



April 2, 2012

San Rafael City Council
San Rafael City Hall
1400 5th Avenue
San Rafael, CA 94901

Honorable Mayor and Council Members,

Sustainable San Rafael has previously commented to the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) regarding the Draft Downtown Station Area Plan (DSAP) and has followed the development of the Plan closely, believing its policies are critical to our city's sustainable development. The arrival of SMART and our adaptation to the changes it will bring are among the most significant development issues we face. We appreciate the careful consideration it has received.

The Plan applies sustainable practices to an existing environment largely dominated and frequently overwhelmed by automobiles. Although we may not eliminate cars in the near future, this Plan begins the process of ending our reliance on a single mode of transportation. We ask that the Council keep this guiding concept in mind as the Plan develops into brick and mortar.

We support your action to accept the final Plan this evening and to diligently pursue its implementation so that the city benefits fully from the arrival of SMART. We recommend that you accept the Plan tonight, and charge the CAC and staff with refining implementation priorities and timing, with continued input from the public. The following items are of particular importance during implementation:

- Compact development. SSR supports the proposed increases of heights and FAR to encourage development close to transit and to achieve greater continuity of development to help overcome the barrier of the freeway. These changes are consistent with the goals of San Rafael's Climate Change Action Plan and the Sustainable Communities Strategy. Current structures of this scale on Fourth Street have integrated well into the fabric of downtown. We understand and support the concern of residents east of the freeway for a stepped down entry to the downtown, and we believe that the revised final Plan allows the City to address these concerns during the subsequent development of zoning revisions and design guidelines.
- Flexible parking requirements. The DSAP includes a range of recommendations for parking and, indeed, flexibility will be needed. The vision remains for a pedestrian and

bike friendly area and reduction of automobile use. This may require multiple strategies to create living space for the growing number of residents not wishing to own a car. At the same time, the Plan recognizes that parking impacts on adjacent neighborhoods need to be addressed. Again, this can be accomplished as code revisions are developed.

- Bicycle and pedestrian improvements. The DSAP appropriately creates links with the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan. We encourage the careful development of the "Complete Street" concept for Tamalpais Avenue to complement the Hetherton bikeway north of Fourth Street and to complete the connection south to the Mahon Creek path and the Canal Paseo. Creating a safe connection to the Canal and east San Rafael along Second Street may be challenging, but it is critical to the overall success of the plan.
- Other public improvements. The Plan includes a small plaza at the north end of Whistlestop and a greenway along the northern reach of Tamalpais. These would be delightful additions of public space, but they are not enough. This planning area will help establish San Rafael's identity well into the future. The area needs both consistent design guidelines for private development and a coordinated public improvement program, grounded in the best principles of urban design, to integrate the plaza, greenway, bicycle and pedestrian improvements, under-freeway connectors and creek-side improvements into a coherent whole. Only then will the opportunity presented by this Plan be fully realized in a livable and animated district.
- Workforce housing. The Plan acknowledges the need for below-market-rate housing but adds little beyond what is already in the General Plan. Additional bonuses or other incentives need to be explored during the code-development phase of implementation, along with the identification of appropriate sites. This is an ideal area for workforce housing, and we believe that extraordinary means should be used to achieve it.
- Sea level rise. Finally, we are concerned that to bring this Plan to fruition may require additional resources to defend the area from the incursions of predicted sea level rise. Significant portions of the study area lie within the threatened zone. The Plan does not address this issue substantively, but only by reference to the climate adaption actions in CCAP. Near-term attention to these actions is prerequisite to the Plan's success.

The Plan is a good description of our collective hopes for the future of San Rafael. We look forward to working with the City on the hard part, making the vision come true.

Sincerely,

Jerry Belletto,
Secretary



May 30, 2012

San Rafael City Council
City Hall
1400 Fifth Avenue
San Rafael, CA 94901

Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Sustainable San Rafael has previously commented on the Downtown Station Area Plan in a letter of support dated April 2, 2012. (Please see attached). Since then, presentation to the Council has been delayed while a key element of the plan, the future of the Whistlestop building, was re-considered. SSR is not commenting on the merits of the proposed development, other than to lament the inability of the community so far to find a solution that would retain an iconic building while allowing our seniors to enjoy the benefits of a re-vitalized downtown area.

The Whistlestop building's historical use as a train station and its classic neo-mission style, linking San Rafael to California's past, were recognized by citizens at all of the Station Area public workshops, making its re-use perhaps the single most-agreed-upon element of the Plan. While the Station Area Plan continues to provide a clear roadmap to a more sustainable downtown, the potential loss of this building highlights some key elements that will be essential to the Plan's successful implementation:

- This site is a key point of entry to San Rafael and needs to be a welcoming and lively.
- An iconic architectural statement is necessary here to mark that entry.
- The ground floor of this site should be as active and accessible as possible, featuring cafes and other retail, ideally with an arcade linking the station platform and Tamalpais.
- The designs of the station platform and the adjacent site demand careful integration, which has not yet been provided by either SMART or Whistlestop.
- The already-limited dimensions of the public rights-of-way for both SMART and Tamalpais Avenue must be preserved and used to optimize their public purposes in accordance with the Plan. (For instance, the substandard width of the west platform proposed in the preliminary SMART design needs immediate re-study to achieve a width appropriate to what will likely be the most heavily used platform in the SMART system.)

- At the same time, certain functions required for use of the site, such as drop-off and loading, could be provided in concert with the public drop-off and loading zones and other “complete street” improvements that the Plan proposes for the Tamalpais right-of-way.
- Another key element of the Plan, flexibility of parking requirements (including off-site parking), should likewise be applied proactively by the City to accommodate optimal re-use or redevelopment of this critical site. Certainly, parking should in no event be allowed (much less, *required*) to pre-empt active, pedestrian-friendly ground floor uses in a gateway development immediately adjacent to a primary transit station. That would be completely at odds with the spirit and specific recommendations of the Plan.
- The station plaza that the Plan suggests for the north end of the site is a minimal amenity to anchor the visual character of the Station Area—it should be expanded (not eliminated), and amplified with the adjacent street landscaping, public artwork, creek-side greenways, and landscape treatments of Tamalpais that the Plan proposes.
- The site needs careful integration with the “complete street” improvements recommended for Tamalpais (from 2nd to Mission) and Fourth Street (from Lincoln to Grand), unifying the inviting, pedestrian character of this new gateway district.

SSR recognizes that the Downtown Station Area Plan is a work in progress, and we therefore urge the Council to charge the Citizen Advisory Committee for Economic Development with the on-going responsibility of monitoring Plan implementation and keeping it faithful to the vision and values it has expressed. Next steps include:

- Preparing necessary Code revisions, including parking requirements.
- Developing a comprehensive Public Improvements program for the district.
- Establishing design guidelines to unify and integrate private and public improvements to create the “sense of place” called for by the Plan.
- Resolving the future of the Whistlestop site as the centerpiece of the Station Area, including its integration with the SMART station itself.

Since the downtown area is one of two Preferred Development Areas in Marin, we recommend that the City actively pursue MTC funds to support such a unified Plan Implementation effort.

The arrival of SMART presents San Rafael with a rare opportunity to control its future, to turn a vision on paper into a real place of charm and sustainability—and ultimately to reclaim the City’s streets from the encroachment of the freeway, returning them to spaces dominated by people, not cars. To capture that opportunity, it’s vital that the momentum of the Station Area planning process continue without pause.

Sincerely,

Jerry Belletto,
SSR Secretary