

3 EXISTING CONDITIONS

3.1 LAND USES, GENERAL PLAN AND ZONING



The aerial photo to the left provides a view of land uses surrounding the Plan area. Adjacent land uses north of the Specific Plan area, across Doherty Drive, are the Mt. Tamalpais Racquet Club (#16 in Figure 3-1), Hall Middle School (#14), a sewer

Photo Key

1. Doherty Park
2. Railroad buildings
3. City parking lot
4. Downtown
5. American Legion
6. Larkspur Plaza
7. Abandoned greenhouses
8. Meadowood neighborhood
9. Larkspur Creek
10. Tamalpais High School District facilities
11. Redwood High School
12. Twin Cities Police
13. Piper Park
14. Hall Middle School
15. Larkspur Boardwalk
16. Mt. Tamalpais Racquet Club

Figure 3-1 Aerial Photo, Specific Plan Area

pumping station, the Twin Cities Police Department headquarters (#12) and Piper Park (#13). East of the Specific Plan area, across Larkspur Creek (Arroyo Holon), are the Tamalpais High School District offices, service buildings and equipment yard and the Redwood High School campus (#10 and 11 in photo). The Meadowood residential neighborhood (#8 in photo) is south of the Specific Plan area, on the other side of Larkspur Creek. Downtown Larkspur is adjacent to and extends into the western edge and southwest corner of the project area.

The eastern portion of the Plan area (the Niven property, Subarea 3) constitutes approximately 75 percent of the Plan area, exclusive of Doherty. From the early 1920s up until recently, this property housed a major wholesale horticultural business operated by the Niven family. At present, abandoned greenhouses and other facilities used for the former nursery operations occupy most of this area (#7), although several buildings do remain in use on an interim basis for the limited purpose of growing and wholesaling orchids. A small retail nursery also operates on a month-to-month lease on the northeastern corner of the property.

Uses in the western portion of the Plan area consist of the following:

- ❖ Larkspur Plaza (#6). The major tenant is the 23,400-sq.ft. Albertsons market. Other uses are a contiguous pharmacy of 2,500 sq.ft. and an adjoining 8,200-sq.ft. commercial building occupied by small retail, personal-service, and food-sales establishments.
- ❖ A gas station at the corner of Magnolia Avenue and Doherty Drive.

- ❖ A small triangularly shaped public park (Doherty Park, #1) in the northwest corner of the site fronting Magnolia Avenue.
- ❖ A partially developed private parcel (#2) containing four buildings: a former railroad station building, now occupied by a restaurant; a former railroad station warming house, now used as a crafts workshop; and two one-story commercial buildings occupied by retail, commercial, and office uses.
- ❖ A City-owned public parking lot (#3) with 28 parking spaces at the corner of Magnolia Avenue and Ward Street.
- ❖ A building that serves as the clubhouse for the local American Legion chapter (#5). This building also includes public-assembly accommodations and a small amount of office space that is leased out.

