

Citizen Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes: August 23, 2010

Present: City Manager Dan Schwarz, Director of Public Works Hamid Shamsapour, Senior Planner Neal Toft, facilitator Ben Noble, Contract Planner Julia Capasso. All Committee members present with exception of absences listed below.

Absent: Committee members Russ Brubaker, Tony Catrino, Cherie Daly, Wolf Gutscher, and Jerry Hauser; Planning Director Nancy Kaufman.

Senior Planner Toft called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. He introduced Ben Noble, senior associate with the Berkeley-based consultant firm Design, Community & Environment. Mr. Noble will be facilitating the Committee's discussions from this meeting forward. His recent experience includes managing the City of Novato's General Plan update (in progress) and the City of San Carlos' General Plan update (completed).

Staff Presentations

Ms. Capasso gave a brief presentation of the General Plan's purpose and structure and a summary of state requirements. Hamid Shamsapour, Director of Public Works, then gave an informative presentation about the Department's current and future infrastructure maintenance and improvement projects. A condensed version of the presentation will be posted on the City's website and distributed to the CAC via email. [NOTE: file may be too big to email, but will be posted on the City website when available.] A Q&A session followed the presentation (see attached document "Department of Public Works: Q&A" for transcript of all questions and answers).

Community Character Photo Slideshow

A brief slideshow was then shown featuring photos taken by the Committee to capture development types that contribute to or detract from the community character. Several sites in particular, the Nazari property, Larkspur Plaza, and the Niven property, were the subject of many "detracts from community character" photos. The CAC generally voiced concern that the Nazari property has remained vacant for so long, and identified it as an opportune site for a community gathering place or town square. Mayor Lundstrom noted that its development was governed by the Central Larkspur Specific Plan (CLASP), and that there are multiple reasons why the parcel has remained undeveloped. The CLASP was created with the oversight of a citizen advisory committee similar to this committee.

Community Character Element Discussion

Following the photo slideshow and discussion, Mr. Noble introduced the Community Character Element. He stressed the importance of strong, clear policies as a tool for communication to private property owners and developers. The Committee began the discussion of the Element by addressing question #5 on the Community Character Element handout:

"What elements detract from community identity? How can they be overcome?"

Julie Leitzell stated that parking meters and cameras at signals would detract from Larkspur's small town character, and that they should be specifically avoided in the future. Jim Moore agreed, and stated that high tech solutions are not always practical.

Mr. Moore noted that the three CLASP subareas have significant potential to shape the City's character in the next twenty years. Zach Perry agreed, noting that the vacant parcels in particular (the Niven property and the Nazari property) had the most impact. Mr. Perry added that while regulatory control over development of the historic Downtown was appropriate, excessive regulatory control of the development of private property may detract from the community's character. Joakim Osthus noted that good design can help blend new development with old development to maintain existing character.

David Esposito noted that the City lacks community gathering spaces, which detracts from a feeling of community cohesiveness. He thought that the Marin Country Mart and the Nazari property have potential for such gathering spaces. Mayor Lundstrom noted that the City had reduced parking standards to increase the vitality of sidewalks Downtown. She suggested a possible program/action to remedy this would be to consider the inclusion of public spaces in the design of commercial areas.

Alice Anderson stated that installing a gazebo in public gathering places for musical performances would be a major community draw, and could help increase foot traffic. Bruce Friedrichs agreed, noting that the space could be used for performances by school children as well as professional or local musicians. He also suggested that fostering a café-like feel to the Downtown shops, as Rulli's currently offers, is another way to add to community space. Additionally, he thought that the historic features of Downtown, such as the Rainbow Market sign, must be maintained and cared for, lest they become an eyesore.

Mike Folk stated that a higher intensity of use in the Downtown and reduced parking requirements would encourage more foot traffic and enhance the vitality of the Downtown. A Downtown farmer's market would be a valuable community asset and would attract more foot traffic to the Downtown area. James Holmes acknowledged Mr. Folk's comment, but noted that increasing urbanization may put pressure on the existing open space, which was recognized by the Committee members as one of the most important assets to community character. Daniel Kuntsler said that a balance could be struck between the current underutilization of retail space and higher density/urbanization. He thought that the re-designed Marin Country Mart could provide such a balance, with new boutique shops as a retail draw, and local services for residents. Elise Semonian stated that she does not encounter any problems with parking in her neighborhood, on the edge of the Downtown.

City Manager Dan Schwarz encouraged the CAC to define the limits of the Downtown. [Mr. Schwarz has clarified that this comment refers to "limits" from an economic development standpoint and does not refer to planning boundaries.] The Council recognizes a need for economic development. There is currently no synergy between Larkspur Plaza and the Downtown.

