

DOWN THE HILLS

2.0 DOWNTOWN PLAN OVERVIEW

2.1 PURPOSE

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide the reader with a brief overview of the elements of this Specific Plan. While following chapters of this Plan provide specific detail with regards to land use, urban design, transportation and implementation, this chapter synthesizes the major points of each of the elements and describes the major concepts involved in the Plan to revitalize downtown Belmont. The last section of this chapter contains a summary of each of the goals and objectives of this Plan to "set the stage" for each of the following elements.

2.2 ROLE OF THE DOWNTOWN

Downtown Belmont today looks remarkably similar to the Downtown Belmont of 20 or 30 years ago. The City's traditional Central Business District contains a wide range of loosely scattered commercial, office and residential uses centered on the major roadway corridors of El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue. The "commercial strip" appearance of Belmont is characteristic of much of the El Camino Real corridor, but the general consensus of Belmont's residents is that they want something better, something unique which can provide a "sense of place" for their downtown.

2.3 THE COMMUNITY'S DESIRE FOR CHANGE DOWNTOWN

The process for planning for Downtown Belmont began in March 1986 when the City of Belmont decided that its citizens must be involved in the future of Downtown. Instead of using the traditional, reactive form of public involvement in which a plan is developed independent of the community and later presented to the community for evaluation, a unique approach was used. The City held three workshops which were attended by well over a hundred people. Citizens went out on a walking and bus tour of Downtown and evaluated what should be preserved and what should be changed. They then worked in small groups to identify issues and the kinds of changes they would like to see. The workshops identified the major issues that Downtown planning should address and a strong consensus that change was needed in the Downtown. At these workshops, citizens developed the following desires for Downtown planning.

1) Image:

The scale and image of Downtown Belmont should reflect a smaller, village-like character and a strong relationship to the tree covered hills.

2) Creating a Downtown Core:

The block bounded by El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue, Sixth Avenue and O'Neill Avenues represents the Downtown core and should be improved as a center. Major change in this area was acceptable to create a lively, downtown shopping area. A plaza in this area was desirable. Public landscaping should be used to unify and define the Downtown while creating a place of beauty that caters to the needs of the pedestrians.

3) Traffic Improvements:

Traffic improvements must be implemented to lessen negative impacts from auto and train traffic.

4) Parking Supply:

Parking supply should be more accessible and convenient and planned to keep pace with new development.

5) Land Use Mix:

A good mix of Downtown businesses and land uses must be established to ensure compatibility between uses, satisfy unmet local market demand, and provide a more stable tax base.

2.4 DOWNTOWN TASK FORCE

In late 1986, building on the workshops, the City appointed a 15-member Citizens Downtown Task Force charged with examining the issues that came out of the workshops and ultimately preparing a comprehensive plan with a detailed implementation strategy for revitalizing the Downtown area. This Downtown plan concludes in this effort and marks a new beginning in the ongoing process of creating a better Downtown.

The first task that the Downtown Task Force undertook was a market study to determine what was economically feasible within the Downtown area, prior to undertaking more detailed planning studies. This market study was completed in the fall of 1987. The results of this study indicate that the total sales demand generated by the population of the City of Belmont could support an addition of approximately 400,000 square feet of commercial/retail space. However, competition for sales capture would be high, with the regional shopping malls already located within the vicinity. On a more conservative level, the study indicates that there is certainly an opportunity to support the expansion of approximately 100,000 square feet of convenience retail space, catering primarily to the needs of local residents who would prefer a convenient, local store rather than a large regional mall for convenience items such as food stores, drug stores, restaurants and specialty items.