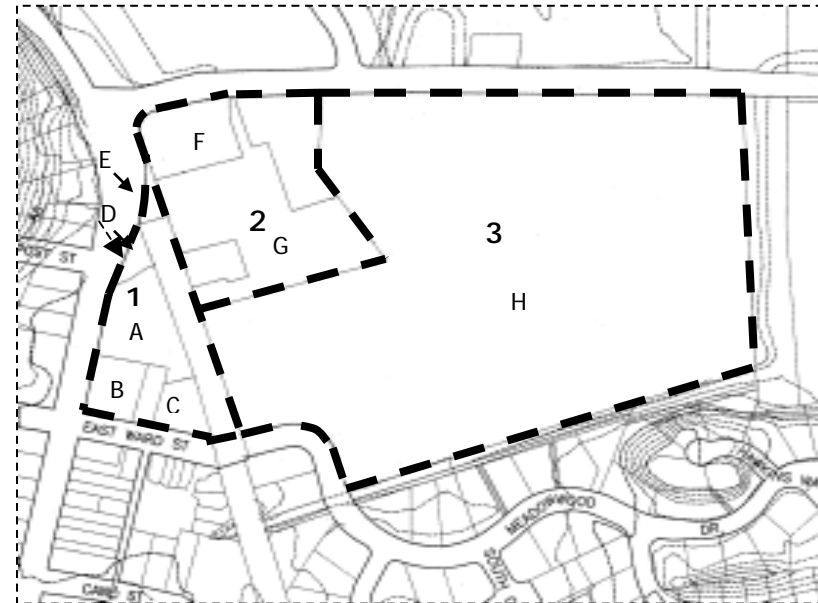
Adjacent properties to the north are in the General Plan land use designations "Downtown Commercial" (Tamalpais Racquet Club), "School" (Hall Middle School) and "Public Facilities" (Twin Cities Police Station). The corresponding zoning on these properties is Transitional Downtown on the Racquet Club and R-1, First District Residential, on the remainder of the Doherty Drive frontage. East of Subarea 3 the adjacent creek area is designated "Water" and the Redwood High School property is "School." on the General Plan Land use Map. The zoning for these areas is R-1. The Meadowood neighborhood south of the planning area is classified as "Low Density Residential" in the General Plan and is zoned R-1. Properties on the west side of Magnolia Avenue are shown as "Low Density Residential" (at the corner of Magnolia Avenue and Doherty Drive) and "Downtown Commercial." These areas are zoned R-1 and Storefront Downtown/Heritage Preservation District, respectively.

Subarea boundaries

Subarea boundaries have been defined to focus Specific Plan policies, objectives and implementation programs. Subarea boundaries are shown in Figure 3-2. The numbers assigned to each subarea are used throughout the remainder of the Plan to identify the Plan area under discussion. Table 3.1 below lists the General Plan Land Use designations and zoning for properties within the Specific Plan area boundaries. (Note: * indicates where Assessor Parcel #s have changed in the Assessor books.)

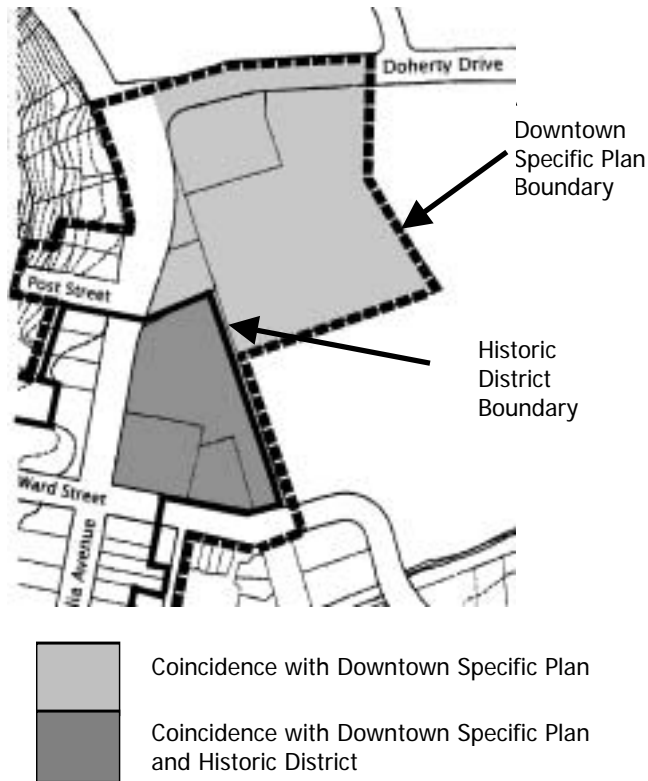
The area designated “Downtown” on Figure 3-3 (following page) is covered by a Historic Preservation District Overlay zone, which requires Heritage Preservation Board review of zoning changes and building, demolition, and grading permits. The Historic District was officially recognized by the State of California in 1981, and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. A portion of Specific Plan Subarea 1 is included within the City’s Downtown Historic District.

