



# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Council Meeting Date: August 30, 2011

Staff Report #: 11-152

Agenda Item #: F-2

**REGULAR BUSINESS: City Council Review of Planning Commission  
Recommendations on the Draft El Camino  
Real/Downtown Specific Plan**

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## RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the City Council commence its review of the Planning Commission's recommendations on the Draft El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan with the following steps:

1. Receive public comment;
2. Review and approve the proposed City Council Draft Specific Plan review process; and
3. Review and provide initial direction on the Planning Commission's recommendations for the Station Area and the ECR SE (El Camino Real Southeast) zoning district.

The Planning Commission's recommendations are included as Attachment A. The Planning Commission recommends moving forward with the Specific Plan subject to specific revisions/questions. The Planning Commission notes that the Commission was not able to discuss and fully resolve every topic, but it encourages the City Council to address such issues during their review process.

## 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. Both the Vision and Specific Plan processes have benefited from extensive community outreach and participation.

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 future Planning Commission and City Council meetings.

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 Planning Commission's recommendations form the foundation of the City Council's subsequent discussion and direction on the Draft Specific Plan. The expanded Planning Commission review process has been strongly supported by the Council's Specific Plan Subcommittee (currently Council Members Cline/Keith; previously Boyle/Cline), as it would enable the Commission to conduct an in-depth discussion, and thus allow the Council itself to have as efficient a review process as possible.

The Planning Commission's review of the Draft Specific Plan commenced on July 11, 2011, with an overview/background meeting. The Planning Commission subsequently reviewed the Station Area on July 21, Downtown on July 28, and El Camino Real on August 4. Each of the geographic area meetings concluded with tentative recommendations, which were reviewed comprehensively and finalized/augmented at the final meeting of August 22. The Planning Commission's comprehensive recommendations are included as Attachment A. The August 22 Planning Commission meeting also included review of the plan's Fiscal Impact Analysis (FIA), which is discussed in more detail later in this report and which is intended to be the subject of more detailed City Council review at a subsequent meeting. Staff reports, presentations, public comment summaries, and video for the preceding Planning Commission meetings are available as part of the project web page (*note: the August 22 public comment summary will be posted after the publishing of this staff report but in advance of the August 30 City Council Meeting*).

Concurrent with the Planning Commission's review, the Housing and Transportation Commissions conducted sessions on the Draft Specific Plan and have provided recommendations included as Attachments B and C, respectively. As is the case with the Planning Commission, the Housing and Transportation Commissions both recommend moving forward with the El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan process, subject to specific recommendations.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Public Comment**

The Vision and Specific Plan processes have benefited from extensive community engagement, with strong and diverse attendance at workshops and other project events. Public input was an important part of the recent Planning Commission meetings on the Draft Specific Plan, and this is expected to continue through the City Council's review. The initial meeting of August 30 provides an opportunity for comments on the Draft Specific Plan in general and the Station Area and ECR SE zones in particular. Comments on other specific areas/topics can be focused at subsequent meetings, as described below in the review process section.

### **City Council Draft Specific Plan Review Process**

The City Council was originally scoped to conduct its review of the Draft Specific Plan in one meeting. In discussions with staff, the Council Subcommittee recommended that the City Council review process be enhanced, in order to allow for more discussion and deliberation. Staff recommends that the Council expand the review process to three meetings, with the following focuses:

- August 30, 2011
  - Introduction/overview
  - Review and approval of the Draft Specific Plan review process
  - Geographic area review
    - Station Area and ECR SE zoning districts
- September 13, 2011
  - Geographic area review
    - Downtown
    - El Camino Real (other than ECR SE zoning district)
- September 20, 2011
  - Non-geographic topics, including but not limited to:
    - Bicycle/pedestrian improvements
    - Fiscal Impact Analysis (FIA)
    - Public benefit
  - Review/wrap-up

The breakdown of the discussion by geographic area reflects the Planning Commission experience, which found this a generally useful way to structure the discussion. The geographic area splits should also benefit the Council's review, since the following Council Members with conflicts-of-interest can more easily recuse themselves from specific discussions:

- Council Member Fergusson: ECR SE and ECR SW (El Camino Real Southwest) zoning districts
- Council Member Ohtaki: ECR SW zoning district

As noted in the Draft Specific Plan, the various geographic areas are distinct, but they are also connected, and as such some zoning districts may be considered to be part of multiple areas, and issues may overlap. The City Council is encouraged to keep in mind the various interrelationships between plan elements as its detail-type discussion proceeds. As the Council considers potential changes to a particular plan element, the potential changes to other aspects of the plan should also be considered. In addition, the Council may consider the Draft EIR analysis throughout the review process.

