

GENERAL PLAN SUBCOMMITTEE

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**Subject:** General Plan Update - Key Issues/Priorities/Existing Conditions

General Plan Subcommittee Members:

San Mateo has a wealth of historic resources that can be found in every corner of the city, from homes to storefronts, parks to public works, individual buildings and intact districts. They reflect important themes in the city's growth and development, including architecture, city planning, social history, ethnic heritage, and commerce. Collectively, they tell the story and define the character of our community, adding to the quality of life for all. These oft neglected community assets are recognized by our current General Plan as providing "economic, cultural and aesthetic benefit to the City of San Mateo," yet many remain unidentified and most are unprotected.

Listed below are several suggestions for General Plan priorities to reinforce city policies that support recognition and protection of our irreplaceable historic buildings and neighborhoods. The City Council, at their January, 2018 priority setting meeting, determined that these issues should be included in the general plan update process.

- **Review, update and complete the City of San Mateo Historic Building Survey**

In order to make informed planning decisions that support City policy goals, policy makers need baseline information on potential historic resources. Before buildings are torn down or altered, it is useful to ask if they have some significance to the community. Without critical information about our historic resources, bad decisions will inevitably be made.

Adopted by the city council almost thirty years ago, the 1989 Historic Building Survey was a significant achievement, but also limited and incomplete. It did not include many neighborhoods with a large number of older buildings that relate historically and have a high degree of architectural consistency.

Completing the historic resources survey at this time would accomplish a strategic direction identified by the Council in 2016 to "support efforts to improve residential neighborhoods and preserve and enhance neighborhood character." Leading cities from Palo Alto to Pasadena, San

Francisco to Santa Barbara have undertaken extensive historic resource surveys. Even Los Angeles recently completed a citywide survey, documenting 880,000 properties<sup>1</sup>.

As development pressure increases, policy makers and the community at large deserve clear data about which structures have ‘historic’ value and if they deserve to be preserved. In the end, completing the survey will lead to better land use decisions and a more livable community. There are a number of highly qualified preservation consulting firms in the Bay Area capable of completing historic resources surveys<sup>2</sup>.

- **Strengthen protection of the City’s Historic Resources and Downtown Historic District**

San Mateo’s historic resources, both individually and collectively, are perhaps the city’s most under valued asset. The zoning code and demolition ordinance offer some protection to individually eligible buildings and contributors to the historic district, but they are silent on potentially eligible buildings that have not yet been identified as historic. Moreover, there is no deterrent to “demolition by neglect,” a situation in which a property owner intentionally allows a historic property to suffer severe deterioration, potentially beyond the point of repair.

Other jurisdictions in California have established review and approval procedures for demolition permits for older structures that are potentially significant historical resources. The City of Sacramento, for example, has a mandatory investigation and review process for the demolition of structures 50 years or older that may be historically significant for purposes of CEQA but are not otherwise yet recognized as historically significant. And before issuing a residential demolition permit, San Francisco and San Jose apparently require complete CEQA review.

Even cities with reasonably strong protections are finding that in the Bay Area’s turbocharged housing market there is ample financial incentive to circumvent the law. Indeed, a January 7, 2018 San Francisco Chronicle report “**Homes in S.F., some historic, razed illegally**”<sup>3</sup> reveals that developers and flippers are finding it more profitable to work around the law than to comply with it.

Adding sufficiently strong protections and stringent financial penalty provisions in the general plan, downtown plan, and zoning code will help deter unnecessary demolitions, retain architectural interest and serve to enhance the vitality of our downtown environment and residential neighborhoods.

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<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles (<https://preservation.lacity.org/survey/>);  
San Francisco (<http://sf-planning.org/historic-resources-survey-program/>);  
Pasadena (<https://ww5.cityofpasadena.net/planning/planning-division/design-and-historic-preservation/historic-preservation/>)

<sup>2</sup>VerPlanck Historic Preservation Consulting (<http://www.verplanckconsulting.com/>)  
Page & Turnbull (<http://www.page-turnbull.com/>)  
Architecture + History (<http://architecture-history.com/>)

<sup>3</sup>See San Francisco Chronicle archives: <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/ODN/SanFranciscoChronicle/Default.aspx>

- **Update and strengthen Downtown Retail Core & Downtown Historic District Design Guidelines**

The current guidelines have worked well and I support updating and strengthening them to help ensure compatible new designs that reference and respect their historic context. Developers of new infill projects or property owners renovating existing buildings in the downtown deserve the best up-to-date professional guidance available in order to produce top quality projects.

