

STANFORD
UNIVERSITY



August 29, 2011

Mayor Richard Cline
Mayor Pro Tem Kirsten Keith
Councilmember Andrew Cohen
Councilmember Kelly Fergusson
Councilmember Peter Ohtaki
City of Menlo Park
701 Laurel Street
Menlo Park, CA 94025
Via e-mail: city.council@menlopark.org

Re: Menlo Park El Camino and Downtown Specific Plan (“the Plan”)

Dear Councilmembers:

Stanford University owns six parcels, totaling approximately 12.8 acres, in the El Camino Real South-East portion of the Menlo Park El Camino and Downtown Specific Plan area. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to the City regarding the draft Plan’s policies. As you are aware, Stanford has participated since the beginning of the planning process in order to understand the community’s objectives as they relate to our properties. We support the Plan’s goals and believe the thorough public outreach process conducted to date, which has included extensive community involvement and input, has resulted in a draft Plan that can provide significant benefits to the Menlo Park community.

The draft Plan determines that Stanford’s land is suitable for multi-family residential, commercial and mixed use development, including a hotel, an east-west pedestrian and bicycle linkage near Middle Avenue connecting through Burgess Park, and a pedestrian promenade along El Camino Real.

The draft Plan allows a floor area ratio of 1.25 and a housing density of 40 dwelling units per acre on Stanford’s properties, with a potential Public Benefit Bonus of 1.75 FAR and 60 units per acre. The Plan recognizes that the increase in FAR and density help to finance public improvements. In addition, the Plan states that density bonuses could be considered for senior housing, additional residential units including affordable units, a hotel, and platinum LEED certified buildings.

We support the Plan’s goals and policies. But in connection with that, we are concerned that a few of the Plan’s requirements could seriously undermine the ability to redevelop

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Stanford's property in the manner envisioned by the Plan. Development of our property is highly constrained by the site's narrow configuration and location which is sandwiched between El Camino Real and the railroad tracks. In order to provide the transit-oriented mix of uses, intensity and amenities desired by the community, we request additional flexibility to position structures in a manner that enables optimal use of the site. As explained in more detail below, our suggested revisions are intended to promote the Plan's policies in a practical and realizable manner.

The following are specific concerns we have with the draft Specific Plan:

Building Breaks (Pages D3, D7, E33, E34, E35, E71 of the Plan)

The draft Plan's standards and guidelines for building massing and modulation are intended to reduce the monolithic character of buildings, ensure that all new buildings complement the existing character of the area, ensure appropriate transitions to adjacent neighborhoods and provide variety and visual interest. Stanford agrees with these goals. As depicted on page E32, there are a variety of ways to incorporate both horizontal and vertical modulation into an attractive building design. However, we ask that the City modify the Plan to allow for additional flexibility with regard to building breaks.

The draft Plan states that building and frontage breaks are encouraged in all areas of the Plan with one exception: rather than encouraging breaks, the Plan *requires* building breaks in the southeast area of El Camino Real. (Page E33) We ask that the Plan be modified to *encourage* building breaks in the ECR-SE area as one of several methods of ensuring that buildings are not monolithic, but to *require* a building break only at Middle Avenue.

The Plan (at page E71) requires seven building breaks in the ECR – SE area of the Plan, each of which must be at least 50 feet wide, with one at 90 feet and another at 120 feet. Figure D1 on page D3 shows two of the breaks. Figure D5 on page D7 provides a conceptual diagram showing six such breaks. Figure E12 on page E35 provides a more detailed diagram showing all seven breaks. With the exception of the break at Middle Avenue, none of these breaks would enhance pedestrian or bicycle connections due to the barrier of the train tracks at the rear of the properties. However, as can be seen on the diagrams, the breaks will substantially constrain site development, resulting in unlikely or relatively small building areas for the type of transit-oriented, mixed-use development envisioned by the Plan.

While we acknowledge the need for building modulation along El Camino Real, we believe the required building breaks called out in the Plan are neither necessary nor practical. As previously stated, the Stanford site is narrow and backs up to the Caltrain tracks. Visual breaks would only open a view corridor to the railroad right-of-way, limiting the aesthetic benefit behind the concept. Also, the narrowness of the site causes the building breaks to substantially limit design flexibility, as well as the ability to provide the density and mix of uses desired in the Plan. We suggest the following modifications to the draft Plan:

Middle Avenue

The Plan requires a minimum 120 foot building break at Middle Avenue. While we support the concept of a bicycle and pedestrian crossing at the train tracks in the vicinity of Middle Avenue, this can be achieved within a narrower building break that does not severely restrict the ability to redevelop for mixed use on sites adjacent to this break, each of which is located near transit and would be linked to Burgess Park via the pedestrian and bicycle crossing. We suggest a reduced building break requirement on the order of 60 feet in the general vicinity of Middle Avenue to allow for flexibility in redevelopment. Also, locating the building break closer to the parcel line between APNs 071-440-040 and 071-440-030 would allow for greater development efficiency if the two parcels were developed separately. The 60 foot break would mirror the width of Middle Avenue and provide ample space for a publicly accessible plaza with pedestrian amenities.

