissioners are asked to bring their copies of the document to the meeting, in case specific sections need to be referenced. Key sections of the plan are noted by page number within this report.

### *Discussion Framework/Meeting Structure*

The Planning Commission should consider the Downtown elements within the context of the established Vision Plan's Vision Statement and Goals (Attachment C) and the Draft Specific Plan's Guiding Principles (Attachment D). The Commission may wish to structure its recommendations on potential modifications to the draft plan to reference specific Goals or Guiding Principles that would be enhanced by a proposed change.

As noted at the July 11 meeting, the Planning Commission is encouraged to keep in mind the various interrelationships between plan elements as its detail-type discussion proceeds. As the Commission considers potential changes to a particular plan element, the potential changes to other aspects of the plan should also be considered. In addition, the Commission should consider the Draft EIR analysis as the geographic area review process unfolds.

### *Urban Design Framework*

Chapter C (Plan Principles, Framework + Program) discusses the Guiding Principles in more detail, and correlates them to an Urban Design Framework for each of the three geographic sub-areas. For Downtown, the framework (pages C16-C18) intends to establish a more vibrant and active Downtown through enhanced pedestrian pathways, active gathering spaces, and new mixed-use infill development, including residential uses. The concept for Downtown emphasizes the existing small-town character, ensuring a variety of public spaces and smaller-scale buildings complementary to the existing character of the area. The Downtown concept celebrates Santa Cruz Avenue, enhances its character and functionality, and positions it for a successful future through wider, more comfortable sidewalks and a refreshed streetscape. Specific elements of this framework are discussed in more detail below.

As noted in the draft plan, graphics of various improvements are conceptual, meant to relay the overall intent, not final designs. Both public and private space improvements will undergo public review and approval processes for discrete projects. For public improvements, final decisions on phasing, design, and financing would come through subsequent City Council actions, primarily through the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) planning process.

### *Public Improvements*

Within Downtown, Santa Cruz Avenue sidewalks (pages D10-D13) would be improved, creating new space for informal gathering and outdoor dining. The existing medians and

center street trees would be retained, as they are iconic features of Downtown. The sides that currently have angled parking would be reconfigured to provide parallel parking, with the reclaimed width (also from narrowing the travel lane) being used to widen the sidewalks. The sides that currently have parallel parking would keep the same parking layout, although the travel lanes would be narrowed to widen the sidewalk slightly, and street trees would be integrated into the parking lane to provide more usable sidewalk space. Overall, these improvements would help encourage walking and increase levels of street activity, as well as renew the image of Downtown with updated streetscape elements.

Between the northern legs of Crane and Chestnut Streets, Santa Cruz Avenue sidewalks would be expanded further to create the Santa Cruz Avenue Central Plaza (pages D14-D17). In this area, the two automobile through lanes would be retained, but all on-street parking would be removed to widen the sidewalks to their maximum extent. The street surface would be raised to be flush with the sidewalks, creating a unified pavement treatment, and helping establish this area as Downtown's central public space. Although the automobile travel lanes would be retained, the plaza could be closed for special occasions.

The Chestnut Paseo (pages D18-D19) would extend the Central Plaza pedestrian-oriented experience south along Chestnut Street, toward the market place and flex space/parking area (discussed below). Closed to regular traffic (emergency vehicles would retain access), the paseo would provide space for temporary vendors, benches, additional landscaping, and would offer a unique environment away from motor vehicles.

The Market Place (pages D20-D21) describes a broad concept, linked with the paseo, which could take a number of forms: a plaza expanding the paseo, a pavilion structure creating a covered and shaded plaza for a portion of the existing Farmer's Market or other events, or small enclosed building(s) providing permanent stalls for vendors. The intent of the market place, whatever its form, would be to reinforce and activate the area as the center of downtown, and to complement and not compete with the existing Sunday Farmer's Market or other nearby markets. The market place would preserve an existing heritage oak tree in Plaza 6 and would also retain automobile access to and from Plazas 6 and 7, at the southern edge of the paseo.

Several other public space elements support these central features. The South Parking Plazas Pedestrian Link (pages D22-D23) would serve as a safe and welcoming pedestrian pathway along the rear store entries for Plazas 4 through 8. The Flex Space/Parking Area (pages D24-D25) would retain automobile parking in Plazas 5 and 6, but would improve the paving and landscaping to allow them to be used for special events. Pocket Parks (page D26) along Crane Street and at Chestnut Street and Oak Grove Avenue would provide smaller, more intimate open spaces, and serve as small gateways to Santa Cruz Avenue from the north side parking areas. Other Street/Alley Improvements (page D27) in this area would provide clear and comfortable connections to and from the proposed parking garages (see below) and pocket parks.