In November of 1987, the City of Belmont hired The Planning Collaborative to assist the Citizens Downtown Task Force in the preparation of this Specific Plan. The direction at the outset of this planning process was to 1) build upon the planning efforts of the past, 2) develop a sound land use and economic program for the development of land in Downtown, 3) prepare specific urban design guidelines which

can provide early, positive changes in the appearance of the Downtown, and 4) to recommend realistic, economically viable strategies. to implement the Plan. Towards this end, the Citizens Downtown Task Force has conducted a series of public workshops to discuss such issues as:

1. The role of the Downtown Core and its implications for surrounding land use.
2. Alternative development programs for the Downtown Core and an evaluation of these alternatives against implementation, market feasibility, operations and design criteria.
3. The viability and economic reality of constructing underground parking facilities.
4. The impacts of future growth on traffic congestion.
5. The role of urban design policies in shaping the form and appearance of Downtown.
6. Site planning and architectural treatment within the various sub-areas of the Downtown.
7. The relationship between zoning, general plans and specific plans in directing land use development.

This Specific Plan consists of a documentation of the discussion of these issues, the decisions which were achieved, and the refinement of these decisions into specific policies and guidelines. This process has ensured that the plan for Downtown Belmont has in fact been prepared by the citizens of the community. It represents the consensus of opinions, desire. and expectation of a wide cross-section of community residents, and is the culmination of a true public planning process.

2.5 A FOCUSED PLAN: THE DREAM AND THE REALITY

An all too common problem with many community plans is that the hopes and the visions expressed in them bear little or no relationship to what can be realistically or practically accomplished. The basic principle which guides each component of this Specific Plan is to concentrate the City's available resources on implementable objectives.

A New Image

A major focus of this Specific Plan is to create a new image for the Downtown, to improve its appearance, and create the "sense of place" which the community desires. This Specific Plan responds to these issues with two major elements: the creation of a Downtown Core, or Village Center project; and urban design plans and guidelines to improve the form and appearance of the Downtown streetscape.

As the Downtown currently exists, the scattered pattern of land uses requires those people who utilize the Downtown for shopping, personal and professional services, and entertainment to travel by car from location to location. The pedestrian shopper is faced with the hazards of crossing busy streets, walking

long distances to accomplish a small variety of purchases and services, and finding no place to enjoy a pleasant rest and participate in one of the world's most favorite pastimes, "people watching".

The Village Center concept of this Plan is seen as the key element for creating a new image for the Downtown. The Village Center would form a focal point which would function as the center of the City's commercial, cultural and entertainment activities. Located on a two block area in the cross-roads of the Downtown, the Village Center represents a combination of a "clean-sweep" and a preservation of viable buildings having locations and attributes that would compliment and support a major supermarket tenant. The City Council determined in March, 1992 that the removal and rebuilding of all two blocks of the Village Center was not economically feasible due to changing market conditions, land prices, demand for office space, absorption rates, the recent recession, and overall costs. The outgrowth of this finding has been a scaling down of the Village Center Plan to one that is attainable giving current City, Redevelopment Agency, and private resources. The current version of this Specific Plan retains the key architectural, aesthetic, land use, pedestrian and traffic circulation, and other features identified as important components by the Downtown Task Force.

On a larger scale, the entire downtown district can achieve a new image, one which would set it apart from the rest of the El Camino Real commercial strip. This new image can be defined simply as "a better looking downtown". The urban design policies and guidelines of this Plan establish a streetscape of trees, building frontages, paving materials and architectural themes which define the boundaries of the Downtown, provide pleasant opportunities for people to walk and enjoy, and also provide a cohesive theme and appearance which ties the Downtown together as a visual and functional district.

Revitalization

The revitalization of Downtown Belmont relies on an ability to attract the community into the downtown to conduct their shopping, procure personal and professional services, and spend their leisure time. Because of Belmont's proximity to two major regional shopping malls (Hillsdale Mall and Fashion Island) the competition for shopping dollars and leisure expenditures can be fierce and difficult to overcome. Clearly, if the Downtown district were to compete with these regional malls for providing the same types of goods and services, the economic reality of achieving a revitalization downtown may never be achieved. However, if Downtown Belmont can manage to carve its own unique niche into the retail market, and provide a type of shopping experience which is not available at a large regional mall, then revitalization is indeed achievable. The concept for the revitalization of Downtown is to create that familiar, comfortable feeling of a self-contained neighborhood community. This feeling is most closely exemplified by communities which are often referred to as "Urban Villages" such as North Beach in San Francisco, College Avenue in Berkeley, and Downtown Mill Valley in Marin County. Each of these communities rely on providing for not only the day-to-day needs of the surrounding community but also provides opportunities for people to eat, be entertained, and spend leisure and relaxed time browsing, strolling and enjoying the urban outdoors. The Village Center concept of this Plan, together with policies intended to provide for adjacent land uses which are complimentary to and supportive of the Village Center, will help to bring about these characteristics. The Village Center project is seen as the catalyst which can spark longer-term redevelopment on adjacent parcels.