The City Council should consider the El Camino Real elements within the context of the established Council-accepted Vision Plan's Vision Statement and Goals (Attachment D) and the Draft Specific Plan's Guiding Principles (Attachment E). The Council 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 in Attachment A, the Planning Commission is recommending that the Finance and Audit Committee review the FIA and provide input to the City Council. This type of review is not part of the Finance and Audit Committee's charge. If the City Council believes this would be valuable, it would require a change in the Committee's responsibilities, including a clear direction for the Committee to follow.

### **Station Area and ECR SE Review**

The City Council's initial geographic zone review will focus on the Station Area (SA E and SA W) and the ECR SE zoning districts. While the ECR SE district is broadly part of the El Camino Real corridor, many of the development standards (in particular, height) relate more closely to the Station Area districts and as such are considered together here. Key elements of these areas are discussed below, with Draft Plan page numbers noted, where applicable. Council Members and the public are encouraged to have hard copies of the Draft Plan available during all meetings, in order to reference topics in more detail. Where the Planning Commission has recommended that a plan element change, that is noted in *italics*.

### ***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. For the El Camino Real corridor, the framework (pages C10-C13) recognizes the street's role as both a local-serving and a regional-serving arterial roadway. The concept for El Camino Real enhances overall street character, east-west connection opportunities and pedestrian safety and comfort. It recognizes and addresses the character of various areas along the corridor. 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 (pages D30-D31), 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. 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 (page D32), 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 (page D33). This would be linked to the existing Civic Center by the Ravenswood Gateway (pages D34-D35), 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. *The Planning Commission recommended that the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists at the intersection of the railroad tracks and Ravenswood Avenue be made a high priority, and that possible solutions to the existing safety issues be expedited through the Specific Plan or alternate programs.*

Along El Camino Real (both within the Station Area and along the ECR SE district), north-south walkability (pages D38-D41 and F6-F10) would be significantly improved. Along the east side of the street, sidewalks would be required to be at least 15 feet wide, with a minimum of 10 feet used for the pedestrian through zone (remainder used for plantings/furnishings). On the west side, sidewalks would need to be at least 12 feet wide along the majority of the corridor (12-15 feet wide within the Downtown area), inclusive of an eight-foot wide pedestrian through zone. Because of the constraints posed by the existing street dimensions and its arterial service role, most of the

sidewalk improvements would take place as adjacent redevelopment occurs, with sidewalks located in part on private property setback areas. Within the downtown core (between Oak Grove Avenue and Menlo/Ravenswood Avenues), sidewalks would be widened to the maximum extent possible by adjusting roadway and lane widths (no changes to the overall number or configuration of El Camino Real automobile through-lanes or parking are proposed).

East-west connectivity (pages D42-D44 and F6-F10) would also be enhanced at key locations. 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 (“bulb-outs”), and median islands/pedestrian refuges. Intersections at Encinal Avenue, Glenwood/Valparaiso Avenues, Roble Avenue, Middle Avenue, and Cambridge Avenue would see “basic” treatment improvements, including marked crosswalks, accessible pedestrian signals, and sidewalk extensions. East-west connectivity would also be improved with grade-separated pedestrian/bicycle crossings of the railroad tracks at the Caltrain station and in the vicinity of Middle Avenue. The latter improvement would be coupled with a plaza that provides an additional open space amenity. *The Planning Commission has recommended that the option for sidewalk extensions (also known as “bulb-outs”) be removed from the Plan, so that north-south vehicle flow could be improved and thus potentially increase the frequency of east-west pedestrian/bike crossings. The Commission also recommended that more creative and aggressive efforts to improve east-west connectivity be explored.*

Bicycle improvements would include Class III bicycle routes (shared auto/bike use) on El Camino Real, Merrill Street, Alma Street (between Oak Grove and Ravenswood Avenues), and Middle Avenue, 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. Additional Class II and III lanes and routes along Alma Street and Garwood Way would provide alternate paths for north-south travel along streets with less automobile traffic than El Camino Real. *The Planning Commission has recommended exploring the possibility of improving/upgrading bicycle improvements on El Camino Real and Middle Avenue to Class II bicycle lanes (the latter when the proposed pedestrian/bicycle crossing of the railroad tracks is implemented).*

### ***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. The ECR SE (El Camino Real South-East) zoning district is bounded by El Camino Real, the Caltrain

tracks, Ravenswood Avenue, and San Francisquito Creek, and its proposed development regulations are described in detail on pages E66-E71).

