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Many Complain About Downtown Plan

By Cathy Tyson

The next step in the Downtown Specific Plan (the Plan) process is a public hearing of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (D EIR). Because of the document's complexity it is scheduled to be discussed at two public hearings with the Planning Commission - the first was on March 1, and the second on March 15 (past publication deadline for this newspaper.)

The D EIR is an important component of the Plan - which seeks to provide a framework for the future of the downtown core for the next twenty years. The Draft EIR assesses potential environmental consequences and identifies mitigation measures and alternatives that lessen impacts. Three alternatives were considered in the D EIR: a No Project Alternative, a Lower Intensity Alternative with modified height and density requirements, and finally a High Intensity Alternative. The Higher Intensity version has prompted the most concern among residents. It should be noted that the City Council will not make a decision on the Plan until the fall of 2010.

Early on the Plan was described as "developing a comprehensive vision for our downtown that would allow Lafayette to remain true to its past and still progress forward." Easier said than done. If the Higher Intensity Alternative is adopted, at full build out by 2030, up to 1,765 additional housing units could be built in the downtown, adding 4,589 new residents. Opponents of the Plan argue that the General Plan is working just fine - and if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

After the Planning Commission hearings on the Draft EIR, the next step in the process is for all of the comments and questions regarding that document to be addressed in the two-part Final EIR - comprised of the revised Draft EIR and responses by groups and residents alike.

The City has dedicated itself to transparency throughout the Downtown Specific Plan process. As a result, many residents have provided loud and clear negative comments - a tsunami of complaints.

In preparation of the March 15 Planning Commission meeting, Maeve Pessis, the President of the Lafayette Homeowners Council, which represents a number of homeowner's associations, wrote a letter to the Planning Commission that said in part, "We will continue to follow the review process, even though it appears at this time that the DEIR and the poll of our residents are both pointing to the 'No Project Alternative/Revert to the General Plan' as the proper way for the City to proceed."

Included with the letter is a 29-page chart prepared by resident experts that goes over the D EIR with a fine tooth comb - providing specific comments on every section from, "Explain the use of Trips Projections based upon a 1% per year growth rate vs. the more typical 2% per year that Lafayette has known in past studies," to "Given the many constraints on infrastructure, such as traffic congestion, police protection, limited circulation network, how can a 72% downtown increase in population be mitigated. Revise to explain."

A long list of concerned residents felt compelled to voice their opinion. "Reading the D EIR and now learning that these impacts have been held to just 80% of build out - might just make Lafayette residents' hair stand on end," said Lynn Hiden. "The Draft EIR is fundamentally inadequate because its analysis of the impact on the schools omits the evaluation of significant impacts, and its evaluation of mitigations is equally deficient," notes a letter from Mark and Karen Zelman.

Going forward there will be continued opportunities for public input. A public hearing of the Final EIR is scheduled to be held May 17 and June 7, followed by a public hearing on the Draft Specific Plan on July 12. Meetings by the City Council will continue through mid-summer then adoption or non-adoption of Final Specific Plan by the City Council is set for October 18.

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