



To: Civic Center Station Area Plan Advisory Committee

From: North San Rafael Collaborative

Date: March 8, 2012.

Re: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CIVIC CENTER STATION AREA PLAN

The North San Rafael Collaborative would like to review and summarize recommendations to be included in the San Rafael Civic Center Station Area Plan. The Collaborative is a group of residents and representatives of organizations interested in the Civic Center Station Area Plan. Most of the recommendations have previously been presented to the Advisory Committee. They are summarized here to fit within the format of the Station Area Plan report, based on the report outline presented to the Advisory Committee at the January 2012 meeting. These recommendations were developed through consensus among the Collaborative participants who represent a diverse set of interests and concerns and whose affiliations are listed with the names at the end of this memo. We request that these recommendations and comments be incorporated directly into the Station Area Plan.

I. Introduction

- The Plans should clearly state the purpose of the Plan, as well as the limitations for what the Plan is and is not intending to accomplish.
- Any references to Areas A – H are the areas that the Advisory Committee has evaluated for the Plan.

II. Vision for the Civic Center Station Area

- We generally agree with the Advisory Committee's vision statement, and we add:
- We envision a community near the Civic Center SMART station that is a vibrant place of employment, gathering, and activity, with a mix of affordable housing, neighborhood retail, offices, and open spaces. Bicycle and pedestrian pathways connect all parts of the community with the station and major employers. The character of existing neighborhoods is retained and enhanced by the station area developments. It is a sustainable community - people can get around without using their cars, services and stores are within walking distance, existing buildings have been rehabilitated, and environmental resources are conserved.

III. Station Access and Connectivity

a. Complete Streets:

- Landscape Merrydale Road with trees, sidewalks, and appropriate lighting, and also restore and enhance the branch of Gallinas Creek that runs along the segment of Merrydale between Las Gallinas Avenue and the railroad tracks and then out to Highway 101.

b. Promenade Extension:

- Extend the Northgate Promenade through the station and on to the Civic Center, as depicted in the North San Rafael Vision.

- Provide a branch of the Promenade pedestrian/bicycle crossing of the tracks, to connect Merrydale Road.

c. Other Pedestrian Improvements:

- Provide pedestrian circulation throughout the area, with connections to the station, the Civic Center, and Northgate Mall.
- Provide a pedestrian (Promenade or Promenade branch) crossing of the tracks, at the west end of the station.

d. Other Bicycle Improvements:

- Provide bicycle circulation throughout the area, including a transition through the station, with connections to the station, the Civic Center, and Northgate Mall.
- Provide a bicycle (Promenade or Promenade branch) crossing of the tracks, at the west end of the station.

e. Transit Access:

- Consider transit access via Merrydale, on the north side of the tracks, since access by transit via Civic Center Drive will be highly unreliable due to traffic congestion.

f. Vehicular Access and Circulation:

- The Plan should state that there will not be any vehicular traffic connection of Merrydale across the tracks, as is stated in the North San Rafael Vision.

IV. Land Use

We provide comments here, on issues of interest and concern to us that are not organized under the subheadings of the report outline.

Affordable Housing

- The land use proposal developed by the Advisory Committee makes no mention of affordable housing; this seems to have been an oversight. The Plan should establish goals and incentives for developing affordable housing, such as an overlay zone that permits an increase in density only when a minimum share is below market rate. Prioritize housing for households earning less than 65% of Area Median Income, for Marin, which reflects the incomes of many employees working in and near the station planning area. Specify sources of funds for affordable housing. Encourage workforce housing throughout the area.
- New residential buildings should facilitate very-low and low-income housing, while also keeping the scale compatible with existing neighborhoods.
- Existing affordable units should be retained even as they are improved.
- Northgate Mall provides an excellent opportunity to provide affordable housing, especially under its renovated configuration that does not utilize the upper floors of the interior mall building; The Plan should include Northgate and identify it as an opportunity site for affordable housing.

