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# introduction

## SECTIONS

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- 1.04 Plan Goals and Policies
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## 1.01 PLAN PURPOSE

The purpose of the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan, adopted by the City of El Cerrito (September 2014), is to articulate a vision for the future of San Pablo Avenue, identify improvements, and adopt context-sensitive regulations that can be applied along its length and to adjacent areas. The Plan creates a framework for transforming the Avenue into a multimodal corridor that functions, not just as a thoroughfare, but as a place that provides a multitude of opportunities for living, working and community life. The Plan's key principles are to deepen a sense of place and community identity, attract private investment, strengthen partnerships, enhance the public realm, promote the everyday use of transit, walking, and biking, foster environmental sustainability, and add housing and commercial space.

The two and one-half mile section of San Pablo Avenue that traverses El Cerrito from its southern border at El Cerrito Plaza to its northern gateway at the Baxter Creek Gateway Park serves as the main commercial thoroughfare for El Cerrito. Bordered by Richmond to the West, the Plan Area includes parcels within both cities and has been developed over several years through close collaboration between staff and community members. Since the Plan's inception, the City of Richmond has embarked on a Livable Corridors planning effort, resulting in a compatible Form-Based Code. The Specific Plan defers to Richmond's Livable Corridors Form-Based Code (in development 2014) for properties in Richmond's jurisdiction and has been developed to articulate and achieve a common vision for San Pablo Avenue.

## **1.02 PLANNING CONTEXT**

The Specific Plan was developed in coordination with previous and concurrent planning efforts in both El Cerrito and Richmond and incorporates City, stakeholder and community input from each stage of the planning process. This section outlines the efforts and physical context that helped to frame the Specific Plan goals.

### **1.02.01 PREVIOUS AND CONCURRENT EL CERRITO PLANNING EFFORTS**

The following are planning efforts by the City of El Cerrito that shaped the direction of the Specific Plan.

#### **El Cerrito General Plan (1999/2003)**

The El Cerrito General Plan (1999) identifies San Pablo Avenue as the most significant opportunity area for the City and targets future growth around the two BART Stations and the Midtown area. The Specific Plan was developed to build upon the General Plan, which will be amended as a part of the Specific Plan adoption process. The 2007-2014 Housing Element (2012) specifically identifies the need to streamline permitting and design review in order to build the development needed for the dense urban framework envisioned by the General Plan and to support a vibrant, affordable San Pablo Avenue.

#### **Ohlone Greenway Master Plan (2009)**

The Ohlone Greenway Master Plan, adopted in the Summer of 2009, outlines the goals and conceptual improvements proposed for the Greenway, an important non-motorized transportation corridor and recreational amenity for future development. The Plan recommends circulation improvements that can contribute to increasing connectivity in the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan Area, as well as the integration of enhancements to adjacent development to create a vibrant zone of activity along the Greenway.

#### **El Cerrito Strategic Plan (2013)**

The Strategic Plan, adopted in the Spring of 2013, articulates a vision of El Cerrito as an environmentally-focused destination with vibrant neighborhoods, businesses and public places. The Strategic Plan guided the development of the Specific Plan framework and priorities to deepen a sense of place and community identity and foster environmental sustainability.

#### **El Cerrito Climate Action Plan (2013)**

The Climate Action Plan, adopted in the Spring of 2013, outlines the most effective actions to reduce locally produced greenhouse gas emissions and to create a safer and more sustainable El Cerrito. The plan outlines a series of Sustainable Community strategies, which include encouraging more compact, higher density infill development to reduce vehicle miles traveled. The goal is to create a walkable, bikeable San Pablo Avenue supported by strong public transportation use, vital commercial activity, a mix of housing types, pedestrian design elements, green infrastructure and urban green open spaces proven to reduce dependence on the private automobile.

#### **El Cerrito Urban Greening Plan (in development 2014)**

The El Cerrito Urban Greening Plan is an effort by the City to enhance quality of life for residents by improving existing and creating new public places and open spaces to support increased density and improve overall environmental sustainability. The Plan identifies specific greening opportunities near San Pablo Avenue and has informed the Open Space standards proposed in the Specific Plan.

#### **El Cerrito Active Transportation Plan (in development 2014)**

The Active Transportation Plan revises the City's Circulation Plan for Bicyclists and Pedestrians (2007) to create a walkable, bikeable, and sustainable City through the identification and prioritization of non-motorized transportation improvements. Key focus areas aim to improve connectivity throughout the Plan Area.



Figure 01. Theater block in Downtown



Figure 02. New City Hall building in Midtown



Figure 03. New Safeway in Uptown

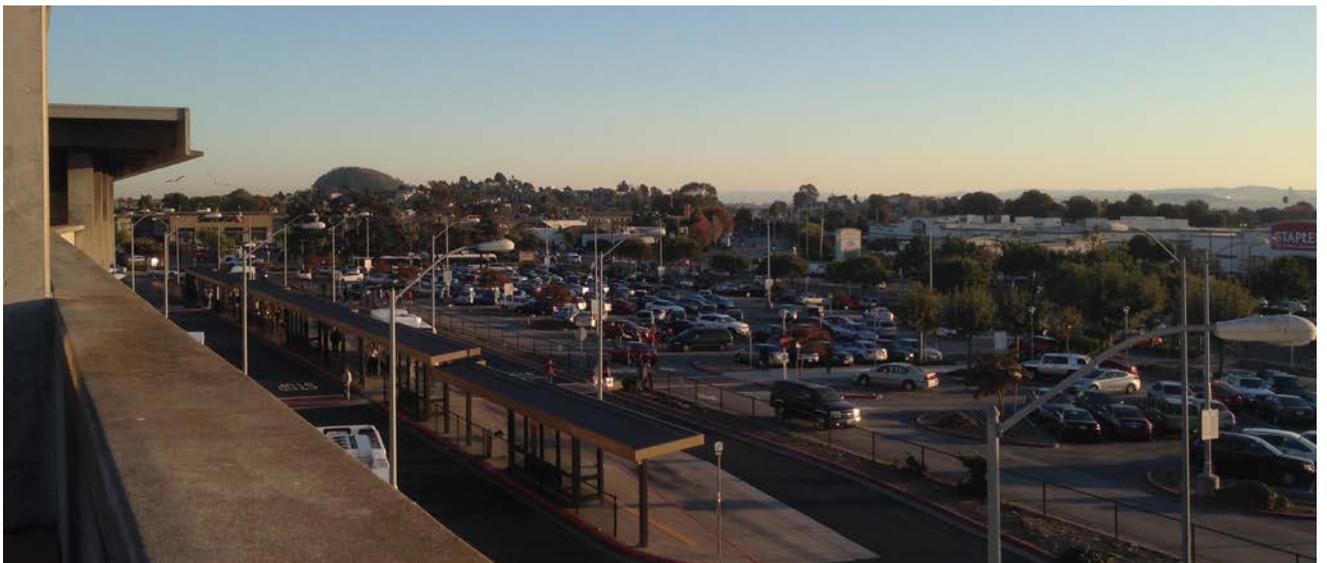


Figure 04. View of Plan Area from del Norte BART Station

## **PREVIOUS AND CONCURRENT RICHMOND PLANNING EFFORTS**

The Specific Plan was developed to be compatible with and defers to recent and concurrent Richmond efforts.

