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Published March 4th, 2009

Lafayette Continues to Wrestle with Specific Plan

By Cathy Tyson



Downtown Strategy and Specific Plan Community Workshop at the Veterans Hall Photo Cathy Tyson

The process of creating the Lafayette Downtown Strategy and Specific Plan marches on. In the final Community Workshop of this multi-year, multi-faceted project, citizens were invited to provide input on overall plan direction and specific recommendations and priorities. There has been an almost unprecedented public response so far, the Lafayette Homeowners Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and past city council candidate Gabriel Froymovich have all urged citizens to get involved.

Initiated in May of 2007 as a response to development pressure and antiquated 20-year old plans, the goal of this plan is to develop a vision and strategy for the long-term future growth of Lafayette. Mayor Don Tatzin in his opening remarks at the recent Community Workshop reminded attendees that there will be many other opportunities to discuss the plan in the months to come. In addition to individual citizen input, during the first week of March the Circulation Commission, the Creeks Committee, Downtown Strategy Advisory Committee and the Planning Commission will all be discussing the draft plan.

More than a dozen round tables were set up in the Veteran's Hall to allow participants to discuss and provide input on five specific topics provided by organizers. Attendees were also asked if there are specific aspects of the Plan they liked, are unclear about or think need to be refined.

An introduction by Jim Stickley, Principal, at consulting firm Wallace, Roberts and Todd, included an overview of the discussion topics: community character/

establishing districts, refining development regulations, adding downtown parks and creek greenways, improving downtown circulation and parking, and finally improving streetscapes.

Despite a detailed explanation in his overview, a couple of participants at this reporter's table were very concerned about proposed height limit changes. Although when asked if the table would prefer the existing 76 station or an attractive mixed use three-story building, the unanimous answer was the new structure.

One table mate felt that, "Lafayette is a small town, it's important to build to that scale." regarding refining development regulations. There seemed to be palpable concern about the possibility of changing building height limits from 35 feet to 42.5 feet, even with upper story setbacks. On the other hand, a couple who developed a three story building in the center of town, with retail on the bottom and living space on the upper floors noted, if they weren't able to have three stories the project would not have penciled out financially.

What was an empty lot in the heart of downtown now has shops that contribute sales tax to the city, and happy residents who very rarely need a car because they can walk to nearby businesses.

On the whole it seemed liked most participants agree with the community vision (in italics below), as stated in the Downtown Strategy and Specific Plan, they just didn't quite agree on how to get there:

A downtown that retains its small town charm, is vibrant with pedestrian activity, is safe and comfortable, offers a variety of unique shopping and dining choices and has a unique combination of built form and landscape character in keeping with its surrounding natural environment - characterized by oak-studded hillsides and cool shady creeks. A downtown that encourages economic activity beneficial to the community through the encouragement of small local businesses and enhancement of its tax base - generating revenue that continues to enhance and maintain a high quality public space environment.

For more information go to www.lovelafayette.org for the official Draft Plan, Executive Summary, comments, workshop notes and more.



Mike Anderson presents the plan to business and property owners Photo Sophie Braccini

Businesses Discuss Strategic Plan

More than 110 business owners crowded Temple Isaiah's meeting room on Feb 24 for a presentation of the downtown specific plan organized by the City of Lafayette and the Chamber of Commerce. A panel composed of City Manager Steve Falk, Lafayette developer Steve Cortese, Council Member Mike Anderson and Chamber member Ann Denny answered questions. Here are some of the questions and answers:

The city is planning to have certain zones become parking or public areas, will Lafayette use eminent domain to materialize the plan?

Falk said Lafayette has no such intention. The plan will set the rules for when someone wants to redevelop a business/property. Cortese added, "The purpose of the plan is to give a view of what could happen within 20 years; it's what could happen."

The city is planning a public walkway along the creek; when someone has a property there and will want to remodel that property will he have to comply with this project?

Falk's short answer was, "Yes."

Why build housing in the downtown?

Falk outlined the reasons: To provide housing for seniors who want to downsize and stay in Lafayette, and housing for first time buyers and young families; also adding condominiums in the downtown area will help preserve open space. He added that "it's better to develop where there is already some development." Finally, he said, "This could help with the city's affordable housing mandate."

How can the parking problem be resolved?

Falk: "The consultant has proposed a central parking (Campana area) that would be used by employees of nearby business and schools and would free up parking for customers. The plan also proposes to consolidate exclusive small parking that individual stores have to create pocket parking in the back of stores.

Why increase the maximum height to 42 1/2 feet?

Cortese explained, "That's the height of the Mercantile, it allows for higher ceilings for the first floor retail area which is what is required today, plus add two levels above."

How will the problem of traffic congestion be solved?

Anderson answered, "We first need a better understanding of our traffic problem. One solution that has been proposed by the consultant is adding connecting streets that would parallel Mount Diablo and release that street. Another solution would be to build a tunnel under Mt Diablo to directly link Moraga traffic to the freeway." He added that the engineering of the project would be very complex and very expensive.

S. Braccini

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