As noted during the Station Area review, links between Downtown and the Caltrain station would be improved through the enhancement of pedestrian crosswalks on El Camino Real at Oak Grove Avenue, Santa Cruz Avenue, and Ravenswood/Menlo Avenues. These crossings would be improved with “special” crossing treatments, including high-visibility crosswalks with enhanced pavement, accessible pedestrian signals, countdown pedestrian signals, sidewalk extensions, and median islands/pedestrian refuges. Bicycle improvements would include Class III bicycle routes (shared auto/bike use) on Menlo Avenue, University Drive, and Crane Street, and a Class II bicycle lane on Oak Grove Avenue. The latter improvement would require the removal of parking on one side of the street and restriping to accommodate two dedicated bicycle lanes (one bicycle lane on each side of the street).

Within Downtown, the existing shared surface parking would be enhanced with up to two parking garages, proposed for Plazas 1 and 3. The proposed locations are derived from an earlier analysis, which found that these two plazas would be the most cost-effective locations for new garages, primarily because they are the largest of the eight downtown plazas, although these locations would also have the benefit of having limited visibility from public streets. The garages are projected to increase the total supply of public off-street parking spaces by between 361 and 641 spaces, with the difference due to an option for one of the garages to also include a housing component, which would reduce the amount of public parking.

The garages would provide parking spaces to offset those relocated for public space improvements, such as widened sidewalks and pocket parks, as well as potentially provide parking for new Downtown developments paying an in-lieu fee (discussed more in the Private Improvements section). The increase in parking supply would also allow for more use of extended time limits (currently, parking is limited to a maximum of two hours, with a pending program to limited extensions), as well as provide a centralized location for employee/owner parking, which is currently dispersed among all plazas (with the exception of Plaza 4).

Downtown parking supply is described in detail in Table F2 (page F26). Total Downtown parking would increase by between 256 and 536 net new spaces, which would represent net increases of between 16 and 34 percent over the current supply of off- and on-street parking spaces. Parking garages would be required to be set back 25 feet from neighboring private property, in order to preserve services and emergency access.

### *Private Improvements*

The land uses for the majority of the traditional Downtown core are governed through the Downtown/Station Area Retail/Mixed Use land use designation, which permits uses such as retail, restaurants, personal services (limited size per business), office (limited size per parcel), residential units, and hotels. Along Santa Cruz Avenue-fronting parcels, the Downtown/Station Area Main Street Overlay would apply, which permits primarily retail and restaurant uses on the ground floor, with supporting uses such as offices (limited size per parcel), personal services, and residential units permitted on upper floors. The Downtown/Station Area Main Street Overlay structure effectively

memorializes current practice, which emphasizes retail on Santa Cruz Avenue. The areas surrounding the traditional Downtown core would be part of the Downtown Adjacent Office/Residential land use designation, which permits residential units, personal services (limited size per business), office (limited size per parcel), but which does not permit retail, in order to not compete with the Downtown area.

The private development building regulations for Downtown are concentrated in the D (Downtown) and DA (Downtown Adjacent), although as noted during the Station Area review, the SA W (Station Area West) zoning district is located in close proximity to the traditional Downtown core. The current maximum heights in these areas are 30 feet (D) and between 30 and 35 feet (DA). Both districts would permit total building heights of up to 38 feet, although the façade height (how tall the building is at its front edge) would be limited to 30 feet on all sides except for an interior side, in order to limit the perceived mass of any building. Above the façade height limit, upper floors need to step back at a 45-degree angle (10-foot minimum), similar to the Daylight Plane regulation that is used in many residential districts. Within the D district, the two parking garage sites would be permitted a maximum height of 48 feet, with a façade height of 38 feet.

Density within the D district would be limited to 25 dwelling units per acre, although this could be increased to 40 dwelling units per acre with the provision of negotiated public benefits. Within the DA district, these limits would be 18.5 and 25 dwelling units per acre, respectively. These residential density standards are intended to enhance downtown activity and vibrancy, and would represent increases from the current 18.5 units per acre (with the exception of the base DA density, which would remain the same).