### **Richmond General Plan 2030 (2012)**

Richmond's General Plan was updated in 2012 to guide the City's growth towards 2030. The San Pablo Avenue corridor is addressed as a "Change Area" in the Plan, and is envisioned to include more mixed-use development and a strong pedestrian-oriented environment. The Plan has been developed to support the General Plan's goals and policies.

### **Richmond Livable Corridors Form-Based Code (in development 2014)**

The Livable Corridors Form-Based Code is an implementation tool that guides the transformation and revitalization of Richmond's portions of Macdonald Avenue, San Pablo Avenue, and 23rd Street into livable, walkable, and economically thriving corridors. The San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan Form-Based Code will add Plan area parcels to the draft Livable Corridor code and defers to the Livable Corridor codes for the Richmond parcels within the Plan Area.

## **1.02.02 STATE AND REGIONAL REGULATORY CONTEXT**

The Specific Plan has been developed to be consistent with, and further the goals of, the following State and regional regulations.

### **Association of Bay Area Government (ABAG) FOCUS Program**

The FOCUS Program was developed to encourage infill development in Priority Development Areas (PDAs) in order to reduce dependence on the private automobile, increase affordability, protect natural resources and promote mode shift. The Program prioritizes funding for areas well suited for contextually-sensitive increased density given strong existing regional transportation and infrastructure services. City Council and ABAG passed a resolution in 2007 to designate San Pablo Avenue as a Mixed-use Corridor PDA within the City of El Cerrito. The FOCUS program encourages the development of PDA Specific Plans to proactively plan for future growth.

### **Assembly Bill 32 (AB 32)**

AB 32, the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, requires California to reduce statewide GHG emissions to 1990 levels by 2020, resulting in the development of the City's Climate Action Plan in 2013. New policies, regulatory and incentive programs affecting local development are emerging from State implementation of AB 32 and will impact local implementation of the Specific Plan.

### **Senate Bill 375 (SB 375)**

SB 375, the Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act, reduces GHG emissions by cutting vehicle miles traveled through compact land use patterns, infill and transit-oriented development. The Act calls on local Metropolitan Planning Organizations to establish transportation-related GHG reduction targets and develop a regional "Sustainable Community Strategy."

### **Plan Bay Area (2013)**

The Bay Area's Sustainable Community Strategy, Plan Bay Area, was developed by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) in an attempt to align regional transportation planning efforts and funding, GHG targets, land use and housing allocations. The Specific Plan furthers these goals locally by supporting higher-density, transit-oriented development that results in a mix of housing types, greater employment density and community-support services to create a vibrant, walkable Priority Development Area (PDA) supportive of transportation mode shift and economic development.



### 1.02.03 RECENT/UPCOMING PUBLIC INVESTMENTS

The City actively invests in landscaping, infrastructure and public investment projects to catalyze development and further create a sense of identity and improved connectivity within the Plan Area.

#### **Ohlone Greenway Station Access and Place-Making Improvements (in development 2014)**

The City was recently awarded \$3.5 million in funding to complete Ohlone Greenway Improvements in and around the City's BART Stations. The project, complemented by a planned rain garden on the Greenway at Fairmount Avenue, will address important circulation constraints around the stations, while installing landscaping, street furniture and other elements to create a strong sense of place for BART riders.

#### **Community Tree Planting (2014)**

El Cerrito's recent Community Tree Planting project enhanced green infrastructure within and adjacent to the Specific Plan area. Funded through a grant from the California Urban Forests Council's Invest from the Ground Up program, twenty five trees were planted in collaboration with the City's Tree Committee and interested citizens on Avila Street, El Dorado Street and Carlson Boulevard.

#### **Moeser-Ashbury Improvements (2013) and Central-Liberty Improvements (2014)**

The City recently constructed two major bicycle and pedestrian improvement projects on Moeser Lane and Ashbury Avenue, and on Central Avenue and Liberty Street. The projects replaced sidewalks, installed decorative concrete, pedestrian-level lighting, curb bulb-outs and ramps, high-visibility crosswalks, bike routes, street trees, and street furniture to close important bicycle and pedestrian circulation gaps throughout the City.

#### **San Pablo Avenue Streetscape (2011)**

The City completed a multi-year infrastructure project to create a sense of place, improve walkability and stimulate economic development along San Pablo Avenue by constructing new medians, crosswalks and pedestrian crossing signals to improve safety and connectivity. Historical and cultural pavers, upgraded landscaping, new street trees and furnishings, public art, LED streetlights, transit stop upgrades and rain gardens help create a distinct identity along the Avenue. With interpretive signage, the project also built awareness about important stormwater and landscaping issues in urban environments.

#### **City Hall Reconstruction (2008)**

The new LEED-certified City Hall incorporates sustainable design elements, landscaping and rain gardens to soften the streetscape and underscore the City's commitment to sustainability. The project site includes building articulation, public open space, improved bus furniture and landscaping, and bike parking to support transit, pedestrian and bicycle access to the site.

#### **Cerrito Theater Reconstruction (2006)**

The Friends of Cerrito Theater and the former Redevelopment Agency partnered to restore the Cerrito Theater, originally constructed in 1937, to preserve a valuable historic resource and catalyze significant private investment in the Theater Block. The iconic architecture of the Theater creates a sense of cultural heritage and community on the dense block, while sidewalk-activating uses attract visitors and encourage economic activity.

#### **Baxter Creek Gateway Park (2006)**

The Gateway Project, located along the Ohlone Greenway and daylight Baxter Creek, softened the northern entrance to the City, and improved bicycle connectivity between El Cerrito and Richmond. The project restored the natural contour of the creek to slow, filter and infiltrate water. In 2014, Richmond intends to complete the Richmond-Ohlone Greenway Gap Closure Project to connect the Ohlone Greenway to the Bay Trail via the Richmond Greenway and Baxter Creek Park.