The SA W district is made up of parcels currently in the C-3 district, and most of the SA E district is currently in the C-4 (ECR) district, although a portion of the SA E zone to the east of Alma Street is currently zoned C-3. All of the ECR SE district is currently in the C-4 (ECR) district.

Key proposed development regulations are summarized below:

AREA	FAR	DU/ACRE	FAÇADE HEIGHT	MAXIMUM HEIGHT	SETBACKS (FRONT AND CORNER SIDE)
SA E	1.35 (1.75)	50.0 (60.0)	45'	60'	0'
SA W	2.00 (2.25)	50.0 (60.0)	45'	60'	0'
ECR SE	1.25 (1.75)	40.0 (60.0)	45'	60'	10'-20' (15' sidewalk)

The differing FAR and DU/acre standards represent the proposed Base and Public Benefit Bonus levels. The Base standards are intended to achieve inherent public benefits, such as the redevelopment of underutilized properties and creation of more vitality and activity. The Public Benefit Bonus standards would be applied when an applicant proposes to provide additional benefits to the city through a negotiated process.

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 restricting those uses (currently limited to 0.40 FAR in the C-4(ECR) district and 0.50 FAR in the C-3 district), to increase the diversity of overall uses, and to address concerns in particular about traffic from medical and dental uses. For the C-4(ECR) district, the current overall FAR effective maximum is 0.75 and the current DU/acre maximum is 18.5. For the C-3 district, the current maximum FARs range between 1.00 and 2.00, and the current DU/acre maximum is also 18.5.

The existing maximum height in these districts 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, the building at 800 El Camino Real is 56 feet to the main roof deck). Façade height would be a new standard intended 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 Planning Commission has recommended that the façade height standard be reduced by one full story (exact dimension to be determined by staff and the consultant), and that an alternative mechanism be explored to limit the amount of the building that can reach the maximum height of 60 feet.*

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. New developments in the ECR SE district would additionally be required to provide building and frontage breaks, in order to break up building mass and to provide publicly-accessible open space, essential linkages, and an improved pedestrian environment (pages E33-E35). All developments in the ECR districts would also be required to provide open space, including private open space for residential development.

Setbacks in the SA E and SA W 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 these 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. In the ECR SE district, buildings would be set back between 10 and 20 feet, in order to achieve the expanded sidewalks and also to reflect the auto-oriented character of that area. All developments would also be required to provide private open space for residential development, and commercial developments in the SA E and ECR SE districts would be required to provide general 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. All developments in the ECR zoning districts would be required to provide all parking on-site. Developments within the SA E and ECR SE districts 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. *The Planning Commission has recommended that the residential parking standard be modified in the Station Area districts from the proposed 1.85 spaces per unit to a minimum of 1.0 space per unit and a maximum of 1.5 spaces per unit with an emphasis on the accommodation of shared vehicles, guest parking, shared parking and unbundled parking. The Commission noted that the intent of this change was to encourage transit usage and development of senior and other smaller-unit housing.*

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 these areas.

### **Fiscal Impact Analysis (FIA) – Initial Inquiry**

The project FIA (consisting of separate analyses for the City General Fund and associated Special Districts) was released on August 16, with results summarized in the August 22 Planning Commission staff report. Prior to the start of the meeting, a local resident, Chuck Bernstein, distributed correspondence to the Planning Commission and City Council email lists, and also attended the Planning Commission meeting to relay

verbal comment on this topic. Mr. Bernstein's letter and comments call into question the overall accuracy of the analysis, and also identify a list of specific errors. Since this meeting, staff and the fiscal consultant have conducted an initial review of the comments and determined the following:

- The most significant discrepancies identified are due to Mr. Bernstein apparently not discounting long-range projections (which account for inflation) to 2009 dollars. FIAs commonly present results in constant dollar equivalents, so that inflation does not unnecessarily skew a modern-day reader's perception of the numbers. The presentation of results in 2009 dollars is noted clearly throughout the text and table titles, but an additional clarifying statement can be added.
- The sales tax projections did not account for a 10% vacancy rate, and Mr. Bernstein is correct that they should. It appears that this will reduce the sales tax revenues by approximately \$15,000, which would lead to an approximately 0.37% decrease in revenue in year 30. This correction will be made, although none of the overall FIA conclusions will be significantly affected.
- Mr. Bernstein correctly identifies several text errors. None affect the analysis, but they will be corrected.