Figure 3-2 Subarea Map



Subarea	Assessor's Parcel #	Ownership	Acres	Existing Conditions		
				Land Use	General Plan	Zoning
Subarea 1						
A. Nazari	020-254-08, 10	Private	1.45	Commercial, retail & office	Downtown Commercial	SD/H-Storefront Downtown/Historic Preservation
B. City Parking Lot	020-254-01, 11	City	0.45	Parking lot	Downtown Commercial	SD/H-Storefront Downtown/Historic Preservation
C. American Legion Hall	020-254-02	Private	0.23	American Legion, office, public assembly	Downtown Commercial	SD/H-Storefront Downtown/Historic Preservation
D. Larkspur Plaza Driveway	020-254-07, -09*	City	0.11	Driveway	Downtown Commercial	SD/H-Storefront Downtown/Historic Preservation
E. Doherty Park	020-254-12	City	0.22	Park	Downtown Commercial	SD/H-Storefront Downtown/Historic Preservation
Subarea 2						
F. Gas Station	022-110-33	Private	0.56	Gas station	Downtown Commercial	TD-Transitional Downtown
G. Larkspur Plaza Shopping Center	022-110-41, 42, 46*	Private	2.21	Retail, commercial, personal service & food sales	Downtown Commercial	TD-Transitional Downtown
Subarea 3						
H. Niven Property	022-110-45	Private	16.80	Retail, wholesale nursery	Low Density Residential	LI-Light Industrial
Doherty Drive		City	5.58	Public road	Secondary Arterial	

Figure 3-3. Location of Central Larkspur Specific Plan in Relation to Historic District and Downtown Specific Plan.



The General Plan designates the Niven property (Subarea 3) as Low Density Residential on the Land Use and Circulation map. The General Plan text notes that the property is zoned Light Industrial (L-1) in recognition of the existing nursery. General Plan policies provide that the property may be rezoned when it is no longer used for nursery, and that a Specific Plan will be required before the property is redeveloped in any use other than nursery (Action

Program 22). The General Plan also indicates that Larkspur's historic consultant has stated that the nursery has the potential for landmark designation based on its industrial use.

The General Plan incorporates the following specific references to Subareas 1 (referred to as the Chevron/Walker property) and 3 in the Land Use Element (General Plan pages 39 and 40):

The 17.9-acre Niven Nursery property fronting on Doherty Drive is designated Low Density Residential. However, the present wholesale and retail nursery uses on the site are viewed as desirable and will be allowed to remain indefinitely. The property will be rezoned when it is no longer used for nursery, and a Specific Plan will be required before the property is redeveloped in any use other than nursery. Some parts of this site may have potential for higher density residential – such as housing that is affordable to seniors and others – and commercial development, but potential problems with traffic, as well as transition to adjacent uses, must be addressed first.

The land use designation for the Chevron/Walker property will remain Downtown Commercial, but development proposals will be considered only after a Specific Plan is completed for the Downtown. A public plaza may be located somewhere in the block.

The plaza location decision should be viewed in the larger context of what will be developed in the entire area from the intersection of Ward Street and Magnolia Avenue north to Doherty Drive encompassing the western edge of the Niven property and the existing shopping center. For that reason, the General Plan designates this a special study area that requires preparation of a Specific Plan before any further development is allowed.

The minimum lot size in a Low Density residential area is 7,500 feet where slopes are less than 10 percent.

In Larkspur's Downtown, the goal is the promotion of personal services and retail sales of convenience goods while enhancing the vitality and character of the historic commercial area. All uses in this area are to be compatible with the present mix of small-scale restaurants, drug stores, and retail shops. Second-story housing is encouraged and exempt from floor area ratio restrictions (i.e., density is limited by parking and height restrictions). The existing two-story scale of buildings is to be maintained, and off-street parking will be required for all new development. Floor area ratio for commercial and retail uses should not exceed 1.0 in the Downtown area.

