



PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

FOR THE PLANNING COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING OF JULY 21, 2011
AGENDA ITEM D1

PROJECT: **El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan
Review of Draft Specific Plan
Meeting 2 – Station Area**

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 Planning Commission's review of the Draft Specific Plan commenced on July 11, 2011, with a meeting that included the following elements:

- Overview Presentation (project history and key elements of the Draft Specific Plan)
- Geographic Area Breakdown – Station Area, Downtown, and El Camino Real
- Public/Private Improvements as Discussion Framework
- Interrelationships (how changes to one element can affect other elements)
- City Council Guidance
- Public Comment
- Planning Commission Procedural/Technical Questions and Clarifications, and Guidance

A summary of public and Planning Commission comments from the July 11 meeting is included as Attachment A. Elements of the Planning Commission's discussion are addressed in more detail in this report, while others should be considered on an ongoing basis by the Commission and the public as the Draft Specific Plan review proceeds. With regard to public comment, the July 11 meeting was intended to be the primary public comment opportunity for the Planning Commission's review, so that Commissioners can effectively consider recurring and/or overlapping comments, questions, and concerns throughout the whole process. However, the Planning Commission will take public comment at the July 21 meeting and at the following meetings, although the Chair will have the discretion to request that comments do not duplicate previously-relayed remarks and/or to limit the amount of time available for comments.

The July 21 meeting will start at 6:00 P.M. with a summary of the July 11 meeting, including an abbreviated version of the overview presentation and a summary of public and Planning Commission comments made so far. The Planning Commission is not necessarily expected to attend the 6:00 P.M. 'refresher' session, and may arrive only for the 7:00 P.M. official meeting start.

In addition, the Transportation Commission held a meeting on July 13, 2011 on the Draft Specific Plan, in particular to review staff responses to questions posed earlier by individual Transportation Commissioners. The Transportation Commission requested that the Planning Commission be provided the list of questions and responses (Attachment B) and the summary minutes from the Transportation Commission's earlier meeting of June 8, 2011 (Attachment C). The Transportation Commission also requested that the Planning Commission be provided the minutes for the July 13 meeting, which will be forwarded to the Planning Commission once they are approved by the Transportation Commission. The Transportation Commission also noted that

they are intending to review the Draft Specific Plan at a future meeting and provide additional comments directly to the City Council.

ANALYSIS

Station Area Review

The focus of the July 21 meeting is the Planning Commission's review of, and potential recommendations on, aspects of the Draft Specific Plan relating to the Station Area geographic zone. The following Planning Commission special meetings will focus in turn on the Downtown and El Camino Real areas. 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, if needed. 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"
- "Remove *Improvement C* from consideration"

The tentative recommendations will be compiled and considered comprehensively either at the end of Meeting 4 (August 4) or in an optional Meeting 5 (August 22). The Planning Commission will then finalize its recommendations, which will form the basis for the City Council's subsequent discussion and direction on the Draft Specific Plan.

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. The selection of the Station Area as the first zone for review deliberately acknowledges this, as it is the area where Downtown and El Camino Real come together and illustrates why all of these areas have been part of an integrated planning process.

Key elements of the plan relating to the Station Area 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 Station Area elements within the context of the established Vision Plan's Vision Statement and Goals (Attachment D) and the Draft Specific Plan's Guiding Principles (Attachment E). 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. Alternately, the Commission may consider rating various aspects of the plan on how

well they address the Goals and Guiding Principles, in order to identify areas of potential focus. The Commission may also propose an alternate framework for the Station Area discussion. The upcoming Downtown and El Camino Real meetings would utilize whichever meeting structure is most successful.

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 the Station Area, the framework (pages C14-C15) intends to establish a strong civic presence and statement at the train station, create an important arrival point into Menlo Park, and emphasize a higher intensity of uses. 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. Within the Station Area in particular, the plan acknowledges the uncertainties of the High-Speed Rail (HSR) project and attempts to provide flexibility to address different HSR configurations.

Public Improvements

A key focus of the Station Area's public space is the Civic Plaza, which would serve as a landmark space and gateway to downtown and Menlo Park, a pick-up and drop-off locale for motorists and transit users, and a civic public space integrating the historic train station and enhanced pedestrian linkages and plazas to downtown, Menlo Center, and the Civic Center (pages D30-D31). The center of the Civic Plaza would feature a vertical central feature, such as a fountain or sculpture, to be visible from both the train station and Santa Cruz Avenue. Iconic trees that are distinct from the surrounding landscape would provide a unique sense of civic space, and the historic train station and bus access would be preserved and accommodated. A widened sidewalk on the north side of Santa Cruz Avenue would provide a more distinct and comfortable path from the train station to downtown.