The fiscal consultant expects that these corrections can be made within the next week, and the corrected FIA will be posted on the project page and distributed to the Planning Commission and City Council.

### **Correspondence**

Four letters have been submitted between the Planning Commission meeting and the publishing of this staff report, and they are included as Attachment F. Tom and Pat Wong write that they are not opposed to any changes proposed to El Camino Real, but are strongly opposed to changes to the downtown area, stating that it's not broken and doesn't need fixing. Dianna Traylor states that she and her husband are consistent patrons of the Farmer's Market, questions the need for a covered marketplace and two parking structures, and encourages the Council to consider compromise solutions that enhance the value of Menlo Park. John Kadvany (a member of the Planning Commission submitting individual correspondence), lists a number of his individual recommendations that he was not able to address during the Planning Commission's review, in particular: extending the Station Area residential parking standard to all Specific Plan zones; providing open space and building separation approvals for the El Camino Real Southeast zone; increasing the depth of front upper-story setbacks; and reducing building size in "transition zones" along Alma and El Camino Real adjacent to Downtown. Michelle Beasley, Greenbelt Alliance, commends the City for crafting a vision of a more vibrant, walkable urban corridor that respects the existing small-town character, and notes suggestions about retaining the proposed maximum building heights, encouraging affordable housing, prioritizing Safe Routes to Schools, and developing a parking management plan.

## **IMPACT ON CITY RESOURCES**

The Specific Plan requires both staff resources dedicated to the project, as well as appropriations of \$839,080 from the General Fund Reserve for consultant services, \$78,400 for transportation and traffic analysis contingency, \$27,010 for a Water Supply Assessment (WSA), and \$25,000 for related City costs, for a total appropriation of \$969,490. The City Council has made General Fund Reserve appropriations over the preceding years for these expenses. In addition, due to a conflict of interest with the City Attorney (who leases property within the Plan area), the City has contracted with a Contract City Attorney to provide legal services for the project. The Contract City Attorney's review of the Draft EIR was conducted through a contract under the City Manager's discretion. Depending on the scope of the City Council's direction on the Draft Specific Plan, as well as on the scope of the Draft EIR comments (detailed review in progress), the project could require adjustments in order to adequately address work not covered by the existing contract.

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 analysis to allocate the costs appropriately, as required by law.

The Vision Plan (Phase I) required both staff resources dedicated to the project as well as a General Fund reserve appropriation 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) includes the preparation of a program-level Environmental Impact Report (EIR). The comment period for the Draft EIR closed on June 20, 2011, and responses to the comments will represent the Final EIR, which will be reviewed publicly at future Planning Commission and City Council meetings.

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Thomas Rogers  
Associate Planner  
Report Author

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Arlinda Heineck  
Community Development Director

## **PUBLIC NOTICE**

Public notification consisted of publishing a legal notice in the local newspaper and notification by mail of owners and occupants within a 500-foot radius of the subject property.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

- A. [Planning Commission Recommendations on the Draft Plan](#)
- B. [Housing Commission Recommendations on the Draft Plan](#)
- C. [Transportation Commission Recommendations on the Draft Plan](#)
- D. [Vision Plan Excerpt - Vision Statement and Goals](#)
- E. [Draft Specific Plan Excerpt - Guiding Principles](#)
- F. [Correspondence](#)
  - Tom and Pat Wong, received August 25, 2011
  - Dianna Wellen Traylor, received August 25, 2011
  - John Kadvany, received August 25, 2011
  - Michelle Beasley, Greenbelt Alliance, received August 25, 2011

**Note:** Attached are reduced versions of maps and diagrams submitted by the applicants. The accuracy of the information in these drawings is the responsibility of the applicants, and verification of the accuracy by City Staff is not always possible. The original full-scale maps and drawings are available for public viewing at the Community Development Department.