3.2 PHYSICAL FEATURES AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Topography

The Specific Plan area is generally located on low-lying ground adjacent to Larkspur Creek near its confluence with the tidal estuary of Corte Madera Creek. Elevations within the Plan area range from a low of 7 feet above sea level immediately west of the Larkspur Plaza to a high of approximately 22 feet in the southwest corner of the area along Magnolia Avenue. The one significant topographical change occurs just east of Magnolia Avenue, where portions of the site drop from an elevation of 22 feet to about 15 feet in a distance of about 100 feet.

Geology and Soils

The Specific Plan area is located in the seismically active San Francisco Bay Region. Active faults of the region include the San Andreas fault (located approximately 8 miles southwest of Central

Larkspur), the Hayward fault (located approximately 10 miles northeast), and the Rogers Creek fault (located approximately 12 miles north-northeast). The smaller inactive San Pablo fault is located approximately 5 miles east of the Specific Plan area, and a relatively small, inactive, unnamed fault is located approximately 1 mile north of the Specific Plan area.

Geologic maps of the Specific Plan area published by the California Geological Survey (CGS) show the site as being underlain by artificial fill and bay mud. The nearest bedrock to the site consists of Franciscan Complex graywacke sandstone with outcrops located within one-fifth mile to the west.¹

The Specific Plan area is located on the northwest margin of San Francisco Bay. It is on a natural upland peninsula that extended into the historical wetland margins of San Francisco Bay. This area is generally comprised of fine-grained colluvium derived from the erosion of nearby hills and alluvial deposits of marsh sediments and Bay Mud. Soils in the Specific Plan area have been mapped as xerothents-urban complex, indicating significant artificially deposited fill materials that can exhibit variable drainage and engineering strength characteristics.² The artificial fill materials range in thickness from approximately two to nine feet below ground surface.

Subarea 3 is located on the limits of historic San Francisco Bay Margins. Subarea 3 was originally a peninsula trending in an east-west direction through the central portion of the property. Fill was placed on the property in the late 1800s.

¹ Rice, et al., *Geology for Planning Central and Southern Marin County, California*, DMG OFR 76-2, 1976.

² U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Soil Survey of Marin County, California*, 1979.

The western portion of the Specific Plan area appears to be underlain primarily by Pleistocene alluvium. The alluvium is underlain by the Franciscan Complex. The extent of Bay Mud underlying the western and topographically higher portion of the Specific Plan area appears to be limited.

Under 100-year conditions, flooding is projected to be limited to land immediately adjoining Larkspur Creek and a small area in the northwest corner of the Niven property. The remainder of the site lies within the 100- to 500-year projected floodplain.

The majority of the site consists of developed and disturbed areas. Where not occupied by structures, these areas are dominated by weedy species and scattered ornamental and invasive trees and shrubs. The small group of redwood and oak trees in the eastern portion of the Plan area is a valuable natural asset. At the southwestern edge of the Niven property, there is also a small patch of California bay and willow trees in an artificial depression. A planted row of liquidambar trees exists along the Doherty Drive frontage. Additionally, along Larkspur Creek, wetland vegetation worthy of protection within the immediate stream corridor extends approximately 300 feet upstream from Doherty Drive.

Hydrology and Water Quality

Larkspur Creek flows under the Doherty Road bridge at the northeast corner of the Specific Plan area, approximately 2,400 feet upstream of its confluence with Corte Madera Creek. Field observations of channel morphology and vegetation indicate that Larkspur Creek is tidally influenced along the east side of the site, to approximately 400 feet upstream of the Doherty Road bridge crossing.

The 1984 Flood Insurance Rate Map shows that the 100-year tide lies within the banks of Larkspur Creek in those areas where it borders the Specific Plan area. The remainder of the site and the adjacent section of Doherty Road are mapped as between the 100- and 500-year flood elevations. The site also appears to be subject to tidal flooding in and adjacent to the concrete drainage ditch located in the northwestern part of the site during extreme tide events. Because of the site's location within the lower reach of Larkspur Creek and the lower part of the Corte Madera Creek watershed, 100-year flooding is governed by extreme tide events, rather than extreme upland runoff events.