Revision of the existing design guidelines should be done by an architectural firm that specializes in the revitalization of historic buildings. Several Bay Area firms experienced in preparing historic district design guidelines are identified above. The general plan and the downtown design guidelines should reflect the fact that the protection and enhancement of our historic downtown buildings are community priorities.

All three of these suggested priorities - resource survey, resource protection, and historic district design guidelines - are essential components of both the general plan and downtown plan. As we articulate a community vision for our long term future and grapple with jobs, housing and transportation issues, we must not lose sight of the contributions of those who came before us and what they have left behind for our use, benefit and enjoyment.

I thank you in advance for including these priorities.

Sincerely,  
Keith Weber  
San Mateo, CA

CC:  
Charlie Knox, PlaceWorks  
Larry Patterson, City Manager  
Drew Corbett, Finance Director  
George White, Community Development Director

ATTACHMENT: ***Downtown Assets and Opportunities***, Guest Perspective, San Mateo Daily Journal 1/8/18.

## Downtown Assets and Opportunities

“Great downtown!” exclaimed the post-it note at the pop-up workshop. Just one of many comments offered during the multi-year San Mateo downtown engagement process. But what makes a great downtown? What are the ingredients? The engagement process attempted to answer these questions and more. A variety of factors contribute to a great downtown, but one that I would venture plays an outsize role is the built environment and historic fabric.



Why, I wondered, was the historic district in downtown barely acknowledged during the engagement process? Why was this remarkable asset never a focused topic of discussion during the years of workshops, forums and pop-ups? Missing an obvious opportunity to celebrate the most notable aspect of downtown, the engagement process steered discussion toward intensifying new development, parking, bike lanes and pocket parks. All worthwhile, but they fall short without first affirming that the historic core is the urban and architectural context that gives downtown its authenticity. Let's take a moment to pause and reflect on just how important the downtown historic district and the historic buildings within it are to the future of the City.

Decades of San Mateo planning documents have reinforced the community's strong interest in respecting its existing historic and architectural character. The General Plan itself “confirms the City's commitment that the protection, enhancement, perpetuation, and use of historic structures are of economic, cultural, and aesthetic benefit to the City of San Mateo.” If so, why then was the historic character of downtown an after thought and not the starting point for planning outreach? Take a walk downtown and you will notice signs of neglect: dirty sidewalks, peeling paint and missing tiles. One is left to wonder if our preoccupation with an imaginary tomorrow has not betrayed the very character we claim to appreciate.

As development pressure in the downtown continues to mount we must not lose sight of the valuable contribution our historic buildings make to our downtown. It is worth keeping in mind that its collection of historic buildings is downtown's single most important characteristic, and a regional drawing card. It's an asset, that above all others, enables us to understand how downtown's authenticity can provide direction and inspiration for future development.

“There may have been a time when preservation was about saving an old building here or there,” Richard Moe, former president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation has said, “but those days are gone. Preservation is in the business of saving communities and the values they embody.”

During the first two months of 2018 the City Council will outline its vision and priorities for the next two years. Finalization of the Downtown Plan and revisions to the General Plan will soon follow. The Council has an opportunity to reconfirm priorities that celebrate and strengthen this irreplaceable asset for the benefit of current and future generations, business and community alike. We should expect nothing less.

To show your support for historic downtown San Mateo, call, email or write the City Council: by phone (650-522-7049) or visit their website (<https://www.cityofsanmateo.org/55/City-Council>) for email information.

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*Keith Weber is a community activist and former Trustee of the California Preservation Foundation. He has been active in downtown planning, historic preservation and land use issues for over 30 years.*