Cambridge Avenue

The Plan requires a 90 foot building break at Cambridge Avenue. A break in this location would essentially prevent redevelopment of the parcel to the south of Cambridge Avenue. There is only a small sliver of land between the existing Stanford Park Hotel parking lot and Cambridge Avenue. (The diagram on page E35 does not depict the existing, leased surface parking lot.) As previously stated, we recognize the benefits of building modulation at this location. However, it would be possible to provide the desired articulation at this location, as well as a plaza area, without a building break. For example, a “U” shaped building aligned with the Cambridge cross street would serve the same purpose as a complete building break. By contrast, a complete break in this location would render the undeveloped parcel to the south of Cambridge Avenue unusable.

Additional Breaks to the North and South of Middle Avenue

In addition to the breaks at Cambridge and Middle Avenue, the draft Specific Plan requires an additional 50 foot break at Roble Avenue located at ground level, and four more 50 foot breaks that could be located above a parking podium. While breaks could be encouraged as a means to provide building modulation, they should not be required. Other design requirements of the Plan would achieve the Specific Plan’s goal of mirroring the street grid on the other side of El Camino Real without unnecessarily constraining redevelopment opportunities. Given the site configuration and location, we ask that the Plan should be revised to address massing and modulation issues through means other than building breaks.

Setbacks (Page E70 of the Plan)

Front Setback

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We support the Plan’s 10 foot minimum front setback along El Camino Real. However, it would be helpful to clarify that the Plan’s 15 foot sidewalk requirement includes 5 feet of existing right-of-way, in order to make the setback and sidewalk provisions consistent.

Rear Setback

The draft Plan requires a 20 foot rear setback. We feel that a rear setback adjacent to the Caltrain tracks is not necessary and could reduce the developable area of the parcels. We suggest no minimum rear setback, but recognize that fire district will retain the authority to impose specific building setbacks as needed. In some cases, uses such as surface or structured parking may be appropriate up to or close to the property line.

Open Space (Pages E70 and H10 of the Plan)

The draft Specific Plan proposes a minimum 40 percent open space requirement for the ECR-SE portion of the Plan area. Based on our review of the combined draft Specific Plan requirements applied to our parcels, we feel this level would be inconsistent with the high density transit-oriented mixed use development that the Plan envisions for our properties. The 20 percent open space requirement proposed for most other portions of the Plan area is more realistic for our area, and would still represent a significant improvement over the minimal open space currently on the sites.

The Plan recognizes that Stanford’s properties are located in a developed area that is separated from housing and other sensitive uses. The Plan calls for a relatively high intensity and density of uses on the site and provides for density bonuses as an incentive for providing desirable uses such as senior housing and a hotel. A 40 percent open space requirement runs contrary to these goals and is not needed in light of the properties’ location. Accordingly, we request a modification to the Plan to specify a 20 percent open space requirement in the ECR-SE portion of the Plan area.

In addition, we request a modification to the definition of Open Space, as found on page H10 of the draft Specific Plan, to clarify that open space includes all landscaping, plaza areas, pathways, and walkways, (including walkways along El Camino Real), and the phrase “and preserved from development for public use” be deleted. The current definition appears to restrict open space to a natural area, park, square or plaza open to the sky. Under such a restrictive definition, even a 20 percent open space requirement would be unduly restrictive and inconsistent with the Plan’s goals for a higher intensity of development.

Sustainability (Page E49 of the Plan)

Stanford University has a strong commitment to, and extensive record of providing, sustainable development and supports the Plan’s sustainability recommendations. However the assumption in policy E.3.8.3.03 on page E49 that redevelopment projects

that are over 4 acres will have a greater ability to incorporate sustainability features than redevelopment projects that are less than 4 acres is not well reasoned or supported. Stanford's site is long and narrow. Due to the policies of the draft Specific Plan for our site, which encourage multiple uses including a hotel use, coupled with the narrowness of our site, we do not believe that we will experience sustainability opportunities that are greater than other, smaller redevelopment properties. Accordingly, we ask that the City delete recommendation E.3.8.3.03.

Transportation Demand Management (TDM) (Page F33 of the Plan)

Stanford has a long history of strong support for voluntary TDM and is a recognized leader in TDM program development and implementation. However, as indicated in detail in our letter dated June 20, 2011, state law prohibits the City from mandating TDM. Instead, the Specific Plan should refer to the City's General Plan TDM Policy II-C-1, which encourages the City to work with employers to encourage employees to use alternatives to the single occupant vehicle.

Planning Commission Recommendations

We appreciate the hard work performed by the Planning Commission, and are pleased that they have recommended moving forward with the Specific Plan. We would like to address one of their recommendations, specifically 4.a.i., regarding ECR SE Height. Reducing the allowable façade height by one full story, as recommended by the Planning Commission, will have the effect of limiting the façade height for commercial or mixed use buildings along this portion of El Camino to 2 stories. A two-story height limit along El Camino in this area is very restrictive. Given this area's proximity to El Camino and public transit, this constraint seems inconsistent with the philosophy envisioned in the Plan. We believe the Specific Plan will better enhance the reuse potential of the properties, allow for greater design flexibility, and better promote a transit oriented style of development if it retains the higher façade limit specified in the plan.

We appreciate being able to provide our comments to you. We also want to reiterate our support for the City's planning process and to urge you to take advantage of the significant efforts of all in the community who participated over the past few years.

Sincerely,



Steve Elliott
Managing Director, Development

cc: Thomas Rogers, City of Menlo Park
Planning Commission, City of Menlo Park