

WHY EVEN DO A SPECIFIC PLAN, ANYWAY? *Downtown Specific Plan Goes to Council*

If, over the last few years, you have even vaguely followed the local newspapers or glanced at the *Vistas* in your mailbox, you've probably seen articles describing the tortuous six year path that Lafayette's Downtown Specific Plan (DSP) has travelled.

Why does something like this take so long to produce? Why is it important? Why is it controversial?

Background

First, a little background. Every California city is required to have a General Plan, which serves as a statement of the community's vision for the future. Lafayette first adopted its General Plan in 1974, and updated it in 2002. It is a good long-term plan that seeks to coordinate all of the physical development in every city neighborhood.

Because, however, it is long-range and comprehensive, at its finest grain the General Plan only articulates expansive goals for large swaths of the community. It is truly general in its nature, hence the name.

For instance, when referring to the downtown area, the General Plan speaks in broad platitudes, stating that the primary goal for the downtown Lafayette is to "establish a distinct, convenient, attractive, and safe commercial area that serves and complements the residential neighborhoods of the City while enhancing its tax base."

In order to reach that goal, the General Plan is hardly more specific, suggesting that planners should "encourage a mixture of retail, office,

commercial and residential uses to meet business, service, shopping and dining needs of the community and visitors alike." At its most detailed – which isn't very detailed at all – the Lafayette General Plan calls for the city to:

- **Increase the property tax base** through infrastructure improvements and renewed private and public investment.
- **Increase retail sales tax revenues** by capturing a greater percentage of the regional market and by encouraging people to stop in Lafayette for shopping, personal services, and entertainment.
- Continue to **encourage multifamily residential** uses downtown.
- **Preserve and enhance historic sites** and structures.

The Lafayette General Plan, however, is not naïve about its own deficiencies. To its credit, it recognizes that more work is needed and, in fact, it orders the City to produce additional planning documents, including design guidelines for the downtown and the preparation of a long-range vision statement for the eastern end of Mt. Diablo Boulevard.

In 2006, responding to this direction from the General Plan and facing increased

demands for new downtown housing, the City Council ordered the preparation of a specific plan for downtown Lafayette.

What is a Specific Plan?

A specific plan is a blueprint for the systematic implementation of a general

Top Five Things You Need to Know about the DSP

- 1 It envisions a downtown where residents congregate, shop, enjoy cultural activities, conduct civic affairs, and savor the beauty and ambience of a small town.
- 2 It allows Lafayette to control its development objectives rather than simply reacting to land use proposals as they arrive.
- 3 It executes the General Plan's goals by providing clear, tactical instructions for future development.
- 4 It calls for building heights of 35 feet while at the same time establishing strict protocols for evaluating exceptions to that limit up to 45 feet.
- 5 It limits buildings to three stories and 35 residential units per acre.

plan. That's all it is: a strategy to make general plan goals happen.

Because that's the case – and this is important – a specific plan never controls or supersedes a general plan. The general plan is always superior. If the specific plan and the general plan decided to arm wrestle, the general plan would always win. In a Venn diagram (surely you remember those from fourth grade), the specific plan would be a little circle that fits entirely inside the big general plan circle. Thus, if a specific plan suggests policies that are different from those in the General Plan, it cannot be adopted until the General Plan is first amended by the City Council.

One big benefit of the specific plan is that it allows and encourages the community to be active about its goals

(continued inside)



Downtown Specific Plan *(continued)*

rather than simply reactive to new development proposals as they arrive. If it's a good one, the specific plan tells developers in clear, unambiguous terms exactly what the city wants to see and where it wants to see it. It lays out ground rules to ensure that the evolution of the downtown is consistent with the community's vision.

What's in the DSP?

Here are some highlights. The plan calls for:

- **Distinct downtown districts**, each with its own character and purpose.
- **Three downtown parks** for residents and visitors.
- The **preservation and revitalization of historic Plaza Way** where, in 1848, Elam Brown established the first Yankee settlement in the area.
- **Housing for the young and old** close to BART, grocery stores, and civic uses.
- A **continuous system of walkways** for pedestrians.
- A network of **conveniently located parking lots**.

So Where's the Controversy?

Parks, walkways, historic preservation: there is a lot to like about the DSP. Even some critics say that they support more than 90% of the plan. And indeed, it's that last 10% of the plan that has generated the debate. Most of the commotion is focused on the way the plan seeks to balance economic vitality with the preservation of the community's character.

Economic vitality, at its essence, requires some level of creative destruction wherein failed businesses and obsolete buildings are replaced by new enterprises and developments. This kind of change, however, often butts heads with preservation goals which, by definition, eschew change.

Nowhere is this tension more evident – and controversial – than in the sections of the DSP that address future downtown building heights. The current General Plan has long stipulated that buildings in Lafayette shall be no taller than 35 feet, except in a few

blocks around the BART station, where buildings can climb to 45 feet.

