



# PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

FOR THE PLANNING COMMISSION  
MEETING OF MARCH 9, 2009  
AGENDA ITEM D1

**PROJECT:** El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan  
**APPLICANT:** City of Menlo Park

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## BACKGROUND

Menlo Park is developing a long-term plan for the El Camino Real and Downtown areas. The completed visioning process (Phase I) has led into the preparation of a Specific Plan and associated Environmental Impact Report (Phase II). Environmental and fiscal review will be integrated into this process, so that potential benefits (such as tax revenue) and impacts (such as traffic) of different scenarios will be considered as the community develops the long-term 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 Planning Commission will be directed at understanding, refining, and prioritizing the issues, goals and objectives identified in the Vision Plan, which was accepted by the City Council on July 15, 2008. 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 Planning Commission, 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](http://www.menlopark.org/departments/pln/ecr-d/ecr-d_vision-plan_final.pdf)

To focus the discussion, Planning Commissioners 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 Planning Commission discuss these questions in a structured way, such as by each Commissioner providing comments on the three questions in turn. 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 Commission that the focus of this 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 (which individual Planning Commissioners are encouraged to attend), the project schedule includes four additional full Planning Commission meetings, at which the project will be discussed in greater detail.

On March 17, the City Council will conduct 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. Commissioners Riggs and Bressler are members of the Oversight and Outreach Committee as the Planning Commission representative and an At-Large Member, respectively.

## **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) includes the preparation of an Environmental Impact Report (EIR).

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## **PUBLIC NOTICE & APPEAL PERIOD**

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

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

None

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**Attachment A**  
**El Camino Real/Downtown Vision Plan**  
**Excerpt: Vision Statement and Goals**  
**March 9, 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.