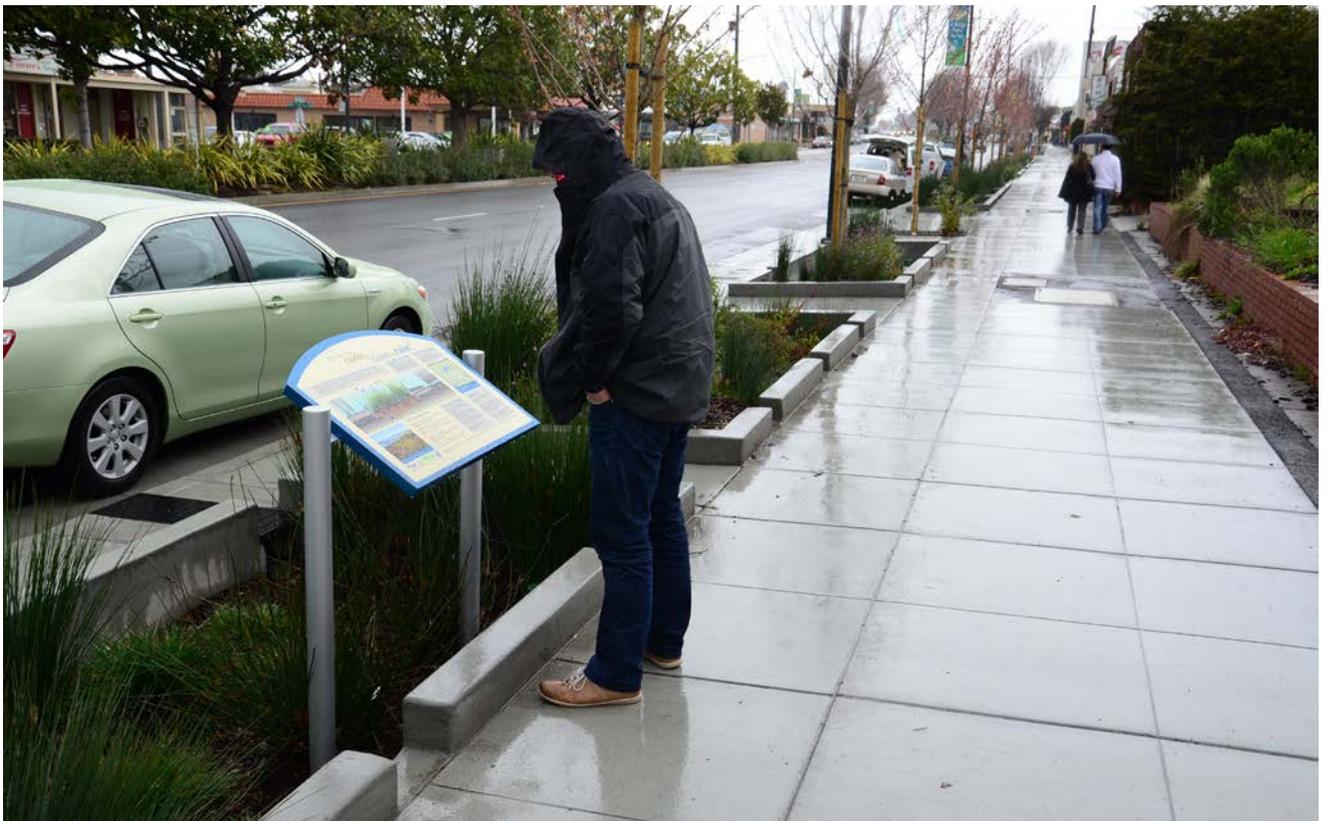


Figure 07. The Baxter Creek Gateway Project and the San Pablo Avenue Rain Garden Project softened the City's streetscape and provided significant stormwater retention and treatment benefits to the City.

## 1.02.04 PLANNING PROCESS

The former El Cerrito Redevelopment Agency undertook development of the Specific Plan jointly with the City of Richmond beginning in 2007 to develop a shared vision for the future of San Pablo Avenue. 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 address open issues, expand the parking study and economic analysis, create more location-appropriate density, height and land use strategies that better reflect the priorities of the Council and align with contemporary land use and transit standards. A detailed Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Feasibility Analysis and Parking Study was then completed and a presentation given to Council on November 21, 2011, resulting in recommendations to increase height and density near the BART stations, provide more flexible parking requirements with lower minimums and a more flexible approach to mixed-use that allows ground floor residential throughout the Plan Area.

On April 2, 2013, City Council received an update on the Specific Plan, including a staff recommendation to add a Complete Streets Element and Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (EIR). Since that time, Community Development and Public Works Staff have been working with consultants to update and complete the draft Plan in response to Council comments and to develop a more implementation-focused, market-driven Plan that better incorporates contemporary land use planning and transportation strategies. Additionally, staff has worked to respond to recent Council adopted policies, including the 2013-2017 Strategic Plan (adopted April 2, 2013), the Climate Action Plan (adopted May 21, 2013) and Plan Bay Area (adopted by MTC and ABAG on July 18, 2013).

### Community Workshops

Since 2013, two community workshops (July 23, 2013 and October 19, 2013) were held to present information and updates on three concurrent and interrelated El Cerrito planning projects including the Urban Greening Plan, San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan and Active Transportation Plan. Participants provided feedback on the proposed Complete Streets alternatives and form and character proposed along San Pablo Avenue and adjacent areas within the Specific Plan boundary.

### Technical Advisory Group Meetings

The streetscape design concepts and standards for San Pablo Avenue and adjacent streets were developed in consultation with, and reviewed by a Technical Advisory Group comprised of representatives from the City of El Cerrito, the City of Richmond, the City of Albany, AC Transit, Caltrans, BART, Contra Costa Health Services, and the East Bay Bicycle Coalition.

### Planning Commission and City Council Study Sessions

The Specific Plan goals and major elements were presented to El Cerrito City Council and Planning Commission during study sessions on November 5, 2013 and November 20, 2013 respectively. The study sessions included a review of the Plan's key principles, urban design framework, Draft Form-Based Code standards, and Draft Complete Streets standards. The recommendations from these sessions guided the development of the draft Specific Plan components.

### Developer and Architect Charrette

A developer and architect charrette held in the Spring of 2014 was an opportunity for the development and building design community to offer input on the proposed Form Based Code standards. This implementation-oriented perspective from charrette participants helped to ensure financial feasibility and sufficient flexibility in the Code to allow for innovative developments that would fulfill Plan goals.



