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Controversial Downtown Specific Plan Given Okay

By Cathy Tyson

The Community Hall was half empty by the time City Council members finally unanimously approved the controversial Downtown Specific Plan after six years of passionate discussion and conflicting views of the future of Lafayette. The Downtown Specific Plan is meant to supplement and specify goals and policies spelled out in the General Plan - clarifying for potential developers what's allowable.

City Manager Steven Falk pointed out in a recent edition of Vistas that there is a substantial amount of common ground on the majority of the Plan: downtown parks, sustainability, convenient housing for young and old, walkways, and preservation of historic Plaza Way. Major friction, however, surrounded downtown building heights. Despite the debate, building heights up to 45 feet and a maximum of three stories were approved and will be added to the General Plan as an amendment, with two significant strings attached - only with City Council permission and with strict benefit requirements will a project be given a green light. Ultimately the City Council certified the Final Environmental Impact Report, amended the General Plan and adopted the Downtown Specific Plan.

"It's been interesting," said Special Projects Manager Ann Merideth, "a complex but enlightening process." Residents once again offered input, both pro and con for roughly two hours prior to the final decision. Council members were well aware of the chasm the Downtown Specific Plan has caused among residents and tried to be conciliatory.

To set the stage for the final decision, Planning and Building Services Manager Niroop Srivatsa explained Housing Element requirements. Cities across California are required to have a fixed number of housing units available for low and moderate income families available through an inventory of sites that have the potential for development. The Association of Bay Area Governments is responsible for the Regional Housing Needs Allocation, or RHNA, which spells out exactly how many very low to moderate income housing units the city must provide. The Downtown Specific Plan will support the city's ability to provide that mandated low income housing.

The requirement for the 2007-2014 cycle is 361 units spread across a range of low income categories. At one point in the long, multi-year process, the Lafayette Homeowners Council proposed a 25-foot height limit. City staff crunched the numbers and found, "it poses a significant obstacle in the delivery of affordable units," concluded the staff report prepared for the September 10, 2012 meeting.

If the city does not meet its housing numbers, it's deemed not in compliance. City Attorney Mala Subramanian described legal and monetary ramifications, calling them "significant." She explained that the City of Pleasanton was recently sued for not complying; the global settlement included \$2 million in attorneys' fees and several civic impacts.

Some residents complained that they were deeply concerned that the housing numbers are driving the Downtown Specific Plan. Others, like Larry Blodgett who was on the original Advisory Committee at the beginning of the process, said that there was input from all community groups up front; he called the Downtown Specific Plan, "necessary to fine tune our General Plan" and noted future projects, especially those with heights between 35 and 45 feet will be under a microscope.

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