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The Seifel Report: Make Downtown Development Less Costly

By *Sophie Braccini*

When Libby Seifel presented her consulting firm's report about the financial feasibility of the Downtown Specific Plan on April 12th to a joint meeting of the Lafayette City Council and Planning Commission, her conclusion was that the combination of current City regulations and a weak economy do not make new development feasible. Seifel identified many constraints that are imposed on developers, such as green certification, need to create open space, constrained building height and set backs, and parking requirements. On April 19th, Planning Commissioners recommended the loosening of some of the rules, while City staff continues to work on the parking situation. Seifel's team moved from site to site in downtown Lafayette to study how, following the city's menu of standards (a set of rules that developers need to abide by), they would be able to build profitably. According to the menu, developers can build a higher structure if they provide additional benefits to the city, such as free public parking, public artwork or additional open space. Higher buildings mean more revenue, but the city's requirements are so costly that every option studied by Seifel proved to be economically unviable.

Parking requirements were pointed out as one of the costly factors, "Four spaces for every 1000 square feet of retail, and five for restaurants, this is a high requirement," said Seifel, adding that for residential sites the requirements were lower, contributing to a better economic outcome for housing construction.

Another reason for the grim prediction is the current economic climate. "The office rents are not high enough to support the cost of building with parking, same with retail," said Seifel, who recommended that the rules be simplified. "I needed a Ph.D. in Planning to do this study," said Seifel with humor, "not a Masters degree." She stressed that the complexity of the menu of standards itself would be a disincentive to developers. Her recommendations were to rethink the parking requirements, allow for greater flexibility of building height, consider raising the density to 35 dwelling units per acre and allow ground floor residential units, "I have concerns about too much retail in the downtown," she added.

"What we saw tonight is a different way to analyze our plans," said Council Member Don Tatzin, "the (Planning) Commission might want to modify the requirements and get some community buy in." Council Member Carl Anduri suggested that local developers give their input, while Mayor Brandt Andersson reminded everyone that the Mercantile was a good example of what was feasible, with a specific height and parking both at ground level and partially underground.

The Planning Commission met the following Monday and agreed to recommend some modifications. "The ideas are starting to gel," said Lafayette Planning and Building Manager Niroop Srivatsa, "The Commission thought that the menu of standards was too complicated and could be dropped. They also would like to see a 35-foot limit for building height, or even 45 in some cases, with the establishment of retail design guidelines to manage the height, the bulk and the look of construction."

The parking requirements that, according to Seifel, are a big hindrance to economic development will be difficult to lift until other parking options are found in the retail area. "We are working on a comprehensive parking strategy including a parking inventory," said Srivatsa. The City is willing to purchase land that could be used for parking. "Six months ago we invited a dozen or so property owners to enter into a conversation with us if they wanted to sell their properties. We heard no positive response," said City Manager Steve Falk, "I have, since that time, had conversations with several individuals, and will continue to see if I can find a good prospect for a public parking lot."

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