Figure 08. Photos of Community Workshops and Technical Advisory Group Meetings

### 1.02.05 SPECIFIC PLAN AREA

The San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan Area is located in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. Extending through the western portion of Contra Costa and Alameda counties, San Pablo Avenue is a major north-south boulevard that parallels Interstate 80 and connects to Interstate 580, stretching from the City of Oakland through Emeryville, Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito, Richmond, San Pablo, Pinole, Hercules, Rodeo and Crockett (see Figure 2). Additionally, the Avenue is designated as State Route-123 within the Plan Area. As a result of the number of communities that it connects to and its proximity to two major freeways, San Pablo Avenue carries both heavy regional through-traffic and local traffic accessing the Avenue’s mix of commercial services, civic uses and BART stations.

The Plan Area straddles portions of both the cities of El Cerrito and Richmond. It extends for approximately two and one-half miles, beginning at El Cerrito Plaza and the border with the City of Albany in the south and continuing to Baxter Creek Gateway Park in the north. At the southern end of the Plan Area, the boundary extends east to include the El Cerrito Plaza BART station and west along Central Avenue to Interstate 80 (see Figure 3). While most of the parcels within the Plan Area are in the City of El Cerrito, some on the west side of San Pablo Avenue and in the northern part of the Plan Area are within the City of Richmond.

A variety of transportation options, including mass transit, automobiles, walking and biking, contribute to the character of the San Pablo Avenue corridor. Besides being a high-traffic vehicular thoroughfare, the Plan Area is well-served by transit including two BART stations, numerous AC Transit bus lines and other regional bus connections. The del Norte BART station serves as a major bus transit hub with multiple regional and local bus lines converging at the station.

The majority of the Plan Area is bordered to the east by the Ohlone Greenway, a multi-use path beneath the elevated BART tracks. The Greenway serves as a major north-south bicycle and pedestrian circulation spine with dedicated pockets of open space that connects El Cerrito with the neighboring cities of Albany, Richmond, and Berkeley.

Several recent public and private investments have enhanced the Avenue including Ohlone Greenway improvements, San Pablo Avenue streetscape improvements, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects, a new City Hall, the restored Cerrito Theater, and new residential and commercial developments.



Figure 09. Regional Context

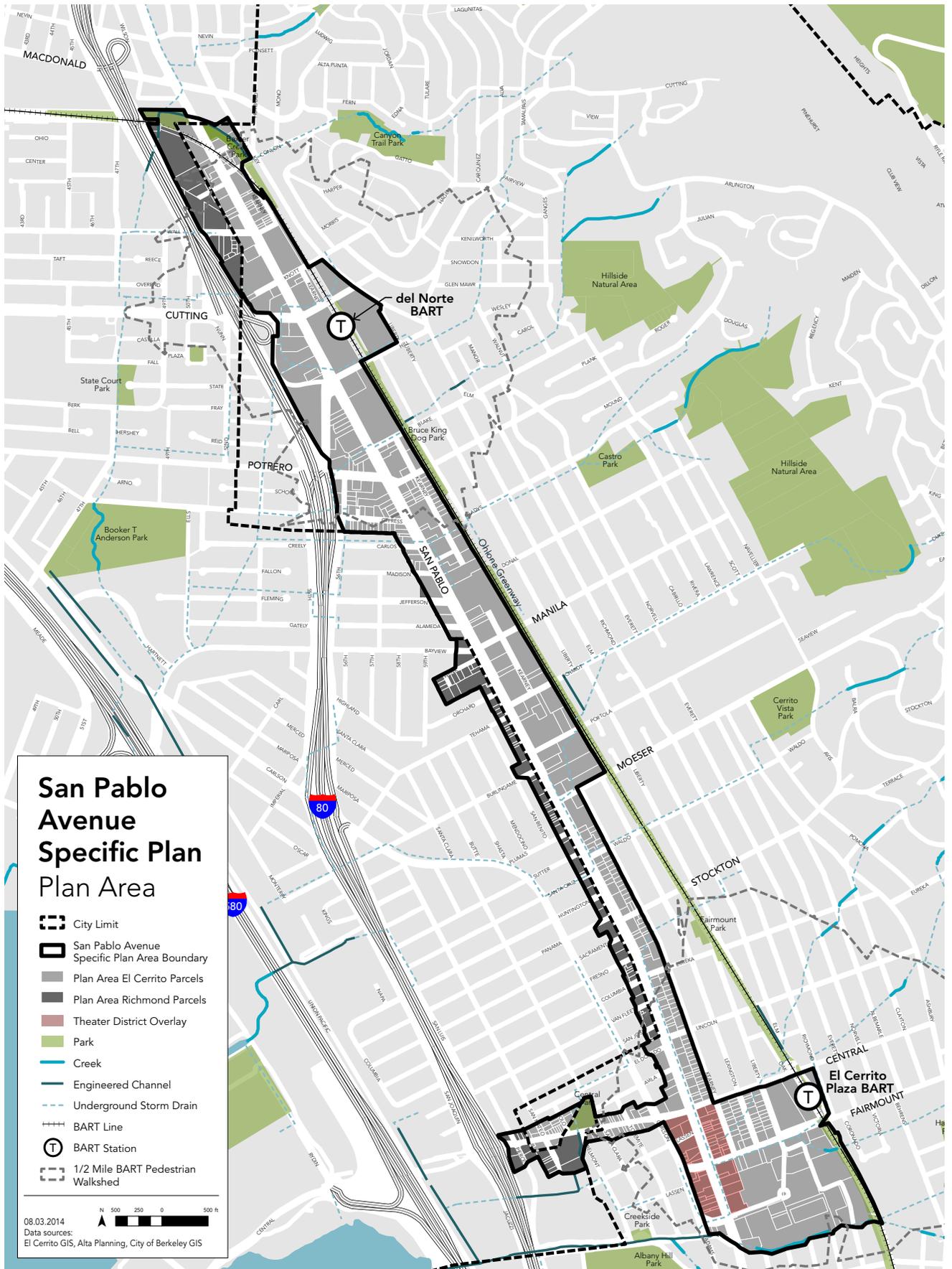


Figure 10. Specific Plan Area

### **1.03 URBAN DESIGN FRAMEWORK**

This Plan supports the community vision to create a vibrant, walkable, sustainable, and transit-oriented corridor that respects surrounding neighborhoods. The urban design framework aims to build on existing assets and maximize public and private opportunities.

Through the planning process three unique destinations emerged within the Specific Plan Area: Downtown, Midtown, and Uptown. The assets, opportunities and urban design strategies for each of these areas are described on the following pages.

