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Strong support for downtown vibrancy, but jobs-housing ratio is critical

By Pippa Fisher



The Lafayette City Council is exploring options for increasing downtown vibrancy, upping the "Ooh la Lafayette" factor, as the city banners proclaim. Photo Pippa Fisher

Many suggestions have been forthcoming over the past few months in the course of preparing a report on increasing the vibrancy of downtown, and support within the community is strong, but concerns remain about the jobs-to-housing ratio.

Despite the lateness of the hour by the time it came up on the Lafayette City Council's agenda, a few supportive residents still remained to hear the discussion as Vice Mayor Susan Candell presented the report by the council's subcommittee on the city's Strategic Objective Four - developing a strategy to expand city support of local businesses and commerce and to increase the vibrancy of downtown Lafayette. Candell reported that it was notable how invested the public was throughout the entire process.

Interim City Manager Niroop Srivatsa emphasized the support in the community, saying that the subcommittee's meetings with stakeholders were filled with obvious energy and enthusiasm.

At the beginning of the year the council established a list of three goals and five objectives aimed at developing public policy in a variety of areas to create a roadmap for the city. At the end of the July 22 meeting the council not only accepted objective four, but also directed city staff to prepare a comprehensive report containing the recommendations for all five strategic objectives. The vote was unanimous, minus Council Member Cam Burks who was absent.

Candell explained that the committee, on which she served together with Burks, held a series of five meetings between March and May this year, talking with business owners, property owners and other stakeholders. She said they facilitated a brainstorming of "needs" and "wants."

Candell said that among the ideas from the meetings, notably the consensus was that no big changes to zoning are necessary but more mixed use should be encouraged.

The report showed support for retaining quality retail, enhancing walkability, and bringing privately and city-owned parking meters onto the same schedule and with the same fees.

Candell said there was strong support for additional strung lighting in the downtown core, from Happy Valley Road to Brown Avenue.

Other ideas touched on the desire to encourage arts and culture downtown, creating kid-friendly spaces and the need to mitigate the increased traffic on Mt. Diablo Boulevard during the afternoon rush as drivers seek to bypass Highway 24.

There was discussion recognizing the challenges of the East End, not least the current zoning which is "housing by right," meaning that housing developments can come in and need not replace any of the commercial or retail currently there. The report reflects that along with the influx of new state laws there is a risk of losing much of the commercial districts.

This is a particular concern for Mayor Mike Anderson who wanted to see a greater look at the jobs-to-housing ratio, and especially how to retain office space. Anderson made the point that he would like to get it on a legislative agenda so that a metric could be established.

Council Member Steven Bliss agreed. "The jobs/housing piece is really critical," he said. Adding to Anderson's comments, he continued, "Looking for ways we can make the case and actually push for policy at the state level that would factor in the jobs/housing balance is really key."

This strategic objective along with the other five will now be organized into a comprehensive report with recommendations on resources needed, and brought back to the council as a roadmap for the future.

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[back](#)

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