Access would also be improved from the Civic Plaza to the existing Menlo Center, which is the development currently occupied by Kepler's Books, Café Borrone, the British Banker's Club (BBC), and office uses. Because Menlo Center is an existing private development, the ability of the plan to implement these changes is limited, but

enhanced connections between these spaces would help integrate this existing activity center with the improved Civic Plaza and train station.

On the east side of the train station, the east edge of the street would be enhanced with a wider, tree-lined sidewalk, referred to as the Alma Street Civic Walk. This would be linked to the existing Civic Center by the Ravenswood Gateway, an improved crosswalk with iconic landscaping and signage. The Ravenswood Gateway and Alma Street Civic Walk would serve to better integrate the Civic Center, an existing activity node, with the rest of the plan area, providing better options for pedestrian access and connectivity between neighborhoods east of El Camino Real and the downtown.

Along the El Camino Real portion of the Station Area, north-south sidewalks would be extended to the extent feasible and generally enhanced in appearance (the current vehicle through-lane configurations would not be modified). Pedestrian crosswalks at Oak Grove Avenue, Santa Cruz Avenue, and Ravenswood/Menlo Avenues 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 El Camino Real, Merrill Street, and Alma 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 dedicated bicycle lanes.

Private Improvements

The private development regulations for the Station Area are concentrated in the SA E (Station Area East) and SA W (Station Area West) zoning districts. The SA E district is bounded by El Camino Real, Alma Street’s rear alley, Oak Grove Avenue, and Ravenswood Avenue, and its proposed development regulations are described in detail on pages E80-E83. The SA W district is bounded by El Camino Real, Doyle Street/Maloney Lane, Oak Grove Avenue, and Ravenswood Avenue, and its proposed development regulations are described in detail on pages E84-E87. Both districts would permit total building heights of up to 60 feet, although the façade height (how tall the building is at its front edge) would be limited to 45 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. The existing maximum height in both areas is 30 feet, although certain properties can currently apply for Planned Development (P-D) or Conditional Development Permits (CDP) to exceed 30 feet (for example, Menlo Center at 1010 El Camino Real is 46 feet to the main roof deck).

Density would be limited to 50 dwelling units per acre in both districts, although this could be increased to 60 dwelling units per acre with the provision of negotiated public benefits. These residential density standards are intended primarily to maximize transit use and enhance the station area and downtown activity and vibrancy, and would represent increases from the current 18.5 units per acre. Base intensities (Floor Area

Ratio, or FAR) would be set at 2.00 for SA W and 1.35 SA E, and public benefit bonus FARs would be set at 2.25 for SA W and 1.75 for SA E. The proposed FARs would generally represent increases over what is currently permitted: the SA W district is made up of parcels currently in the C-3 district, where maximum FARs range between 1.00 and 2.00, and most of the SA E district is currently in the C-4 district, where the effective maximum FAR is 0.75 (there is an allowance for 1.00 FARs for auto dealership storage, but this has never been applied). However, the portion of the SA E zone to the east of Alma Street is currently zoned C-3, so the absolute maximum FAR for those properties would decrease from 2.00 to 1.75, although staff would note that none of these properties are currently developed above a 1.00 FAR. 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 0.40 FAR in the C-4(ECR) district and 0.50 FAR in the C-3 district), to increase diversity of overall uses, and to address concerns in particular about traffic from medical and dental uses.

Setbacks in both districts would be limited in order to be consistent with the historic pattern in this area and to create a strong street edge. With the exception of Alma Street (where the enhanced Alma Street Civic Walk would require buildings to be set back to provide a wider sidewalk), building setbacks in both zones would be set at zero feet from the property line, although buildings would be required to provide façade modulation over long stretches to provide visual interest. All developments would also be required to provide private open space for residential development, and commercial developments in the SA E district would be required to provide open space.

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 SA E district would be required to provide all parking on-site, while developments within the SA W 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 the Station Area.