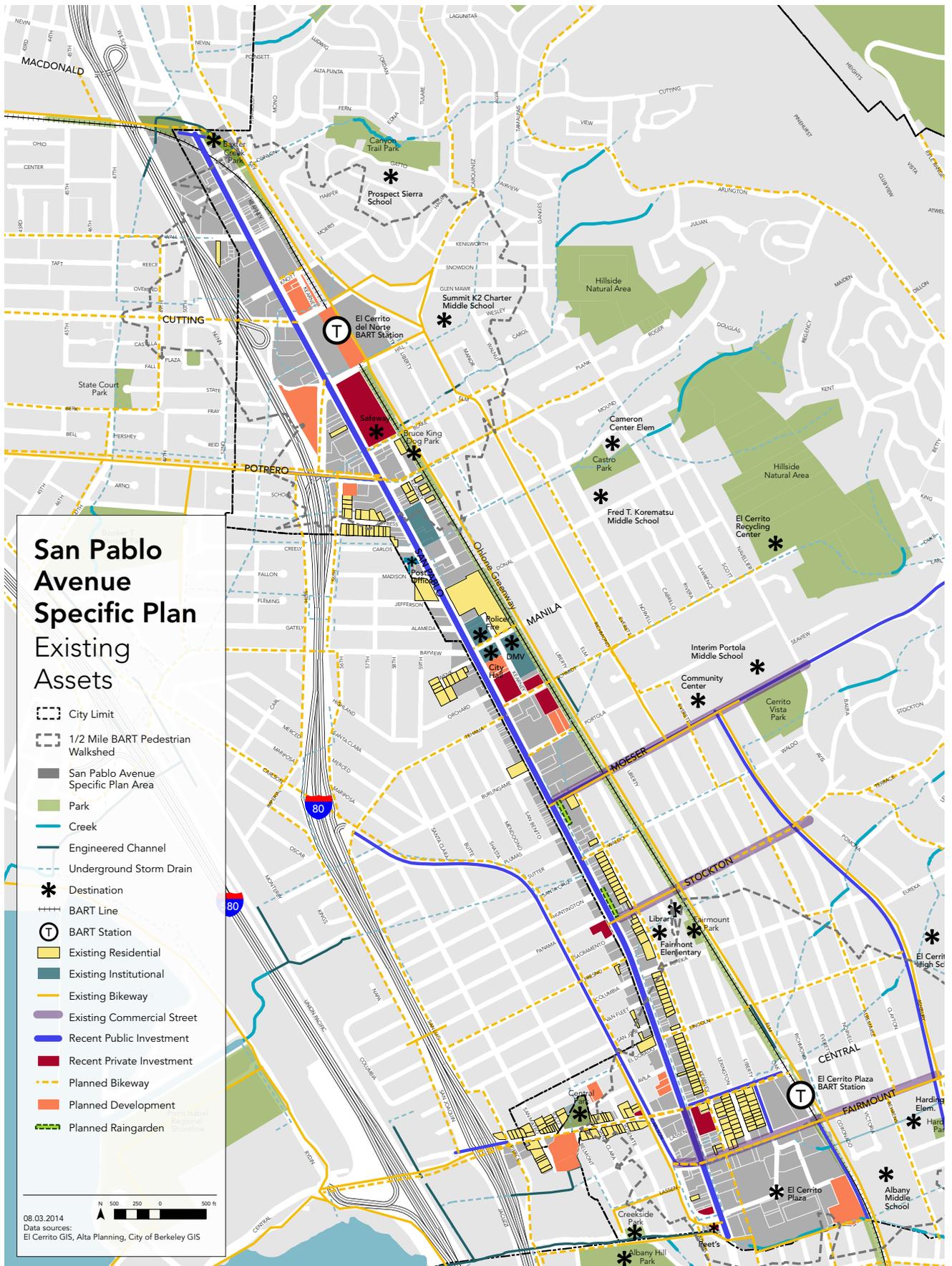


Figure 11. Existing Assets

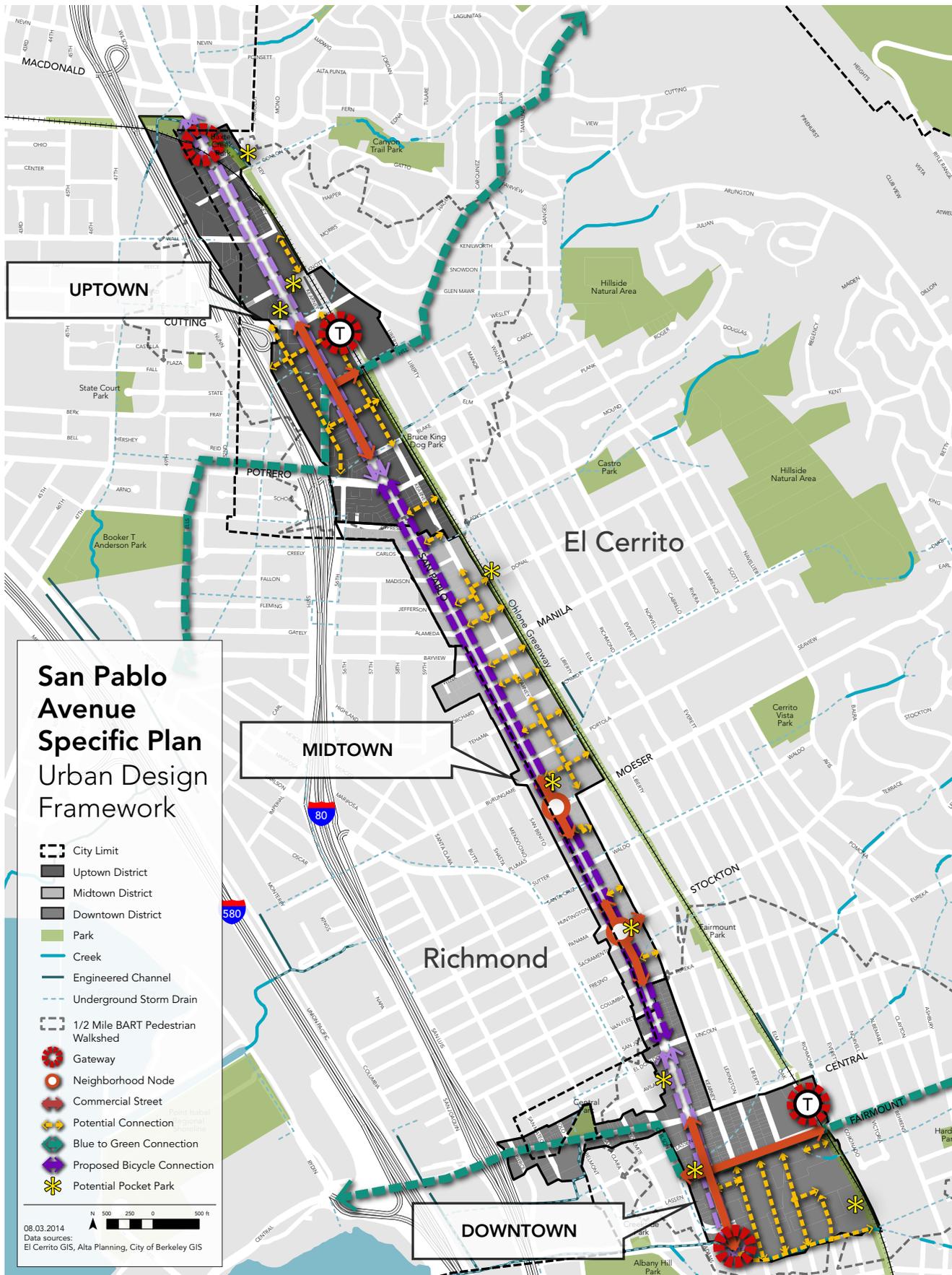


Figure 12. Urban Design Framework

### 1.03.01 DOWNTOWN

Downtown is an **entertainment/theater and shopping district that serves as the southern gateway** to the City. Positioned within a ½ mile of El Cerrito Plaza BART Station walkshed this district is characterized by constrained lots, the El Cerrito Plaza shopping center and adjoining residential areas. New development potential primarily includes smaller infill projects with ‘fine grain’ character, as well as the El Cerrito Plaza BART surface parking lot or eventual redevelopment of the El Cerrito Plaza shopping center.

#### Assets

- Recent public investment in streetscape improvements
- Recent public and private investment in businesses and improvements, including restoration of the historic Cerrito Theater
- Planned infill and large development on underutilized lots, including the Creekside Walk
- Planned BART station and Ohlone Greenway improvements to increase connectivity, sustainability and placemaking, including a planned rain garden and natural play area at Fairmount Avenue

