



Loma Prieta Chapter serving San Mateo, Santa Clara & San Benito Counties

March 25, 2013

Honorable Members of the Menlo Park City Council
Menlo Park, via e-mail

Re: Downtown/El Camino Real Specific Plan Needed Refinements

Dear Council Members,

When City Council passed the El Camino Real/Downtown Specific Plan, the Council asserted the importance of reviewing the progress of the plan in case refinements might be needed.

In order to ensure the efficacy of a Specific Plan, it is normal to refine a Plan based on experience with the implementation of the plan.

As an example, Redwood City, which adopted its Downtown Specific Plan in 2011, revised its Specific Plan in Feb 2012, making multiple adjustments that were brought to light as new development proposals have come forward. Council adopted all changes unanimously.

Several events since the passage of Menlo Park's specific plan suggest that it would be valuable to review a few specific issues soon, before City Council's summer recess.

- There have been new developments proposed on El Camino Real and Glenwood
- The City has been working to update the Housing Element
- The Real Estate market has recovered with strong demand for office

A Specific Plan review would be limited and focused to achieving the established goals. This would not be an open-ended rethinking of the Specific Plan, but a precise review of selected parameters that Council may wish to adjust in order to adjust for unforeseen issues and to ensure achievement of the goals of the Specific Plan

We respectfully suggest the following items for review:

1) Housing. The Downtown/Specific Plan was always intended to provide much needed infill housing. Since approving the Specific Plan, the City has been doing a lot of hard work to update the Housing Element.

The Downtown area is slated to accommodate 680 of the required housing units. However, there are only three major sites that could contribute substantial amounts of housing - Derry, 1300 ECR, and the Stanford properties. The rest are much smaller, are currently occupied with buildings, and would require significant effort to aggregate.

When the Specific Plan was in the works, the Economic Study forecast that Housing would likely be provided because the market would not support Office. However, the Office market has turned out to be extremely strong.

In order to ensure that office development does not permanently outstrip housing in downtown, Council may want to consider that the Plan mandate that larger parcels -larger

than 2 acres -shall provide a mix of housing and commercial to meet or exceed the jobs-housing ratio target of 1.5 to 1 – i.e. they cannot do all office or too much office.

This would ensure that the larger properties contribute as needed to the supply of housing units and therefore avoid a permanent and inextricable jobs–housing imbalance in the Specific Plan area.

This appears to be necessary in order to meet the State’s requirements for the Housing Element lawsuit settlement requirements.

Requiring this jobs-housing mix would also incent building a greater number of smaller units resulting in an increase in the total number of units and, also, the affordability of units in Downtown. This is a desired goal.

2) Medical Office. The Specific Plan already has a disincentive for medical office (allowing a lower FAR than other office, even though the amount now allowed is greater than pre-Specific Plan), since medical generates a very large amount of vehicle traffic per square foot of development that is also very difficult to mitigate with transportation demand management (TDM) programs.

Given El Camino's vulnerability to gridlock, and expected additional development in neighboring Palo Alto and Stanford Medical Center, should Medical be disallowed in ECR-SW and ECR-SE (with a grandfather clause for existing medical offices)?

3) Transportation Demand Management, Parking requirements and Reducing Traffic. Encouraging multi-modal transport (and reduced auto usage) is an important goal in the Specific Plan. The Specific Plan has reduced parking requirements. However, requirements for Office parking are designed to be appropriate for ordinary TDM measures as called for in the Plan.

Using stronger TDM programs, some developers may be able to achieve much better results and in order to promote alternative transportation and to reduce traffic this should be encouraged.

Learning from the Facebook example, can we enable developers to reduce their parking provision if, like Facebook, they are willing to commit to a specific limited maximum number of trips with built-in reporting, and penalties for lack of achievement?

Shared Parking: The Specific Plan does not regulate and promote this well-tested and practical strategy.

If a developer is willing to commit to a trip cap goal with reporting and penalties, Shared Parking between Commercial and Residential should be encouraged to reduce unused private parking in the plan area.

4) Funding for infrastructure- Community Benefits District and Traffic Impact Fees. Two significant developments are proposed that would significantly benefit from associated, planned infrastructure projects:

- The Caltrain bike/pedestrian under crossing at Middle at the pedestrian plaza
- The Garwood Way connection to Oak Grove and train station provides important access, parallel to ECR, for safe bike and pedestrian traffic.

How can developments be leveraged to help fund this mutually beneficial infrastructure? Is it time for a Community Benefits District as described in the specific plan, or can Transportation Impact Fees be earmarked for these important pedestrian/bike connectivity projects?

5) Public plaza at Middle and East-West connectivity. One of the centerpieces of the Specific Plan is a pedestrian plaza, with a bike/pedestrian under crossing of the Caltrain tracks. The Specific Plan currently has very specific requirements, including mandating vehicle access onto the plaza that work against the goals of a safe and pleasant pedestrian plaza.

Is it possible to modify the language to achieve the goals of a pedestrian plaza at Middle?
Eliminate auto circulation on the plaza, in order to prioritize pedestrian activity, but allow emergency vehicle access

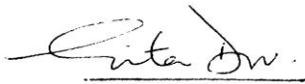
6) Revenues. Any site owned by a nonprofit but leased to commercial tenants does generate property tax revenue for the city. But if used for nonprofit/academic purposes, no property taxes are generated.

Unlike many other cities, Menlo Park lacks a provision to generate fees supporting city services from major nonprofit users. In the Specific Plan area, should Menlo Park add a policy to allow a one time in-lieu fee or require a public benefit contribution for nonprofit/academic use?

The Specific Plan provides a valuable framework for achieving the goals of the Downtown/ECR area. The City Council should consider making focused modifications to the plan now, in order to achieve the important goals articulated in the Specific Plan.

We respectfully request that these potential adjustments to the Specific Plan be put on the calendar, as soon as possible, in order to achieve needed results for the city in a timely manner.

Respectfully submitted:



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