



Community Development Department - Planning Division
10890 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito, CA 94530
(510) 215-4330 - FAX: (510) 233-5401
planning@ci.el-cerrito.ca.us

PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT
Meeting Date: July 17, 2013

I. BACKGROUND

The authority for preparation and adoption of specific plans is set forth in the California Government Code, Sections 65450 through 65457. The law stipulates that a Specific Plan include text and diagrams detailing:

- The distribution, location and extent of the uses of land, including open space, within the area covered by the plan;
- The proposed distribution, location, extent and intensity of major components of public and private transportation, sewage, water, drainage, solid waste disposal, energy and other essential facilities proposed to be located in the area covered by the plan and needed to support the land uses described in the plan;
- Standards and criteria by which development will proceed, and standards for the conservation, development and utilization of natural resources, where applicable; and
- A program of implementation measures including regulations, programs, public works projects, and financing strategies necessary to carry out the plan.

The former El Cerrito Redevelopment Agency undertook development of the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan jointly with the City of Richmond beginning in 2007 to develop a shared vision for the future of San Pablo Avenue, identify improvements for the Plan area, and adopt regulations that can be consistently applied in the Plan area to achieve the vision.

Moore Iacofano Goltsman, Inc. (MIG) was selected as the consultant to support the cities in this effort and prepare the Plan (Redevelopment Agency Resolution No. 563). City staff and the consultant worked collaboratively on the Plan along with members of the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan Advisory Committee (SPAAC) and through Planning Commission, Design Review Board and general public meetings.

A draft Specific Plan was completed in 2009 along with an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration (IS/MND). Based on comments received, a second draft was completed in 2010. On March 7 2011, at a City Council Study Session, Council directed staff to do further revisions to the Specific Plan to deal with open issues, expand the parking study and economic analysis, create more location-appropriate density, height and land use strategies to better reflect the priorities of the City Council, and better align the plan with contemporary land use and transit standards. A detailed Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Feasibility Analysis and Parking Study was then completed, with funding from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). A presentation to City

Council on November 21, 2011 resulted in a number of recommendations, including that the Plan allow increased height and densities near the BART stations, more flexible parking requirements with lower minimums, and a more flexible approach to mixed-use, including allowing ground floor residential throughout the Plan area. With this new information, new potential development numbers were evaluated and it was determined that the project warranted a full Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (EIR) consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act.

Staff returned to the City Council on April 2, with a recommendation to amend the existing contract in place with MIG to include three new tasks: 1. Renovation of the draft Specific Plan to incorporate all the improvements identified since the draft plan was created; and; 2. Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report, and 3. Dependent upon obtaining funding, to incorporate a Multimodal Capital Improvement Program. Task 1 also includes development of a San Pablo Avenue Complete Streets Plan, for which city staff had obtained grant funding. Completion of the Complete Streets Plan in parallel with the Specific Plan will help fulfill numerous goals for the Avenue including promoting a more multimodal environment, to support existing and future development. The City Council approved staff's recommendation unanimously.

II. DISCUSSION

Renovation and expansion of the draft Specific Plan

One of the overarching goals in this final phase is to ensure that the Specific Plan and its underlying CEQA document provided a clear framework for which to build the vision expressed by both the residents at the past workshops as well Commission and Council members. Specifically:

1. To plan for an envelope that would encourage realistic development where it was both expected and desirable by allowing increased height and densities near the BART stations.
2. To allow more flexible parking requirements with lower minimums for both new and existing uses near the BART stations to reflect what many existing business owners are requesting, the ability to locate and/or expand a variety of businesses using a more urban parking ratio. This would also allow interested commercial property owners located along San Pablo Avenue to re-purpose some of their property to something other than parking without impacting their sales.
3. To allow a more flexible, market based approach to mixed-use, including ground floor residential throughout the Plan area.
4. To improve the overall public realm along San Pablo Avenue.

Building on the information gathered during the specific plan process, a growing body of legislation has emerged to support more aggressive plan goals. State and local regulations related to increased transit access and walkability; as well as greenhouse gas emissions reductions have all been put in place as required by AB32 (California's Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006), SB375 (Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008), and the City's own Climate Action Plan (2013). Staff has identified this opportunity to use all the information gathered so far and fold it into a revised document to leverage the kind of public and private projects that the stakeholders have expressed interest in thoughtfully adding to our city.

Moving forward at this time also allows staff to integrate many recent and concurrent planning initiatives and possible funding sources into the Plan, including upcoming BART Station Modernization Plans, new BART TOD Policies, Plan Bay Area, Caltrans Complete Streets, and an update of the West County Plan for Routes of Regional Significance.

As part of the revised Specific Plan, staff has identified other strategies to assure that the Plan's products best situate the City to be ready and competitive to attract high-quality development. Additional tasks that will be completed as a part of the proposed task include:

1. Overhauling the existing draft Specific Plan to have a stronger focus on place-making, emphasizing the strategic importance of the areas around the two BART stations, and to have a more useable format
2. Developing a hybrid Form Based Code which will include a regulating plan, public realm standards, and private realm standards with design guidelines and character-based development standards to achieve both development flexibility and assure that future development contributes to establishing a unique character and sense of place along San Pablo Avenue

Expanding the Environmental Review to a Programmatic/Project EIR and Adding Complete Streets

By changing from an Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration to a Programmatic/Project EIR, the City can prescribe a specific density near BART stations and evaluate the potential impacts and mitigations of such development and complete conceptual development of public circulation improvements. This pre-planning effort can streamline the development of the types of buildings and public improvements that were envisioned by the stakeholders. A significant benefit of using a programmatic EIR is that it allows staff to address a significant limitation of the draft Specific Plan which was caused by constraints imposed on the Plan by the City's existing Level of Service (LOS) standards for signalized intersections, listed in the General Plan. Any impact on LOS generated by a new project, above what is allowed in the City's General Plan, would have triggered the need to prepare an EIR. This essentially translated into requiring a full EIR with over-riding considerations for each new multi-unit development project. With the new approach to the CEQA document and the inclusion of the Complete Streets Plan as a part of the Specific Plan, staff will be able to develop a new multimodal performance standard to help realize the City's TOD and multimodal vision and goals. Further, the ability for the City to adopt an integrated transportation metric that supports current and future multimodal mobility needs is not only supportive of the City's goals for reducing vehicle-miles traveled and achieving a balanced transportation system, but makes pursuing TOD a more economically feasible path. In the time since the draft Specific Plan was released, City staff successfully secured a grant to complete such a plan for the San Pablo Avenue Corridor.

III. NEXT STEPS

The draft Plan will be back in front of the Planning Commission in the next couple of months for a study session on the draft Form Based Code. A Public Scoping Meeting for the EIR is anticipated to be scheduled in Fall 2014. The City Council will receive an update and be asked to make Complete Streets Policy decisions in the next couple of months at a regular City Council meeting.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission receive the report regarding the update to the San Pablo Specific Plan and provide guidance as needed.