#### Opportunities

- Create an identifiable green southern gateway to the City that highlights where Cerrito Creek meets San Pablo Avenue.
- Encourage placemaking through active ground floor commercial spaces and open spaces in key areas.
- Connect destinations to the Bay Trail through pedestrian and bicycle improvements.
- Construct higher-intensity mixed-use developments in proximity to the BART station.
- Improve connectivity through El Cerrito Plaza and to San Pablo Avenue.
- Explore closure of lower Fairmount Avenue from Carlson Boulevard to San Pablo Avenue to create a gathering space and re:Streets opportunities. See Section 3.05.03 Placemaking and re:Street Activation

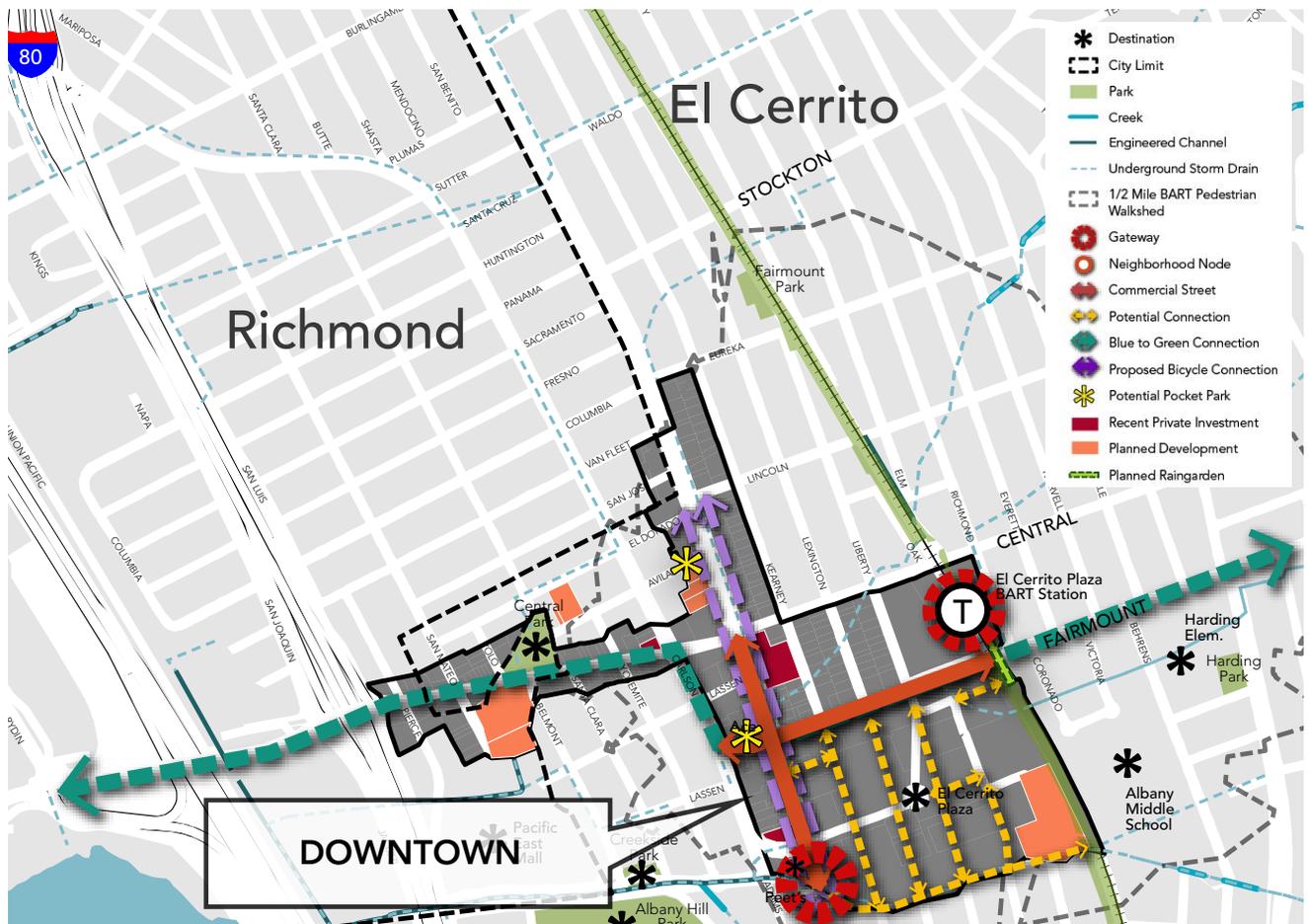


Figure 13. Downtown Urban Design Framework

### 1.03.02 MIDTOWN

Midtown is a **civic and community-oriented zone** with two neighborhood-scale commercial nodes at Stockton and Moeser. Characterized by longer blocks next to BART tracks, the district has both recent and planned mixed-use and residential investment. The area has strong potential to attract additional mixed-use residential development with enhanced pedestrian and bicycle connectivity.