Over the last couple of decades, however, several builders convinced the Planning Commission and City Council that taller buildings make sense in other locations and were granted General Plan amendments to build them. These buildings are located up and down the Mt. Diablo Blvd. corridor and include the Lafayette Park Hotel, Lafayette Town Center Apartments (the brown-shingled building behind Baja Fresh), Lafayette Mercantile (home of Yankee Pier restaurant), and – most recently – the Lafayette Library and Learning Center.

Recognizing the frequency with which the General Plan's 35-foot height rule has recently been contravened – and that these projects are not clustered around the BART station like the General Plan anticipated – the drafters of the DSP concluded that there must be a different way to regulate building heights. And so, rather than continue the practice of formally outlawing tall buildings but then occasionally allowing them anyway, the DSP would retain the 35 foot limit but also create a formal process for approving buildings up to 45 feet.

The new process would require that, in exchange for taller height, the building must not only meet rigorous design standards but also provide significant additional

benefit to the community – parks, plazas, open space, public art, etc. The DSP then goes further, stipulating that all such height exceptions can only be approved by the City Council – not by the Planning Commission or staff. The reasoning is that decisions regarding building height are so important that they should be reserved for directly elected – and not appointed – officials that are accountable to voters.

Notably, the DSP would not only continue to limit all residential buildings to a maximum of 35 units per acre but introduce a new three-story limit as well. Doing so ensures that any new res-

idential project would be no more dense or generate any more traffic than is currently allowed by the General Plan.



At dozens of public meetings held over the last six years, many residents have risen to support the plan's vision for a sustainable, pedestrian-oriented downtown that, as the General Plan orders, encourages multi-family residential uses and renewed private and public investment in Lafayette. Many others, including members of the Lafayette Homeowners Council, note that downtown Lafayette is already congested and have expressed concerns about the additional traffic that growth will bring. They also note that taller buildings could block views to the surrounding hills.

Each group has made their points effectively and passionately – and they will undoubtedly continue to do so.

What's Next?

In other words: Big decisions ahead for the City Council, which is expected to take final action on the matter at its meeting on September 10. All members of the public are welcome and encouraged to attend. Please join us at 7pm at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center (which, if you were wondering, is 44' 6" tall!).

Make Your Voice Heard!

Attend the meeting at 7pm
on September 10 at the Lafayette
Library and Learning Center
OR

Email the City Council via
cityhall@lovelafayette.org

WHAT'S UP WITH THAT, LAFAYETTE?

Why can't people use the city sports fields without a permit?

Every so often, residents inquire about the reasoning behind particular city policies and practices. In previous issues of *Vistas*, we've answered questions such as why the Council decided to implement a motorcycle traffic enforcement program, why the City allowed the "Crosses of Lafayette", and why Lafayette has parking meters while Moraga and Orinda don't.

Given that it is summer, several citizens have recently asked why people can't use City-owned sports fields without a permit. The good news is that you don't need a permit to toss a ball with your kid, to practice soccer moves with your best friend, or to hike on the trails. Permits, however, are required for groups of four or more who seek to use the fields, batting cages or group picnic areas.

There are four reasons why:

1. Limited General Funds

It costs over \$350,000 a year to maintain the City's parks and trails. Over the years, state and federal mandates, new demands by the public, an aging infrastructure, and costly police services have stretched the City's general fund budget significantly. And since only 6% of property taxes paid by Lafayette homeowners actually go to the City, tough choices are necessary when allocating how funds are used. Permits and user fees are essential to operate and maintain the fields at the level Lafayette residents expect.

2. Demand

The City has only four sports fields. The large demand by youth sports groups necessitates a policy whereby groups who provide organized sports to the greatest number of Lafayette youth have priority. Issuing permits guarantees these organizations have fields available to run their programs successfully in exchange for fees that defray some of the cost of maintenance. There are 2½ months in the summer and 3 ½ months in the winter when these organizations do not need the fields. Demand is high in the summer and availability in the winter months can be limited due to weather. The permit process makes it possible to appropriately allocate field space and notify user groups if fields need to be closed due to weather or maintenance.



3. Liability

We live in a litigious world and the permit process allows the City to protect itself by making sure users have adequate liability coverage.

4. Maintenance

Groups and individuals who obtain permits can be notified about scheduled and unscheduled field closures. Weather, broken irrigation lines, re-seeding, and dangerous conditions are all reasons why the fields may need to be closed. Groups and individuals who just show up without a permit during wet field conditions can seriously damage the field and cause extended field closures which negatively impact other users who obtain permits and follow the rules. The permit includes a refundable security deposit which allows the City to address damaged turf if necessary.

Have a question you'd like answered in a future issue of *Vistas*?

Email the editor: TRobinson@lovelafayette.org.

