

CITY OF SANTA ROSA
CITY COUNCIL/PLANNING COMMISSION

TO: MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL
CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE PLANNING COMMISSION
FROM: PATRICK STREETER, SENIOR PLANNER
PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
SUBJECT: DOWNTOWN STATION AREA SPECIFIC PLAN UPDATE

AGENDA ACTION: RECEIVE REPORT

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended by the Planning and Economic Development Department that the Council and Planning Commission receive a report regarding the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan update.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 9, 2007, the City Council adopted the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan (Specific Plan), which as part of its 20-year vision, included development of more than 3,400 new downtown residential units. Presently, midway through the planning period, approximately 100 units have been constructed. While a lack of vitality in the downtown can in part be attributed to market forces, feedback has indicated that the Specific Plan is too restrictive, in terms of development standards such as density and height, to finance and fully realize the City's need for high density downtown housing and job centers within walking distance to the Downtown Station. Following the Council's designation of downtown housing as a top priority, the City applied for a Planning Grant Program through the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC), which was approved on April 25, 2018. The grant provides funding for an update to the Specific Plan to address land use and transportation issues, as well as infrastructure needs, associated with intensification of housing development in the downtown. This study session will provide the Planning Commission and Council with an opportunity to provide feedback and guidance on the draft preferred alternative.

BACKGROUND

On October 9, 2007, the City Council adopted the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan (Specific Plan). The primary objective of the Specific Plan is to increase the number of residents and employees within walking distance (1/2 mile) of the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) station through the intensification of land uses in the Plan area.

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In October 2016, the Council accepted the Housing Action Plan, which was prepared to address the City's ongoing unmet housing needs and to implement the City's General Plan Housing Element.

In October 2017, the City experienced devastating fires, resulting in the loss of nearly 3,000 homes in Santa Rosa. Prior to the fires, the City was already in a housing crisis, with less than 300 units per year being realized each year, compared to the 625 units per year needed to reach the City's goal of 5,000 new housing units by 2023.

On December 14, 2017, MTC notified local governments in the Bay Area of the availability of grant funding for the PDA Planning Grant Program for up to \$800,000 (with a 12% local match). The PDA Grant Planning Program provides financial support for planning processes that seek to intensify land uses by increasing both housing supply, including affordable housing, and jobs, boosting transit ridership, increasing walking, bicycling, carpooling and car-sharing, and retaining and expanding community assets.

On February 13, 2018, the Council adopted a new set of priorities, which included downtown housing as a Near Term (six month) and Tier 1 top priority.

On March 5, 2018, based on Council Policy 000-62, which authorizes the City Manager or his designee to submit grant applications, the City submitted an application to MTC for the PDA Planning Grant Program to amend the existing Specific Plan. The grant would allow the City to comprehensively address land use and transportation issues, as well as infrastructure needs, associated with intensification of housing development in the downtown.

On April 25, 2018, the MTC Commission approved a grant in the amount of \$800,000 to the City of Santa Rosa to update the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan. A match of 12% (\$109,090) is required, which will be provided as in-kind staff time from the Planning and Economic Development Department's existing budget.

On November 27, 2018, the Council, by resolution, authorized the Mayor to sign a Professional Services Agreement with Dyett & Bhatia Urban and Regional Planners, a California corporation based in Oakland to assist the City in preparing the Specific Plan update.

On November 30, 2018, the consultant team met with City staff for a kick-off meeting and walking tour to establish goals and lay out a strategy and schedule for the update process.

On January 8, 2019, the City Council considered the scope and visioning of the Specific Plan update and adopted a Community Engagement Strategy.

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On January 17, 2019 the project was before a joint meeting of the Cultural Heritage Board and the Design Review Board to provide feedback on the proposed scope and visioning.

On March 3, 2019, the first meeting of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was held, with the purpose of outlining the project's goals and objectives and developing a strategy and methodology to maximize community engagement.

On May 1 and May 4, 2019, Community Workshops numbers 1 and 2 were held at the Central Library Branch and Chop's Teen Center, respectively. The workshops represented a culmination of Phase I: Outreach and Opportunities.

On May 30, 2019, representatives of City departments, outside agencies, and other technical experts met for Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) meeting number 1. The purpose of the meeting was to consider two potential project alternatives and develop additional items of consideration that should be tested toward preparation of a preferred alternative.

On June 20, 2019, at a joint meeting, the Cultural Heritage Board and the Design Review Board received a summary of Phase I and provided feedback regarding potential land use and circulation alternatives to be considered.

On July 16, 2019, at a joint meeting, the Planning Commission and the Council received a summary of Phase I and provided feedback regarding potential land use and circulation alternatives to be considered.

