

ECR/Downtown draft EIR and Specific Plan review process

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Dear honorable Mayor and Councilmembers, Thank you for your thoughtful discussion last evening about the review process. I am writing to elaborate a little more on my comments made during the meeting.

This planning effort is likely to affect the heart of our community for at least 50 years, so it's important for the remaining steps of the process to be as thoughtful, thorough, and inclusive as possible. As suggested by councilmember Keith or Fergusson last evening, it would be helpful to see a mock-up of the specific plan effects. Additionally, it could be very helpful for community review to pilot the recommended closure of Chestnut and certain parking lot entrances. Since the Chestnut closure is suggested within the first years of the Plan, this trial should be done as soon as possible to help inform the review process prior to issuance of the final EIR. Certain critical companion documents are not currently available for review, making it impossible to truly understand the potential impact of certain changes. While it was stated that the draft Financial Impact Analysis may be available by early July, it is my understanding that neither the draft Zoning Ordinance Amendment or draft General Plan Amendment are to be available until the time of the Final EIR. If my understanding is incorrect, I would appreciate knowing that.

During the upcoming reviews, I think it is important to assess the draft Plan against the Vision goals, as well as the adequacy of the Guidelines to support the Goals. In other words, how well are the goals achieved through the Plan, what is well addressed and what isn't, Similarly the draft Plan should be reviewed against ALL of the current General Plan goals and policies. Although this draft Plan covers an area of town, it is just a piece of the larger picture for our community - and the changes would be made without benefit of a holistic and comprehensive new General Plan for the entire city.

During review, it also would be helpful to look at what existing businesses

(goods and services) would not be supported over time by the draft Plan and

consider how and where these might be provided in the future. For example, car repair services are essential to every car owner, and convenient access to transportation is helpful when the vehicle will be left at the shop. While not "pretty", these services are much needed and also provide to the city sales tax revenue on parts. Where would they go in the future? Normally the answer to this sort of question would come from the General Plan, but the current plan is just a piece of the entire city.

While I do not believe anyone in Menlo Park cares for the vacant lots on El Camino or vacant storefronts downtown, I urge the Council and reviewers to be very cautious about concluding the reason is the current zoning. After all, under the current zoning, there have been several recent projects

(e.g., 1906 El Camino), a number of approved but un-built projects (such as

1300 El Camino, 1460 El Camino, 1706 El Camino), and the Derry project that just needs the Council approval after having been approved by the Planning Commission some time ago. Additionally, much of the land along El Camino south of Middle is owned by Stanford, which is busy with its just-approved major medical center expansion and has land leases that won't expire until 2014. Retail uses are permitted by right downtown, so the current zoning supports retail uses rather than inhibiting them.

Reviewers should discuss vibrancy and what might influence that and how well the Plan supports those factors. Statements have been made at the dais and in the draft Plan and DEIR that imply additional density and intensity

(beyond current zoning) are required for a more vibrant El Camino and

downtown. I would contend that the actual uses matter more. Some commercial establishments, for example, bring more vibrancy than others (e.g., restaurants vs banks or nail salons). Think Cafe Boronne vs an office building or housing. Consider what has recently made Town & Country shopping center much more vibrant without adding higher stories or housing to it.

The draft Plan promotes more housing, which could improve the current jobs/housing imbalance, but it also promotes a lot of new commercial office growth. Reviewers should consider whether this will cause the the city to continue to "chase its tail" with this endless cycle of more jobs stimulating more pressure for housing in our built-out town.

The city's currency is said to be its land use policy. According to the draft Specific Plan, the new base intensity (FAR, essentially square footage) and density (dwelling units/acre) allowed throughout most of the area would be higher than allowed currently. While there also is a bonus FAR and even higher

density allowed subject to providing public benefit, the new higher base seems to be given away to many property owners with no expectation from the city other than normal fees, for this financial gift.

The draft Plan mentions many times the important goal of enhancing east-west pedestrian and bicycle connectivity. Not only is this a desire for a more friendly community, it also can reduce traffic congestion. However, the Plan includes no new Class 1 and almost no new Class 2 bike paths (there is one short new block's worth on Encinal, I believe). The proposed new train undercrossing doesn't connect the east side to downtown and doesn't connect to any existing Class 1 or Class 2 bike pathways. While this is ok for the spandex biker set, it probably won't help entice most of the rest of the community to abandon cars. This is a once in a generation opportunity to improve this gap! In contrast, Palo Alto has long bike-friendly boulevards. The least we can do is to create continuous Class 2 routes through the center of town.

Thanks again for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Patti Fry, Menlo Park resident and former Planning Commissioner Received on Wed Jun 15 2011 - 15:42:25 PDT