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October 9, 2009

Dear El Cerrito and Richmond City Staff and City Council members,

Urban Habitat has been working on social equity and environmental justice issues since 1989. It is our focus at Urban Habitat to support smart growth goals while maintaining social equity for all residents, especially low-income communities and communities of color. To help accomplish these goals, we have joined with other like-minded organizations to work on the Great Communities Collaborative. The GCC has the following goal for all the organizations involved:

The Great Communities Collaborative brings together residents and local organizations to participate in community planning processes across the San Francisco Bay Area. We want to create a region of vibrant neighborhoods with affordable housing, shops, jobs, and services within convenient walking distance near transit.

We have been closely following the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan from the very beginning, over 2 years ago. With the help of the Greater Richmond Interfaith Program (GRIP), we worked with community members to determine needs and with the help of Greenbelt Alliance, we did a tour with stakeholders of transit-oriented/mixed-use developments in the area.

The San Pablo Avenue (SPA) Specific Plan created by MIG and the joint Richmond/El Cerrito Advisory Committee is a well thought-out document that emphasizes the need to create a more transit-friendly and higher density lifestyle along the Corridor. To further help create more affordable and desirable places to live, we have the following recommendations to include during the public comment process for the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan. We have focused our attention on the following issues: Social Equity, Health, Land Use, Transportation, and Economic Development.

Social Equity

Although Volume III of the SPA Plan details the income and housing price inequities between the San Pablo Avenue Corridor compared to Richmond and El Cerrito citywide, the SPA Plan does not directly address issues of Social Equity.

The fact that “home values increase as locations move eastward, away from San Pablo Avenue and into the hillside residential neighborhoods” in addition to the differences between 2006 median income levels in the SPA Corridor (\$54,120)



compared to Richmond (\$49,810) and El Cerrito citywide (\$64,830), means that there are people living in this Specific Plan Area that are in more need of help than in other parts of the cities. In addition to requesting that the SPA Plan include language on addressing inequalities for its low-income residents and communities of color, Urban Habitat is also addressing the issue in the other categorical recommendations.

Health

A Health Impact Assessment (HIA) conducted within the San Pablo Avenue Corridor found many opportunities for healthy behavior, such as the proximity to the Ohlone Greenway and several neighborhood parks, as well as high access to public transportation and a variety of retail outlets that allow residents to live relatively comfortably without owning automobiles. All of these conditions offer residents opportunities to engage in physical activity by actively commuting to work, walking to shops and stores, and enjoying outdoor activities right in their neighborhoods.

The pedestrian and bicycle environment within the corridor requires upgrades for safety and ease of use, both of which would encourage residents to be physically active. This portion of San Pablo Avenue lacks bike lanes, pedestrian-scale lighting, and sufficient pedestrian access to retail stores and other resources, and the presence of litter and abandoned buildings make the pedestrian environment aesthetically unpleasing. High vehicle speeds and volumes on San Pablo Avenue increase perceived and actual risks of collisions. A safer and higher quality environment for pedestrians and bicyclists could be created by implementing traffic calming features, providing healthy retail stores and restaurants with pedestrian access, and constructing a bike lane along San Pablo Avenue.

Land Use

Design: The urban design and architectural drawings/photographs are well thought-out and well-designed examples found throughout the Bay Area.

Height: According to the Center for Community Innovation (CCI) at UC Berkeley: “The six story height limit allows developers to build two stories above the California code maximum for wood frame construction, which would require steel frames, increasing the costs substantially. However, developers could also choose to build fewer units with taller ceiling heights.” Thus, there needs to be other incentives to encourage developers to build appropriate densities in transit-oriented areas due to the cost of going above 4 stories. Another option is to require a minimum number of floors in addition to height.



Density: Nodes should have the most allowances for height and density. Rather than the 30-50 du/ac that is proposed for SPA-1, a maximum 65 du/ac should be considered. There should also be a minimum density to ensure the most appropriate high-density, mixed-use project is considered for the nodes. Proposed density levels and height maximums (4-5 stories) “make the available sites more difficult to develop” (CCI). Allow for a 65 du/ac density in the “nodes” to encourage developers to create density and transit appropriate housing.

Housing: Include language on creating more affordable housing in the San Pablo Avenue Corridor. Create stronger incentives beyond the required 15% minimum affordable housing to get more mixed use/income developments into the designated nodes. According to CCI, “The state-mandated density bonus is the only clearly articulated incentive for private developers to include affordable units above the required 15%”. Additionally, El Cerrito has been assigned 232 affordable units between 2007-2014, of which, none have been built. Some example of incentives include: density, height, FAR, parking requirements, land donations, etc. Consider increasing the requirement to 30% minimum affordable units within nodes around the BART station.

