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Lafayette Draft Downtown Plan Ready for Final Hearings

By Cathy Tyson

It's a massive document almost five years in the making. Forget the latest thriller, civic-minded Lafayette residents have an early Christmas gift, of sorts, with the newly released Revised Draft Downtown Specific Plan (r DSP), available on-line from the city website, www.lovelafayette.org. The r DSP is meant to compliment Lafayette's existing General Plan with more detailed land use and a design framework for future growth to preserve and enhance this small city.

Although the document is complete, it has not yet been adopted by the City Council. The Planning Commission will be holding hearings on the r DSP and form recommendations for the City Council at meetings slated for November 7, November 21 and December 5. "We hope to take the recommendations to the City Council by late January for adoption of the DSP and certification of the EIR (Environmental Impact Report)," said Special Projects Manager Ann Merideth.

At just over a hundred pages with photos, charts and graphs, this is one-stop shopping for municipal planning and design goals. If eventually adopted by the City Council it will serve as an integral guideline for steering development for the next twenty years. A vision for growth is specified, and priorities to accomplish that vision are spelled out. It's fair to say when the process started the Specific Plan was not embraced by the public. The final version looks different from the original draft plan by consultant team Wallace Roberts and Todd. The City used the firm, but after significant blow back from the public, decided to customize a Plan from the ground up.

"While both plans are based on a district-based strategy and place heavy emphasis on maintaining Lafayette's downtown character, the revised DSP is more consistent with the General Plan's goals and polices for the downtown," said Merideth. "The WRT plan called for higher height limits by right and higher residential densities in some parts of the downtown. The revised DSP maintains the height limits and densities that are in the General Plan, and, like the General Plan, only allows greater height when certain findings can be made."

The height component of the r DSP has been the most controversial element of the Plan from the start. Residents were clearly concerned about changing the character of the City and even speculated that taller buildings would lead to the 'Walnut Creek-ization' of Lafayette. According to Niroop Srivatsa, Planning and Building Services Manager, height limits are spelled out within the district sections.

The process has taken significantly longer than anticipated. "On December 6, we will mark five years of working on the r DSP. I don't think anyone originally thought it would take that long, but it is an important issue for the community and important issues take time," said Merideth.

You can say that again- there have been more than thirty-eight Planning Commission meetings and twenty-two meetings of the Advisory Committee, made up of a cross section of citizen volunteers and City Council and Planning Commission representatives to offer input.

One of the members of the Advisory Committee, Brayton Noll, started when he was a sophomore in high school; now he's in his junior year at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon - although currently he's in the midst of a semester abroad in Ecuador. His mother Cheryl Noll, also on the Advisory Committee, comments that it's not that surprising that it has taken so long considering current civic budget issues: "It's amazing that anything is moving forward. That's one of the reasons that this has been such a great experience for Brayton. He has been personally involved in a governmental process, which sometimes takes years to get anything done! He has learned that you have to be very patient when you have so many parties and interest groups who may all agree on a common goal, but all have slightly different ideas as to the best way to reach that goal."

Will the Specific Plan Impact the Terraces Project?

Whether or not the Revised Draft Downtown Specific Plan is adopted in time to influence the proposed Terraces of Lafayette project is unknown. At a recent Planning Commission meeting a room full of concerned residents turned out to passionately protest the proposed large apartment complex across from Acalanes High School.

Because the application is officially complete, the project is required to go through Lafayette's planning review process which includes an environmental impact report that would clarify potential impacts to air quality, noise, traffic, green house gas emissions and more. The developer, O'Brien Land Company, LLC will pay for the study to be completed by a consulting team. Despite opponents' negative comments, the meeting was designed to determine the scope of the environmental impact report. The report is slated to be complete in January, at that time the public will, once again, have an opportunity to comment.

Current zoning for the parcel is APO, Administrative, Professional, Office use that allows up to 35 units per acre, more than enough to accommodate the potential 315-unit multi-family apartment complex on the twenty-two acre site. The City was in the process of downzoning the parcel at the corner of Deer Hill Road and Pleasant Hill Road when the building application was submitted, although a change has not yet been finalized. The matter has been put on hold while the city attorney reviews the situation. C. Tyson

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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