On July 29, 2019, Community Workshop number 3 was held at the Central Library Branch. More than 120 attendees participated in a small-group exercise designed to gather feedback and preferences regarding the draft alternatives.

On October 2, 2019, representatives of City departments, outside agencies, and other technical experts met for Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) meeting number 2. The purpose of the meeting was to review the draft preferred alternative concept prior to it being presented to decision makers.

On November 6 and 7, 2019, the draft preferred alternative concept was presented to the Cultural Heritage Board and the Design Review Board, respectively.

PRIOR CITY COUNCIL REVIEW

See Background section above.

ANALYSIS

Based on a review of the issues and opportunities identified as part of Phase 1, three preliminary draft alternative concepts were developed. These concepts represent

different strategies the City could take to stimulate housing development downtown, foster economic and cultural vitality, improve multi-modal connectivity, and promote a walkable, livable environment.

Alternative 1 - Vibrant Core: seeks to create a vibrant, big city downtown core around Courthouse Square and to strengthen connections between that location and other parts of the planning area. It would concentrate the bulk of new housing through 2040 in the Courthouse Square area, featuring new buildings taller than 8 stories along Third Street and on City-owned catalyst sites and a vibrant mix of employment, entertainment and visitor-oriented uses. The concentration of higher density housing in the Courthouse Square area under this alternative would provide a critical mass of new residents to support amenities like shuttle service between the SMART station and Courthouse Square; underpasses activated with pop up retail or performances; and a grocery store. Outside the greater Courthouse Square area, the SMART site, the Santa Rosa Avenue corridor, and the former industrial buildings on both sides of the rail corridor between Wilson and Donahue would also see housing development. Maxwell Court and the area between West Third Street and Sebastopol Road in the vicinity of Roberts Avenue would retain an employment-oriented focus.

Alternative 2 - Village Centers: envisions the planning area as a network of interconnected village centers, each with its own distinct character. The overall amount of housing would be the same as with Alternative 1; however, the new units would be distributed more widely throughout the planning area with the intent of fostering a series of centers to serve the daily needs of neighborhoods in and adjacent to the planning area. Each village center would accommodate new high-density housing, but building heights would not exceed 6 stories at any location. The focus of mobility improvements under this alternative would be on improvements to connect the various village centers with one another and to promote travel within the plan area by modes other than single-occupant vehicles. This alternative would involve the extensions of Roberts Avenue and Donahue Street envisioned in the 2007 Plan as well as the reconnection of Fourth Street through Santa Rosa Plaza. It would also involve road diets on Mendocino Avenue, Santa Rosa Avenue and E Street.

Alternative 3 – Transit Forward: would focus new, higher-density development along high frequency transit corridors in the planning area in order to build connections between downtown and other parts of the city, increase vibrancy, and promote walking, biking and transit use over single-occupant vehicles. Key corridors for densification are Mendocino Avenue between College and Courthouse Square; Santa Rosa Avenue between Maple and Courthouse Square; West Third Street from Davis to Dutton; and Sebastopol Road between Olive and Dutton. Each of these roadways would be reconfigured as multi-modal streets with priority for transit and an activated public realm featuring bicycle lanes, wide sidewalks, plazas, parklets, and roof-top green spaces. Under this scenario, the existing transit mall would be expanded to the south and the block would be redeveloped with a mix of residential, office, retail, and entertainment options in addition to transit and parking facilities in buildings 6 to 8 stories tall.

Preferred Alternative: Based on outreach and meetings with decision makers during Phase 2, the project team has developed a preferred plan concept that borrows from each of the three alternatives listed above.

The Preferred Plan Concept envisions a vibrant big city urban core centered around Courthouse Square, and a network of mixed-use village centers in other parts of the plan area that offer an array of housing options for people at various income levels and stages of life, together with shops and services catering to residents' daily needs.

In the urban core, tall new buildings attract new residents and employees to strengthen the role of the Courthouse Square area as the business and cultural hub of Santa Rosa and the wider region. In turn, new rooftops and new jobs support both the vitality of existing businesses and the establishment of new amenities in the core. Santa Rosans and visitors alike will enjoy shopping at unique and eclectic stores, dine at restaurants or meet coworkers for after-work drinks, attend a show at a new entertainment venue or civic space, enjoy the sunshine at Old Courthouse Square, and take advantage of other recreational amenities. Fourth Street is reconnected through the Santa Rosa Plaza mall as a bicycle and pedestrian connection, and design standards call for active ground floor uses such as shops, restaurants, art galleries, and entertainment venues to foster walkability along both Fourth and Fifth Streets. Underpasses at Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Olive streets are activated with lighting, public art, wayfinding, and space for pop up uses like retail, food, live performances, recreation activities, and other events to strengthen the connection to/from the core and Railroad Square.