Compatibility of the Downtown Land Uses

Much has been said here about the vision and the role of the Village Center as a key to downtown revitalization, yet the rest of the Downtown, which can be easily divided into distinct sub-areas, serve their own vital role. A major task of this Plan has been to delineate these sub-areas and to provide clear policy direction as to how they should develop over time. A great majority of the Downtown is already firmly established, yet changing economic conditions and a renewed sense of vitality within the Downtown can effect dramatic changes in the long term.

Each of the sub-areas within the Downtown should form an inter-related and compatible mix of specific types of use. Clearly, the Ralston Avenue and El Camino Real corridors serve a vital role catering to the needs and services of the travelling public by providing for uses which are highly dependent upon the automobile. Although these types of uses are commonly developed in the typical "strip commercial" style, policies which require extensive landscaping, continuous streetfront facades, and streetwall heights which allow for the creation of viewsheds are contained in this plan to "spruce-up" these commercial strips and distinguish Downtown as a unique and special place.

The growing population base within the entire peninsula region will continue to put pressure on communities such as Belmont to supply an ever increasing number of housing units. Coupled with the fact that Downtown Belmont is directly on the Caltrain line providing commuter service to San Francisco, expanded residential opportunities within the Downtown are seen as a necessity. Borrowing from the concepts of 19th century European villages, as well as from relatively recent successful real estate projects, the concept of mixed use development which combines ground floor commercial uses with upstairs residential units has been programmed as an important revitalization element. Mixed use development is particularly suited to be compatible with the Village Center by introducing people into an environment which might otherwise be "dead" during non-working hours.

Other vital roles which can be effectively served within the Downtown include maintaining a strong public presence by retaining City Hall within the Downtown; continuing the presence of the service commercial/light industrial sector along Old County Road, and preserving existing single family residential neighborhoods as quality compliments to the Downtown.

A Practical Approach to Traffic

Probably the most direct example of the practical, realistic approach of this Plan is in regards to traffic improvements. Clearly, the Ralston Avenue and El Camino Real corridors are currently congested beyond acceptable conditions by the combination of commuters from throughout the region, cross-town traffic, and traffic generated by Downtown land uses. While there are numerous possible alternatives for relieving this congestion, each of these alternatives would require capital expenditures far beyond the City's capability to fund. Suggestions such as widening El Camino Real for the entire length of the City, grade-separating Ralston Avenue as an underground underpass, and elevating or lowering the Caltrain Tracks are proposals which would cost 20 to 30 million dollars or more. The basic principle of this Plan is to preserve and maintain the options for City involvement in any of these long-term solutions, but to focus current energies and resources on those improvements which can provide short-term or interim benefits, and on regulatory measures designed to minimize the traffic impacts of additional growth and development within the Downtown. This approach does not turn its back on, or ignore the significant traffic congestion problem in Downtown, but simply recognizes that the costs necessary for long-term

improvements are beyond the City's current funding capabilities, and that such long-term improvements will require continuous coordination and negotiation between a variety of public agencies including Caltrans, Caltrain, San Mateo County and each of the local city jurisdictions.