#### Assets

- Recent public investment in City Hall and streetscape improvements
- Recent private investment in new mixed-use developments
- Existing raingardens at Eureka and Madison and planned raingardens at Moeser and Stockton
- Planned affordable housing developments near City Hall and on Portola Drive

#### Opportunities

- Provide midblock connections to improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity on large blocks.
- Enhance the Moeser and Stockton neighborhood commercial nodes to promote economic activity.
- Construct a mix of mid-density residential and mixed-use developments along the corridor.
- Create a continuous cycle track to improve bicycle safety, access and connectivity. See Section 3.03.02.02 Midtown San Pablo Avenue

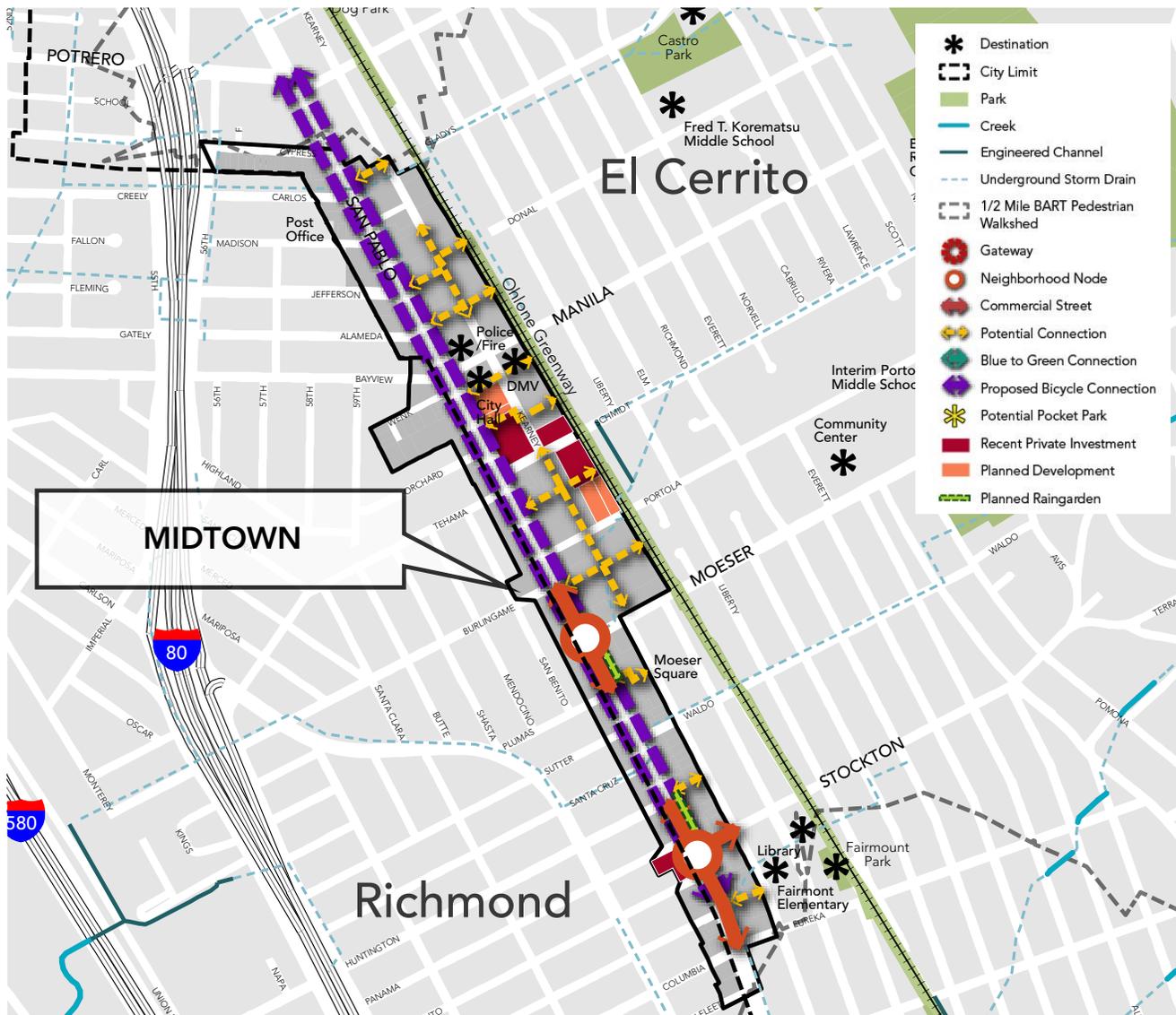


Figure 14. Midtown Urban Design Framework

### 1.03.03 UPTOWN

Uptown is a **mixed-use commercial area that serves as the northern gateway** to the City. Positioned within ½ mile of the del Norte BART Station, a regional multi-modal center, this district is characterized by larger lots and building footprints. The area has potential to be humanized to be a stronger neighborhood that is more walkable and bikeable, while still serving as a transportation hub.

#### Assets

- Recent public investment in Baxter Creek Gateway Park and streetscape improvements
- Recent private investment in new Safeway
- Planned commercial and mixed-use investment on large parcels
- Planned BART station and Ohlone Greenway improvements to increase connectivity, sustainability and placemaking

#### Opportunities

- Provide midblock connections to improve pedestrian and bicycle connectivity on large blocks.
- Encourage placemaking through active ground floor commercial spaces and public open spaces.
- Widen sidewalks to improve accessibility and pedestrian connectivity.
- Construct higher density development on large underutilized lots in proximity to the BART station.
- Construct bicycle and pedestrian connectivity improvements within the Plan Area to close important circulation gaps.