Connectivity is further enhanced with a high-frequency trackless trolley that runs in a loop primarily along Third Street linking Courthouse Square and the Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) station, while road diets on Mendocino and E Street provide improved safety and connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists accessing the urban core. The redevelopment of the City Hall complex with high density housing presents an opportunity to daylight the creeks that run under the site and showcase this natural amenity in the heart of downtown Santa Rosa.

In addition to an intensified downtown core, this plan also envisions strong supporting neighborhoods. The neighborhoods supporting the downtown will retain their unique character, but be provided with flexibility and public improvements to enhance livability. Some of the neighborhoods with potential for change include:

- **Maxwell** - Mixed use development centered on a new public plaza at Ninth and Donahue anchors a new residential neighborhood in the Maxwell Court area. Residents, visitors, and businesses seamlessly coexist in a village-like atmosphere, with multi-family residential housing, live/work units, and creative, maker-oriented uses balanced with the area's existing industries. Donahue would be extended to the northwest along its current alignment to connect Ninth and Maxwell Court, and standards would require uses and design techniques that activate the ground floors of buildings to promote walkability and vitality. A new high-visibility crosswalk would be added at the intersection to provide pedestrian

access for local residents of the West End neighborhood and new housing on former industrial sites flanking the railroad tracks. Lighting and artwork in the Ninth Street underpass strengthen the connection between this village center and the St. Rose neighborhood to the east.

- **SMART Village** -The vacant SMART site west of the railroad tracks is developed with higher-density housing, oriented to provide easy pedestrian access to the SMART station and Railroad Square via the at-grade rail crossing to the east. Residents of the new housing on the SMART site join visitors shopping, dining, and enjoying leisure time in Railroad Square.

The vitality of this charming commercial district is further enhanced with the expansion of Depot Park to create a public plaza that puts the “square in Railroad Square,” and design standards call for active ground floors to foster walkability around the plaza and on Fourth Street. On the SMART site, new multi-family development provides residents easy access to the Downtown commuter rail station, and a new north-south roadway connects Sixth Street and West Third through the site, providing access for CityBus and improving intra-modal transfers to commuters.

- **Roberts** – conveniently located between the Roseland area, including the on-site amenities and housing at the Roseland Village Shopping Center, and the Downtown SMART Station and Railroad Square, the Roberts district acts as bridge, linking Southwest Santa Rosa to the downtown. Sebastopol Road becomes a multi-modal corridor with high-frequency transit connections into the urban core and an enhanced bicycle and pedestrian route via the Joe Rodota Trail. Development capitalizes on proximity to the Trail, and a mix of multi-family housing, live/work spaces, and creative, maker-oriented uses such as artisan shops and studios, media and print production outlets, tech startups, limited light industrial businesses and other supportive uses add character and vitality to the village center. An anchor use such as a sports facility, civic center, performing arts center, or major shopping, dining, or recreation destination gives the district identity and serves local residents in addition to visitors. The street experience along Olive Street is enhanced to provide a stronger connection and safer path of travel for pedestrians, bicycle riders, and drivers.
- **Juilliard Park** - As a key gateway to the urban core, Santa Rosa Avenue is transformed into a grand boulevard lined with higher density housing and trees under this scenario. Uses and design techniques that activate the ground floor of buildings are required in nodes at Mills and Maple, and high-visibility crosswalks at these locations further enhance walkability and vitality. Separated bicycle lanes and high-frequency transit service along the corridor strengthen Santa Rosa Avenue as a multi-modal gateway into the urban core. West of Santa Rosa Avenue, neighborhood enhancements, such as branding and wayfinding, build on the creative energy of the South A Street Arts District (SOFA) community.

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FISCAL IMPACT

The total project budget is \$909,090. \$800,000 is awarded from the MTC grant and the City's 12% local match, \$109,090, comes from the City's general fund for staff time.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

This report on the Downtown Station Area Specific Plan Update is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The report and discussion item is not a project that has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines section 15378.

BOARD/COMMISSION/COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Not applicable.

NOTIFICATION

Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1 - Downtown Station Area Specific Plan Study Area Map
- Attachment 2 - Draft Preferred Plan Concept
- Attachment 3 - Diagnostic memo on barriers to implementation of the previous plan
- Attachment 4 - Existing Conditions Report

CONTACT

Patrick Streeter, Senior Planner
Planning and Economic Development
(707) 543-4323, Pstreeter@srcity.org
www.PlanDowntownSR.com