Public-Private Partnership

Similarly, the implications that redevelopment can provide a "clean sweep" of the entire Downtown area are equally unrealistic. Because the redevelopment strategy set forth in this Specific Plan is based on sound economic projections of market strategies, it is anticipated that private developers will need little coaxing or public assistance to begin the redevelopment process and to realize immediate profits. Instead of a major public involvement in this redevelopment process, this Plan calls for the City to leverage a moderate range of its financing capabilities and resources to assist private redevelopment where necessary. Such assistance may be in the form of property acquisition through eminent domain, backing of private loans, or facilitating acquisition negotiations, but is not envisioned as a fully public-financed redevelopment plan. Other opportunities which do call for direct City investment to revitalize the Downtown include capital improvements such as a street tree and other streetscape amenities.

2.6 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As has been previously described, a great deal of effort has been devoted to the planning for and revitalization of downtown Belmont. The following documents describe this planning process and should be referenced for background information.

Belmont, California, The General Plan. City of Belmont, August 24, 1982

Preliminary Belmont Downtown Concept, Final Report. Amphion Environmental Inc., July, 1986

Belmont Market Analysis Working Paper. Economic and Planning Systems, September, 1987

Downtown Belmont Revitalization Study. Economic and Planning Systems, February 23, 1988

Belmont Zoning Ordinance. City of Belmont, October 31, 1988

2.7 THE PLAN VISION: SUMMARY OF THE PLANNING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The following section consists of a summary of the Plan containing each of the goals and objectives of the Specific Plan Elements. The policy content of these goals and objectives is elaborated upon and more fully described in the following chapters of this Plan.

VILLAGE CENTER GOAL:

CREATE WITHIN DOWNTOWN BELMONT A COMMUNITY FOCAL POINT WHICH CAN FUNCTION AS THE CENTER OF THE CITY'S COMMERCIAL, CULTURAL AND ENTERTAINMENT ACTIVITIES.

VILLAGE CENTER OBJECTIVES:

1. Land Use Development Program Objective:

Provide a lively, attractively designed mix of retail, office, cultural and entertainment uses in one central location in Downtown. Provide for a concentration and intensification of convenience and specialty retail uses, thereby capturing a greater share of the economic "leakage" which occurs as Belmont residents shop in other communities.

2. Village Center Design Objective:

Provide a cohesive overall design for the Village Center which unifies its appearance and is complementary to the outlying portions of Downtown Belmont. The development of the Village Center should have a positive visual impact on the El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue corridors.

3. Community Enhancement Objective:

Provide a location for public activities and ceremonies, and a gathering place for residents to enjoy their downtown environment.

URBAN DESIGN GOAL:

THE DOWNTOWN SHOULD FORM A VISUALLY DISTINCT URBAN DISTRICT WHICH RETAINS THE INHERENT QUALITIES OF SCALE AND CHARACTER OF BELMONT, AS WELL AS MAJOR VISTAS OF THE SURROUNDING HILLS WHICH SERVE AS THE INSPIRATION FOR THE BELMONT NAME. AN ATTRACTIVE, VISUALLY COHESIVE APPEARANCE SHOULD EXPRESS A SENSE OF VITALITY AND PROVIDE A FOCAL POINT FOR PUBLIC ACTIVITY AND A COMMUNITY LIFESTYLE.

URBAN DESIGN OBJECTIVES:

1. Streetscape, Urban Open Space and Landscape Objective:

Achieve a well landscaped streetscape which distinguishes the downtown district, forms the urban open space network and establishes a new design quality for El Camino Real and Ralston Avenue, the major gateways and surrounding streets. A visual streetscape hierarchy should be created which establishes El Camino Real and Ralston as major prominent evergreen boulevards and all other downtown streets as having a uniform streetscape character.

2. Building Form Objective:

The pattern of building massing, height and bulk should achieve an orderly, generally low profile, urban village scale and appearance. The contrast of taller landmark building elements at the Village Center should visually anchor the townscape overall.

3. Architectural Theme and Appearance Objective:

A distinct architectural image for the downtown should be based on a mixed theme of building styles derived from the architectural heritage of Downtown Belmont. Creative architectural design should be encouraged to utilize historic forms in innovative and attractive ways.