Land Use and Development Concepts

- Some sites in the area have the potential for more intensive development, possibly mixed uses with ground floor retail and residential or office above. One example is the public storage next to the station at the north end of Area D, at 380 Merrydale. This may be a suitable site for mixed use, provided there is no development that would impact the residential properties immediately to the west of this parcel.
- The public storage and the Marin Ventures parcels, at the end of Merrydale in Area D, are opportunity sites for affordable housing. The Plan should

specifically call for 50% or more affordable housing at those two parcels, if any new development occurs there and if they are not utilized as parking for the train station.

- The alternative of using these sites for station area parking, preferably with access and egress from the Redwood Highway Frontage Road, should also be evaluated by the team of traffic engineers. This alternative would reduce traffic on Civic Center Drive, which is consistent with the North San Rafael Vision.
- In addition, the existing strip commercial along Redwood Highway Frontage Road in Area D, the Northgate 3 of Area A, and the west end of Area H could also be redeveloped with mixed use, with residences or office above retail.
- The site identified as Area D ought to be split, lengthwise down the middle, into two distinct vision areas (perhaps as Areas D1 and D2), to separate the parcels along Merrydale from the parcels along Redwood Highway Frontage Road. They have very different issues and offer different opportunities. The self-storage site at the north of Area D, however, should be retained as a single unit. The parcels along Merrydale should not have development that is any higher than is allowed by current zoning; the strip along the frontage road could be redeveloped with mixed use.

Building Heights

- The Land Use proposal, as modified by the Advisory Committee at the January 2012 meeting, is improved over the first draft and we appreciate the changes made by the Committee. The following reiterates our comments on land use for the Plan:
- The Land Use proposal is too focused on the numbers of stories and on increasing building heights within the planning areas; some of the proposed heights are excessive. Rather than the number of stories, the plan should provide guidance on limits of building heights.
- For the parcels along Merrydale Road, zoned as HR1 and GC, building heights should be limited to the existing zoning height limits of 36 feet (not more than 3 stories). The plan should not allow taller buildings along Merrydale; to do so would impose on the character and privacy of the existing residential neighborhoods.
- Buildings along Redwood Highway can be somewhat higher, but still not higher than 46 feet (not more than 4 stories).
- The parcels around Northgate Mall can also be higher.
- Building heights for the area adjacent to existing residential sites along or off of Civic Center Drive should be limited to a height that would allow for 3 or 4 stories, not 5 stories as proposed.
- In order to reduce the impact of building heights and massing, the Plan should call for design guidelines such as setbacks and stepped floors that can help to make buildings appear smaller in scale and more hidden from view.

Commercial Development

- Encourage new, local-serving businesses, including services for the rail station as well as neighborhoods. Rehabilitate and reuse existing

commercial buildings. Major new office development and destination retail are not appropriate near the existing neighborhoods.

- If the existing office development north and east of the Civic Center in Areas F and G is rebuilt, it should incorporate residential uses and not exceed the existing four-story height.

Neighborhoods

- Retain the character of existing neighborhoods and minimize the potentially adverse effects of traffic, parking, and development. Ensure that new building heights and residential densities do not have adverse effects on existing neighborhoods.
- New uses should not intrude upon or adversely affect the character of existing communities in the area, such as Rafael Meadows, Marin Lagoon, the neighborhood along Merrydale Road in Area D, and the residential area around Area C. The pedestrian and auto circulation improvements should improve access of existing neighborhoods to the SMART station and the Civic Center and should minimize the potential for spill-over parking into residential neighborhoods.

Other

- Northgate Mall is outside the City's study area; however, the addition of housing would benefit the retail uses and the surrounding area. Housing at Northgate has been recommended by the Marin Environmental Housing Collaborative and other organizations.
- Relate the Station Area Plan to adjacent parcels, such as the Christmas Tree Lot. It has potential for residential use, as well as retail and services. While we recognize that this site is part of the grounds of the Civic Center, its use is the responsibility of the County, and it is being considered as a site for the Farmers' Market, it is within the City's purview and has been discussed by the Committee. The Committee may want to develop suggestions for the site that are relayed to the County. This parcel and others near the SMART station could provide interesting places to shop and socialize for employees and residents.