The main existing water quality problems are erosion/siltation and high coliform bacteria during the wet winter months. In addition, organic constituents from urban landscaping, metals, and chemicals from the drainage of swimming pools into the creek may be causing degradation of the creek's waters.

Shallow depths to groundwater and brackish groundwater conditions would be expected in the vicinity of the Specific Plan area. This is consistent with the site's low elevation and location adjacent to tidal saltwater.

Biological Resources

The majority of the Specific Plan area consists of developed and disturbed areas. Where not occupied by structures, weedy species and scattered ornamental and invasive trees and shrubs dominate these areas.

In the western portion of the Plan area vegetation worthy of consideration is limited to the redwood trees in Doherty Park and landscaping along the west and south edges of the City parking lot.

Although the majority of the Specific Plan area has been developed, a major portion of Subarea 3 has been inactive for a number of years. These areas are graded and filled, and dominated by weedy plant species and scattered ornamental and invasive trees and shrubs. Much of the upper creek bank along the eastern portion of Subarea 3, along the eastern section of the creek bank just inside the southern subarea boundary, and on fill mounds in the ruderal field that occupies the eastern section of the subarea is dominated by French broom, interspersed with other invasive and/or exotic species (i.e., fennel and oleander). The creek bank adjacent to the southern boundary also supports a dense stand of acacia, which dominates the southwestern portion of Subarea 3 south of the Ward Street entrance. At the southwestern edge of the Niven property, there is also a small patch of California bay and willow trees in an artificial depression. A planted row of liquidambar trees exists along the Doherty Drive frontage.

The creek channel and banks located on and adjacent to Subarea 3 are a wetland habitat resource. In this area, the salt-marsh type vegetation is confined to a narrow strip along the lower reach of the creek. Larkspur Creek and its adjacent linear wetland meet the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers definition of "other waters of the United States" and come under the jurisdiction of that agency and under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Fish and Game. There are no wetland areas or other waters of the U.S. on the upland portion of the Specific Plan area.

Wildlife in the Specific Plan area includes songbirds common to suburban settings (i.e., mockingbird, common crow, and house sparrow). Mammals commonly found in developed/disturbed habitats in the Specific Plan area include raccoon, striped skunk, and deer.

3.3 HISTORIC, CULTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

The Plan area has a rich cultural heritage that has included the occupation of the area by the Coastal Miwok Indians, nineteenth-century ranching and farming operations, and the operations of the Niven nursery dating back to the early 1920s.

The Plan area also contains the site of a station of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad, originally built in 1891. As a major commuter facility on an electrified line that connected with ferries to San Francisco, a local history described this station as "the hub and heart of Larkspur in its heyday." As such, it was a major contributor to, and determinant of, the early settlement pattern of Larkspur. Remaining evidence of former railroad use in the Plan area consists of an elevated track grade and a station house and warming shelter which face each other at the former station site (see Figures 3-4, 3-5). These two structures were built to replace the original station in 1929. In addition, the original station master's house and a baggage



Figure 3.4 View of station from west.

storage shed still exist and have been incorporated into the American Legion facility. Additionally, the abandoned greenhouses on the Niven property provide a key indicator of former major uses within the Plan area.



Figure 3-5 View of warming house from north.

3.4 SCENIC RESOURCES

Several significant visual attributes are present in the Plan area that, if properly considered, could economically and aesthetically benefit future development and the community. These attributes include:

- ❖ The railroad station and warming house which can serve both as focal features within the Plan area and provide an important link to the city's origins (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5).



Figure 3-6 Larkspur Creek

- ❖ Views of Larkspur Creek and creekside vegetation (see Figure 3.6).
- ❖ Views of Mt Tamalpais from various locations throughout the Plan area (see Figure 3.7).
- ❖ Views across Magnolia Avenue to several buildings outside the Plan area that have significant historic associations. These include the Art Deco Lark Theater, the Blue Rock Inn, and two adjacent buildings that date back more than a century.



Figure 3.7 View of Mt. Tamalpais looking west from Plan area.

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