NEW LAFAYETTE FARMERS MARKET



URBAN VILLAGE FARMERS MARKET ASSOCIATION

After months of behind-the-scenes work, a new Lafayette Farmers Market kicked off on Sunday, June 10th! The year-round market is held every Sunday from 9am to 1pm at the South BART parking lot (off Happy Valley Road). The market features roughly 60 vendors offering fresh, organic produce, specialty foods, baked goods, artisan coffee, fresh cut flowers, a pizza oven, freshly prepared crepes, waffles and tacos, live music, face painting, and much more. Opening day drew about 2,000 attendees, some of whom compared it to the San Francisco Ferry Building, which is packed with specialty food vendors.

Sponsored by Sustainable Lafayette, the new market is operated by Urban Village, which currently runs 10 others including the Temescal, Montclair Village, and Old Oakland markets. Because of Lafayette's focus on sustainability, Urban Village has chosen all organic produce vendors, minimizes use of plastic bags, and works towards zero waste. The best part is that there is loads of parking behind the Town Center (between Pet Express and Panda Express), along Happy Valley Road, and in the north BART parking lots. The market is also easily accessible via the walking/biking path that starts behind Baja Fresh.

Info, parking map and vendor list, at www.sustainablelafayette.org and www.urbanvillageonline.com.



City of Lafayette
3675 Mt. Diablo Blvd. #210
Lafayette, CA 94549

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Happy Third Anniversary to the Lafayette Library and Learning Center

To celebrate, and as its major Fall fundraiser, the Library Foundation is holding its first ever Authors Dinner, *A Literary Feast*. Look for details on www.LLLCF.org, at the Library, and in the AdLib(rary) e-newsletter. Seating will be limited, so watch for ticket sales to be announced.

We Need Your Feedback on Your Garbage and Recycling Services!

The Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority (CCCSWA) manages the garbage and recycling services for Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda. We are in the process of developing our next solid waste franchise agreements, and we'd like your input. We're hosting a Community Workshop at the Orinda Community Center (Founders Auditorium) at 28 Orinda Way, on Thursday, September 13th. Food and beverages will be served from 6:30-7:00pm and the workshop will be from 7:00-8:30pm. We will be discussing your current solid waste services and potential new changes for the future. Are we missing programs you would like to use? Are you having any issues with your services? We welcome any suggestions and feedback from our communities! Questions? Call Ashley Louisiana at (925) 906-1801.

Senior Symposium

Interested in learning how to manage various aging issues? Mark your calendars for the Lafayette Community Foundation's 4th Annual Symposium, "Aging Successfully in Our Community," Saturday, October 13, 2012, 9am-1pm at the Lafayette Orinda Presbyterian Church. This free symposium – featuring guest speakers, a panel of community experts and an information fair – will benefit families, caregivers and the elderly. Come spend a morning with your friends and neighbors and learn about the wide variety of senior programs and resources available in our area. Refreshments will be served.



Aging **Successfully**
in Our Community

Annual Senior Symposium

Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation
Presents

A Literary Feast

SAVE THE DATE

Here's a Sampling...

Tamim Ansary
Annie Barrows
Katherine Chiljan
David Corbett
Kelly Corrigan
Robert Dugoni
Karen Joy Fowler
Christopher Gortner
Joyce Maynard
Adrienne McDonnell
Michelle Richmond
David Talbot

many more
to be
announced
soon!

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Mike Anderson	Vice Mayor
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Carl Anduri	Council Member
Don Tatzin	Council Member

Messages to all Council Members:
cityhall@lovelafayette.org

Administration

General Reception and	284-1968
Steven Falk, City Manager	Fax: 284-3169
Tracy Robinson, Admin. Srv. Dir.	299-3227
Gonzalo Silva, Financial Srv. Mgr.	299-3213
Joanne Robbins, City Clerk	299-3210

Community Development

Tony Coe, Engineering Srv. Mgr.	284-1951
Niroop Srivatsa, Planning Srv. Mgr.	284-1976
Ron Lefler, Public Works Srv. Mgr.	299-3214
P.W. Hotline (to report problems)	299-3259

If you observe illegal dumping in creeks & storm drains or accidental spills on roads, call Contra Costa Hazardous Materials Division 646-2286.

Lamorinda School Bus Program

Juliet Hansen, Program Mgr.	299-3216
	Or 299-3215

Parks, Trails and Recreation 284-2232

Jennifer Russell, Director	
Senior Services	284-5050

Police Services

Emergency: 24 Hours	911
Police Dispatch: 24 Hours	284-5010
Police Business Office:	283-3680

Anonymous Tipline, Traffic Enforcement, Suggestions & LEARN (Laf. Emergency Action Response Network), 299-3230

Fax	284-3169
Address	3675 Mt. Diablo Blvd. #210
	Lafayette, CA 94549

Website	www.ci.lafayette.ca.us
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E-MAIL: Council/staff members can be reached via e-mail using this address format:
First Initial + Last Name @lovelafayette.org
Example: SFalk@lovelafayette.org

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