4. Site Design Objective:

Creative site and building design should be promoted to achieve architectural and land use intensification goals of the Plan, while ensuring efficiency in automobile access and parking, provision for on-site landscaping, and a high-quality site appearance.

LAND USE GOAL:

LAND USE OBJECTIVES:

THE VILLAGE CENTER ELEMENT OF THIS PLAN SHOULD REPRESENT THE SINGLE MAJOR CHANGE OR MODIFICATION TO THE EXISTING LAND USE WITHIN THE DOWNTOWN. OUTSIDE OF THE VILLAGE CENTER DISTRICT, LAND USE POLICIES SHOULD ALLOW FOR AN INCREMENTAL EXPANSION OF RETAIL OFFICE AND RESIDENTIAL USES, BUT SHOULD NOT RESULT IN A MAJOR CHANGE TO THE EXISTING CHARACTER OR INTENSITY OF DEVELOPMENT.

1. General Commercial Objective:

Recognize and maintain the existing mix of retail and office space uses within the commercial area west of El Camino Real between Ralston and O'Neill Avenues as a compliment to the Village Center, and encourage an expansion of commercial uses on Waltermire Street west of El Camino Real by providing a relief of parking requirements for existing parcels through a

combination of reduction of on-site parking requirements, mixed-use shared parking, and an increase in public parking opportunities.

2. Mixed Commercial/Residential Objective:

Create new opportunities to simultaneously expand the community's tax base, stimulate redevelopment efforts, and address the growing housing needs within the downtown at select locations both north and south of the Village Center.

3. Highway Commercial Objective:

Recognize and maintain the function of auto-dependent land uses along the Ralston Avenue and El Camino Real corridors.

4. Service Commercial Objective:

Continue the presence of the older service commercial district on the east side of El Camino Real, particularly on those parcels with frontage along Old County Road.

5. Low Density Residential Objective:

Preserve the character of established low density residential neighborhoods in the southwestern portion of the downtown.

6. High Density Residential Objective:

Provide greater opportunities to meet the needs of the different lifestyles and incomes of the people who wish to live within the community at locations adjacent to already established multi-family residential neighborhoods.

CIRCULATION AND TRANSPORTATION GOAL:

MAXIMIZE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EXISTING CIRCULATION SYSTEM WITHIN THE DOWNTOWN CORE.

CIRCULATION AND TRANSPORTATION OBJECTIVES:

1. Circulation and Street Classification Objective:

Establish a ranking of street types capable of serving various levels of existing and future land use in a functional and safe manner.

2. Interim Improvement Objective:

Enhance the circulation system within the short term to reduce delays, maintain safe and pleasant travel ways and improve access to downtown land uses, especially the Village Center.

3. Long Term Improvement Objective:

Work towards a resolution of the long-term traffic congestion within the Downtown area in coordination with the development of the Southern Pacific Railroad right-of-way.

4. Transit Service Objective:

Promote and support expanded transit service to the downtown to reduce automobile congestion and facilitate desired levels of downtown development.

5. Downtown Parking Objective:

Provide additional off-street parking in the Central Business District through provision of adequate on-site facilities and public parking opportunities.

IMPLEMENTATION GOAL:

ESTABLISH A PHASED IMPLEMENTATION ACTION PROGRAM FOR JOINT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR INVOLVEMENT, AND PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR THE CONTINUED ADMINISTRATION OF REGULATORY CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT AND REDEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES NECESSARY TO CARRY OUT THE SPECIFIC PLAN.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Plan Regulation and Administration Objective:

Administer the Specific Plan in conformance with stated mandates, which include an annual review, preparation of an annual report, and actions to carry out the intents and programs of the Plan. Ensure consistency between the Specific Plan and other regulatory measures administered by the City to direct land use development.

2. Public Improvement and Financing Objective:

Carry out a prioritized public improvement program which enhances downtown appearance, promotes high quality private sector development, and improves the effectiveness of downtown infrastructure.

3. Redevelopment Program Objective:

The Redevelopment Agency should use its influence and capabilities in facilitating a public/private partnership approach to achieving downtown redevelopment goals, plans and projects.