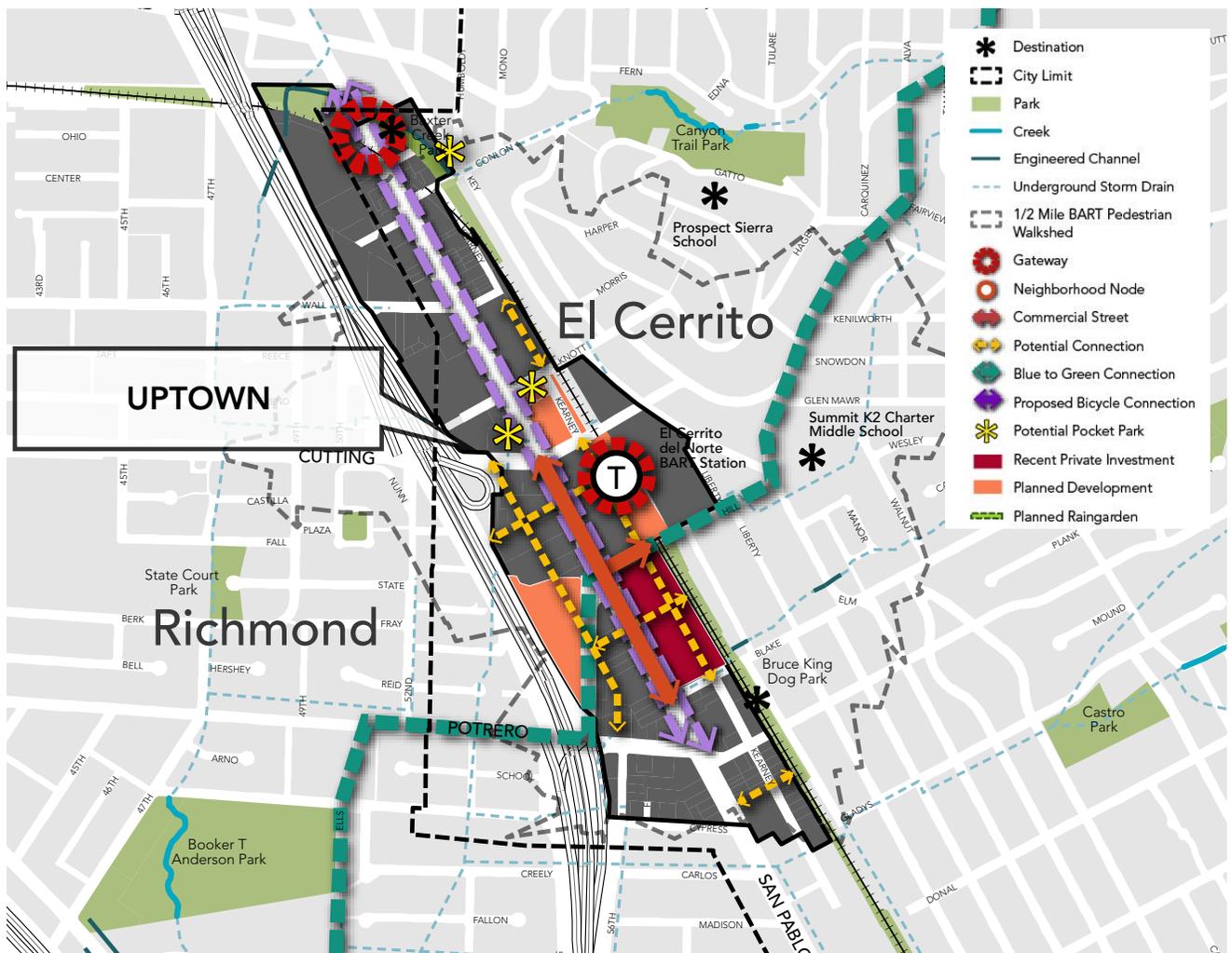


Figure 15. Uptown Urban Design Framework

## 1.04 PLAN GOALS AND POLICIES

The following Plan goals and strategies build on existing conditions analysis, past and concurrent planning efforts and support the proposed urban design framework. They reflect the feedback received from the community and City Council. The goals and policies guide development of the Specific Plan Form-Based Code and Complete Streets concepts and are compatible with the goals articulated in the City of Richmond's Livable Corridors Form-Based Code (in development 2014).



### Goal A: Strengthen Sense of Place

Strategy 1: Articulate distinctive role and identity of each focus area: **Downtown, Midtown,** and **Uptown.**

Strategy 2: Reinforce distinguishing sense of place by responding to existing assets such as the Ohlone Greenway and key views.

Strategy 3: Optimize placemaking in all developments.

Strategy 4: Attract pedestrian activity to key nodes to foster community and identify places of interest.



### Goal B: Ensure Return on Investment

Strategy 1: Maximize TOD potential (BART and AC Transit).

Strategy 2: Stimulate investment in vacant/ underutilized sites at key focus areas.

Strategy 3: Build on recent and planned private and public investments.

Strategy 4: Leverage all investments to catalyze new investments.

Strategy 5: Help the City achieve long-term financial sustainability.



### Goal C: Encourage Practical and Market Friendly Development

Strategy 1: Provide development clarity to encourage investment.

Strategy 2: Incorporate flexible development codes that respond to constrained parcels, surrounding context and the market.

Strategy 3: Allow ground floor residential development to provide flexibility and expand the Specific Plan Area's residential base.



### Goal D: Enhance and Humanize Public Realm

- Strategy 1: Design streets for living instead of just driving through reStreet placemaking principles.
- Strategy 2: Make large blocks human scale through midblock connections.
- Strategy 3: Create new gathering places to serve the needs of existing and new users.
- Strategy 4: Promote environmental sustainability.
- Strategy 5: Celebrate and strengthen the unique natural context.



### Goal E: Catalyze Mode Shift

- Strategy 1: Promote infill development through increased land use intensity close to existing transit infrastructure.
- Strategy 2: Reduce parking requirements to encourage transit use and reduce reliance on the private automobile.
- Strategy 3: Strengthen pedestrian and bicycle connectivity through existing and new connections that provide more alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles.
- Strategy 4: Integrate opportunities to create Complete Streets, multimodal travel ways that balance all users.
- Strategy 5: Improve connectivity between the Green Belt (Wildcat Canyon Trail) and the Blue Belt (Bay Trail) through pedestrian and bicycle connections.
- Strategy 6: Improve walkability through more intensive and varied development that provides additional services and locates more future residents in service-rich nodes.
- Strategy 7: Increase the supply, diversity and affordability of housing in proximity to existing or planned transportation investments.

## **1.05 HOW TO USE THIS PLAN**

The San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan consists of four chapters and Appendices including technical reports, meeting summaries and background documents completed as part of the Specific Plan effort. Chapter 2 Form-Based Code and Chapter 3 Complete Streets are intended to serve as stand-alone reference documents to ease implementation.

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Explains the Plan background and process, discusses the relationship of the Plan to other City and regional plans, provides an overview of the project process, and outlines the organization of the Plan document.

### **Chapter 2: Form-Based Code**

Provides context-sensitive development regulations and design guidelines for parcels within the Specific Plan Area including height, land use, parking, building placement, and open space standards.

### **Chapter 3: Complete Streets**

Describes the proposed street improvements, design standards, and Multimodal Level of Service (MMLOS) evaluation findings for San Pablo Avenue and adjacent streets within the Specific Plan Area.

### **Chapter 4: Infrastructure**

Identifies the utility providers for the corridor, provides a general review of potential limitations in the currently installed systems, and recommends feasibility-level improvements and associated costs.

### **Appendices**

Includes technical memos analyzing transportation and infrastructure systems, glossary of terms and bibliography.