David Sternberg stated that though Downtown is the main symbol of Larkspur, for better or worse, there are others: the apartments at Bon Air and Skylark, Bon Air Shopping Center, Larkspur Landing, and Larkspur Marina.

The Committee then focused on the subject of Question #12 from the Community Character handout:

“Can the City’s livable environment be improved? If so, how can this be accomplished?”

Bruce Friedrichs said that the beautiful natural elements (marshes, woods, King Mountain) contribute to the City’s livability. Nancy Spivey said that increasing public access to the natural environment would help improve the livable environment. Mr. Osthus agreed, and said that he defined livability as anything that brings people outside the house. Alternative/additional access points connecting pedestrians with the natural environment would be valuable. He also echoed Mr. Folk’s earlier statement that increased density or intensity of use in the Downtown would help gather crowds.

Mr. Esposito stated that the livability of the City is enhanced by its economic diversity. Nancy Nakai noted that a significant contributor to the City’s livability is the feeling of ownership or belonging that residents feel. However, some longtime residents have started to feel shut-out from the community as it transitions to a more boutique, upscale retail and restaurant market. Residents should not feel priced-out of their community. Improving livability may entail encouraging a more diverse economic makeup of City businesses. Mr. Moore agreed, noting that the economic diversity of the City’s residents is an asset to the community and should be maintained. Mr. Holmes noted that the Larkspur Plaza Shopping Center provided a variety of uses and is economically diverse. Ms. Anderson said that it would be interesting to consider reversing the layout of the Larkspur Plaza with parking in the rear. Mr. Perry stated that drawing more people to the Downtown will help create more affordability in retail.

Mr. Kuntsler stated that there are several pockets of isolated, outer-lying neighborhoods in the greater community that should be unified. Ms. Semonian said that there were several missed opportunities for connections and parks, and that the City should ideally have a smaller school district. Mr. Esposito stated that the City should focus on developing a Rec Center and community pool. Ms. Anderson stated that pocket parks and public access paths can connect outer-lying neighborhoods. Such community-enhancing features should be required in future residential developments. Mr. Folk questioned the need for using streetlamps or signs to mark the boundaries of neighborhoods, and thought that the best way to link diverse neighborhoods is with the existing natural landscape.

David Sternberg said that the Cape Marin development (by the Bon Air Shopping Center) is an example of successful development- it is connected throughout with pathways and natural features, and its residents feel a strong neighborhood connection. This contrasts with the Hillview neighborhood, which is very isolated. It has only one gateway leading in and out of the neighborhood, and there are no connections to the rest of the City. Ms. Anderson said that installing footbridges, i.e. bridges that don’t allow vehicle access, could be an effective way of

connecting different neighborhoods or areas of the City. Bruce Friedrichs noted that the footbridge on the Twin Cities/Sandra Marker Trail is a great asset. As the discussion concluded, Mr. Holmes stated that some policies in the existing General Plan address many of the issues brought up by Committee members at tonight's meeting.

Next Meeting: September 27, 2010

Senior Planner Toft reminded the Committee of the next regularly scheduled meeting on Monday, September 27. In light of City Council direction to hold more than one monthly meeting if possible, he asked the Committee members to identify an additional meeting date in September. The Committee agreed to meet on September 20. [NOTE: The next meeting has been changed to **MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 6-8 p.m. in the City Council Chambers.**]

Adjournment

The CAC adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Discussion Highlights (Main points brought up during discussion- DOES NOT REFLECT A CONSENSUS)

- Create community spaces
 - Develop gathering areas, such as town square, music gazebo, etc. where the community can interact.
 - Encourage community events in community spaces, including farmer's markets, music performances, and visual and performing arts performances by local schools.
- Enhance the vitality of the Downtown
 - Consider higher intensity of uses
 - Review parking standards
 - Promote community events
 - Create synergy between different areas of downtown (i.e., between Larkspur Shopping Plaza and the smaller storefronts)
 - Promote sidewalk dining
- Serve all economic sectors of the community
 - Encourage a mix of high-end and low-end retail and restaurants
 - Encourage neighborhood-serving retail with "destination" or boutique retail
 - Maintain diverse housing types
- Enhance public access to natural resources
 - Add additional access points to existing trails and paths
 - Promote development of pocket parks and improvements to existing parks
- Promote safe and easy accessibility and connectivity for pedestrians and bicyclists (non-motorized transportation)
 - Use natural landscape- pathways, pocket parks- to connect neighborhoods
 - Promote construction of footbridges (no vehicular access) where viable
 - Enhance pedestrian and bicyclist access to public transit and commercial areas