Nodes: The “nodes” approach increases intensity around areas such as BART, the El Cerrito Civic Center and McDonald Ave/San Pablo Ave. It also allows for low-intensity uses in-between the nodes, including less desired uses such as auto-oriented businesses. One node that has more potential for intensive uses is the area surrounding the El Cerrito Civic Center. The Civic Center is currently in the SPA-3 Overlay which allows moderate intensity residential (such as townhomes, rowhouses, multi-family apartments and condominiums) as well as mixed-use developments. However, the area directly across the street on the Richmond side of San Pablo Avenue is in the SPA-5 overlay which allows low-intensity residential and auto-oriented businesses. Rather than allow the potential for less desirable auto-oriented uses to crop up adjacent to City Hall, it would serve both communities better if there was more likelihood of retail and restaurant related businesses opening up on the Richmond border that can attract people doing business in the Civic Center.

Mixed-Use: Apply the spirit of the Specific Plan for project proposals in the pipeline that are susceptible to discretionary review. For example, the Safeway supermarket that is proposed for the old Target site is located in the TOM zoning, which requires an Administrator Use Permit approved by the Zoning Administrator to operate a “General Market”. However, according to the El Cerrito Zoning Ordinance, “The Zoning Administrator may hold a public hearing to consider the application if the Zoning Administrator determines there is significant public controversy and/or the hearing affords an opportunity to resolve issues of concern.” Since there is a lot of public interest in what tenant will go in the old Target site and because the proposed use counters the San Pablo Avenue Specific Plan



recommendation for mixed-use commercial/residential in that SPA-2 Overlay, the Administrator Use Permit should be recommended to the Planning Commission for review.

Open Space: Identifying open space opportunity areas including between ACE and behind Nation's.

BART Parking Requirements: SPA-4 and SPA-5 parking requirements are use-based and do not take into account proximity to BART stations. Create a parking overlay that accounts for not only land uses, but proximity to BART stations. Consider a 1 car per dwelling unit for residential use and 1 car per 200 square feet of commercial use at El Cerrito Plaza and El Cerrito Del Norte BART station nodes. Current parking requirements overburden developers and make otherwise great projects not market viable (CCI).

Transportation

Ohlone Greenway: The bike and pedestrian path running alongside the BART path is a great concept and its connections to San Pablo Avenue, including the additional signage, is a great effort towards increasing users.

Unbundled Parking: Separate parking requirements from uses. This will allow for new residents the option of going transit-only, partly car and transit, or entirely car-only and thus, paying for transportation accordingly.

Transit Infrastructure: Invest in all the necessary infrastructure for supporting transit including bus shelters, curb bulb-outs for buses, and other appropriate transit appropriate street calming features.

AC Transit Easy Pass: Require bundling the cost of a discounted AC Transit Easy Pass monthly pass into new residential HOA dues.

Car Share Program: Require provision for free car share program membership for new housing and offices. Work with car share programs to establish hubs of cars within a 0.5 mile from transit and pods that are within 0.5 mile of each other.

Shuttle Service: Investigate creation of a developer funded shuttle that would connect new and current El Cerrito residents between BART stations and regional open space at Tilden Regional Park and the Bay Trail. These shuttles equipped with bike racks and room for dogs and strollers would greatly enhance the liveability of El Cerrito and Richmond for both existing and future residents.



Greenhouse Gas Reductions: Make an explicit connection between land use, transportation and greenhouse gas reductions. Add reference to FOCUS PDA, SB375, and AB32 into both the land use and transportation sections of the Plan.

Economic Development

The economy and local jobs are the most important issues on people's minds today. The Cities of El Cerrito and Richmond have an opportunity to address these issues along a significant corridor that enjoys commercial opportunities but also deals with median household incomes below County and El Cerrito citywide medians. The following are recommendations on connecting much needed economic development to a project area that is in need of the help:

Economic Development Section: Include an economic development section in the plan that will address economic development along the San Pablo Avenue corridor. The section should refer back to other elements, such as Land Use, and determine how the Element's goals and recommendations will contribute to the local economy.

Local Hire: Include language for a program for local hire and job development for Richmond and El Cerrito residents in the Plan.

Jobs: Create quality jobs and require union labor for all project construction.

Regional Retail Tax Plan: Create a plan to attract new retailers to create new tax income rather than relocating existing tax income from one area to another, especially to/from Richmond and El Cerrito, thus creating a zero-sum tax outcome.

Youth: Create opportunities to engage youth in planning. Recognize youth involvement in studying the plan area. Encourage future involvement by working with WCCTAC to continue the SPAYEP program. Encourage youth development programs including state certified apprenticeship programs.

Sincerely,
Vu-Bang Nguyen, AICP
Land Use Program Coordinator
Urban Habitat Program