V. Parking

As with our land use comments, we provide comments here, on issues of interest and concern to us that are not organized under the subheadings of the report outline.

- The draft parking proposal does not address parking for the Civic Center station commuters, to prevent commuters from parking in the existing neighborhoods; parking needs to be addressed, both in the land use and parking elements of the plan.
- Consider parking permits for San Rafael Meadows, or other neighborhoods, but only if and when needed.
- The plan should include specific areas to be considered as parking for the station. The North San Rafael Collaborative has previously recommended that the public storage and Marin Ventures parcels, at the end of Merrydale in Area D, be studied as potential train station parking, along with other parcels on the east side of Highway 101.
- Provide an adequate supply of parking at locations that do not have an adverse effect on existing neighborhoods.

- Make the most efficient use of nearby land by studying the feasibility of using existing underutilized parking lots for SMART passengers; these include, but are not limited to, the Veterans Memorial Auditorium and the self storage and Marin Ventures parcels at the end of Merrydale Road.
- Evaluate parking potential near the station, especially at existing surface parking lots on both sides of the highway. The station will be primarily used by people arriving here for work, so there is less need for parking than for a station from which people go to work.
- Consider allowing 10-hour parking on a portion of Merrydale, using pay per space meters. Use the money generated to provide improvements to the station area such as wide sidewalks, street lighting, etc.
- There will, however, be more reverse commuting from central Marin to the north in the future, and plans for parking should recognize this trend and a potential need for additional SMART parking.
- Reduce parking minimums for new development in the area, to promote housing affordability and encourage transit and bicycle use. Encourage unbundled parking for new residential developments.
- The Committee's report on parking includes several excellent ideas under *Tools for achieving reductions in parking requirements*, such as shared and unbundled parking. However, these recommendations contain the fatal flaw of only allowing them on 'a project-by-project basis through discretionary review.' Affordable housing developers list this type of uncertainty as one of the greatest barriers to working in Marin. In these economic times, developers aren't going to risk purchasing a parcel when they don't know what they can do on it. The time and money it would require to get parking reductions this way would directly threaten any chance of truly affordable housing in the area.

VI. Environment and Natural Resources

This section needs to be added to the Plan; it has been a focal area of discussion and planning throughout the process of developing this Plan.

- Protect and restore Gallinas Creek in the planning area, on both sides of Highway 101, according to recommendations by the Marin County Watershed Program as it pertains to the Las Gallinas watershed so that the natural hydrology of the watershed is understood and supported prior to and during development or reuse.
- Do not allow any filling or covering over of the creeks and wetlands in the area.
- Creeks through the area should be restored and connected with nearby open space.
- Address sea level rise in the Plan and how sea level rise can be accommodated.
- Use green building materials, and design for maximum energy efficiency.

VI. Implementation Strategy

- Elements of this Plan must be revisited once the Civic Center Station is designed, to ensure consistency between the two.
- Reach out to interest groups before the draft plan is presented to the Design Review Board and the Planning Commission.
- Other residential areas – such as Santa Venetia and Marin Lagoon —ought to be more involved in the process their input should be sought.

- Continue community involvement in the planning and implementation process; establish an ongoing community involvement process for even after this Plan is adopted.
- Engage the County to incorporate the Christmas Tree Lot and Civic Center in this Plan.
- We urge the Committee to recognize the planning guidance provided by North San Rafael Vision, adopted by the City Council in 1997. The North San Rafael Vision was the result of an extensive public process and consensus of multiple interests.
- The plan for land uses and access for the Civic Center station area must reflect the views of existing residents and businesses, based on a thorough understanding of alternative uses for the various sites, within the context of their surrounding neighborhoods

We appreciate the Committee's consideration of these comments and recommendations. We look forward to reviewing the draft Plan.

Thank you,

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