Fiscal and Economic Analyses

As noted in the July 11 staff report, the project's Fiscal Impact Analysis (FIA) was originally intended to be published in advance of the start of the Planning Commission's review of the Draft Specific Plan, in order to more fully inform the Commission's discussion. However, the initial administrative drafts have required more work than anticipated. In particular, staff has added an analysis of the impact on non-City special districts (fire and school districts, specifically), which was not originally scoped but

which has been a topic of interest on related FIAs. In order to finalize the City analysis and add this special district supplement, the FIA release is delayed, but it will be published and considered in advance of the Planning Commission's final recommendation on the Draft Specific Plan, at which point recommendations can potentially be modified to address fiscal issues.

As discussed at the July 11 meeting itself, an FIA examines the potential impact of a project or plan on a city or special district's ongoing revenues (such as property and sales taxes) and costs (such as maintenance and personnel). FIAs do not undertake independent market studies, conduct 'pro forma' analyses of the profitability of potential individual development proposals, or analyze the potential capital costs and financing options for various public improvements. However, elements of the Draft Specific Plan and the community workshop process have touched on these topics to varying levels of detail, and may address some Planning Commission comments from the July 11 meeting.

Market Study

Chapter B (Plan Context) of the Draft Specific Plan includes a market overview that examined the mid- to long-term potential for residential, retail, office, and hotel and conference space uses in the plan area (pages B23-B30). The draft market study findings were also presented at Community Workshop #2 (June 18, 2009). The market study found strong demand for a variety of housing types and office space, as well as capacity for additional hotels and conference centers during the plan's 20- to 30-year time frame. The retail analysis showed that both downtown and El Camino Real had a high share of neighborhood-serving retail sales, with downtown reporting stronger sales in specialty retail and home furnishings.

Development Feasibility

Because a key objective of the Vision Plan was to revitalize vacant and underutilized parcels, the Specific Plan process examined how height limits (and by extension, density/intensity standards) and parking requirements can affect development feasibility. At Community Workshop #3 (September 17, 2009), information was presented on generic residential and office developments, showing that more restrictive height limits and parking requirements could result in costs exceeding revenues, which would likely not stimulate positive redevelopment. By contrast, increased height limits and reduced parking requirements could increase the likelihood of revitalization, as well as generate more impact fees and opportunities for below market rate (BMR) housing.

These analyses are excerpted as Attachment F. As noted above, they are for generic developments that account for typical land and other costs, although any individual development proposal may have unique attributes that would result in a different cost basis.

Implementation

The Specific Plan would set up a clear and detailed framework for public and private space improvements, but would not itself design or finance any individual components, such as parking garages or expanded sidewalks. This is due to the fact that construction costs and community priorities can shift over time, creating the need for flexibility. However, Chapter G (Implementation) of the Draft Specific Plan does discuss financing methods (pages G17-G25) and phasing options (pages G26-G27). With regard to parking garage costs specifically, the Draft Specific Plan does present some information for overall consideration. As noted on page F29 of the Draft Specific Plan, costs for garage parking of the type considered for downtown typically ranges between \$32,500 to \$37,500 per parking stall. For one 650-space garage, this would equate to between \$21,100,000 and \$24,400,00.

Public Comment and Correspondence

As noted in the Background section, public comments were made at the July 11, 2001 meeting and are summarized in Attachment A. In addition, written correspondence submitted since the publishing of the July 11 staff report is included as Attachment G.

Patti Fry provides comparisons between the existing and proposed development regulations, both in summary form and in an attached spreadsheet. Daniel Kocher states that the current conditions of El Camino Real and downtown are negative, and advocates for revitalization. Robert and Diana Ekedahl state that the El Camino Real portion of the plan should be scaled down, and that the remainder of the plan should be abandoned.

Next Steps

- **Meeting 3 – Downtown – Thursday, July 28**
- **Meeting 4 – El Camino Real – Thursday, August 4**

These meetings will follow the same format as the July 21 meeting, but the primary discussion will respectively focus on the two geographic areas noted above.

- **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. A notice was also published in the local newspaper on June 29, 2011. 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 965 subscribers.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Planning Commission Meeting of July 11, 2011 – Summary of Planning Commission and Public Comments
- B. Transportation Commission Meeting of July 13, 2011 – Staff Responses to Questions Posed Previously
- C. Transportation Commission Meeting of June 8, 2011 – Summary Minutes
- D. Vision Plan Excerpt – Vision Statement and Goals
- E. Draft Specific Plan Excerpt – Guiding Principles
- F. Development Feasibility Analysis – Excerpt from Community Workshop #3 (September 17, 2009)
- G. Correspondence
 - Patti Fry, received July 11, 2011
 - Daniel Kocher, received July 13, 2011
 - Robert and Diana Ekedahl, received July 13, 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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