Base intensities (Floor Area Ratio, or FAR) would be set at 2.00 for D and 0.85 for DA, and public benefit bonus FARs would be set at 2.25 for D and 1.00 for DA. The proposed FARs would represent increases over what is currently permitted: the D district is made up of parcels currently in the C-3 district, where maximum FARs range between 1.00 and 2.00, and the DA district is currently within the R-C, R-3-C, and C-1-D districts, where FARs vary between 0.40 and 0.85. As with the entire plan area, medical and dental office would be limited to one-third of the applicable FAR, with total office limited to one-half of the applicable FAR. The office limits are intended to reflect existing City policy limiting those uses (limited to 0.50 FAR in the C-3 district and 0.40 FAR in the R-C, R-3-C, and C-1-D districts), to increase diversity of overall uses, and to address concerns in particular about traffic from medical and dental uses.

Setbacks in the D district would be set at zero feet in order to be consistent with the historic pattern in this area and to create a strong street edge, although buildings would be required to provide façade modulation over long stretches to provide visual interest and could also continue to inset entrances and provide other variation. Within the DA district, setbacks would be set at between 5 and 20 feet, depending on the site and what is required to provide an 11-foot sidewalk. All developments would also be required to provide private open space for residential development.

In addition to the parking garages, pocket parks, and market place, other parking plazas could be used for non-parking improvements (page E16), including mixed-use buildings on Plaza 2 and portions of Plazas 3 and 4. Such buildings, if desired, would likely be developed through a Request for Proposal (RFP) process and would be required to adhere to the D district standards.

Parking standards would be set by use, as shown in Table F1 (page F21), with the potential to propose shared parking reductions by a standard ULI (Urban Land Institute) methodology. Developments within the DA district would be required to provide all parking on-site, while developments within the D district could either provide all parking on-site, or pay an in-lieu fee for some or all of the parking to be provided in downtown plazas/garages. The parking in-lieu fee process would require that capacity be available, which would likely not occur until at least one downtown parking garage is developed.

Plan-wide design guidelines, such as requirements for active ground-floor uses, building entries, retail frontage, and parking/service access, would all be applied within the Station Area. In addition, sustainability regulations and guidelines, in particular LEED Silver certification requirements, would be also required within Downtown.

#### Public Comment and Correspondence

As noted in the Background section, public comments were made at the July 11, 2001 meeting and are summarized (along with written correspondence) in the staff report for the July 21 meeting. Public comments made at the July 21 meeting are summarized within Attachment A of this report.

Additional written correspondence received after the printing of the July 21 staff report is included here as Attachment E. Patti Fry submitted comments on the Station Area, which were distributed to the Commission at the meeting. These comments include comparisons to the current zoning, in particular with regard to form, uses, and circulation. Walt Zavoli has submitted a letter stating that the Farmer's Market should stay as it is.

#### Next Steps

- **Meeting 4 – El Camino Real – Thursday, August 4**

This meeting will follow the same format as the July 21st and 28th meetings, but the primary discussion will focus on the El Camino Real corridor.

- **Meeting 4 End (Thursday, August 4) or Meeting 5 (Monday, August 22) – Review/Wrap-up**

Depending on time and the complexity of the Planning Commission's tentative recommendations, the review and finalization of the Commission's

recommendations to the City Council will either take place at the end of the August 4 meeting or at the meeting of August 22.

- **City Council Review and Direction on the Draft Specific Plan (Late August/Early September)**

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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 and meetings are scheduled. The project list currently has 963 subscribers.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

- A. Planning Commission Meeting of July 21, 2011 – Summary of Public Comment
- B. Planning Commission Meeting of July 21, 2011 – Planning Commission Preliminary Recommendations on Station Area
- C. Vision Plan Excerpt – Vision Statement and Goals
- D. Draft Specific Plan Excerpt – Guiding Principles
- E. Correspondence
  - Patti Fry, received July 21, 2011
  - Walt Zavoli, received July 24, 2011

## **EXHIBITS TO BE PROVIDED AT MEETING**

Presentation

## **AVAILABLE FOR REVIEW AT CITY OFFICES AND ON THE PROJECT WEB PAGE**

- Draft El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan
- Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) prepared by ESA, dated April 2011
- Draft EIR Comments
- El Camino Real/Downtown Vision Plan

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