

October 11, 2018

General Plan Update Subcommittee
c/o Julia Klein, Principal Planner
City of San Mateo
330 West 20th Avenue
San Mateo CA 94403

Re: Strive San Mateo - Analysis and Challenges

Dear Members of the General Plan Update Subcommittee,

Your work offers an extraordinary opportunity to imagine what San Mateo can be in 2040. In 21 years, a new generation will be adults. These new leaders' notions of home and lifestyle will have been shaped by 21st century realities. Shared mobility services will have reduced private car use by 23%.¹ California will have heated up by an average of 4 degrees Fahrenheit², and Bay waters will have risen about 1.7 feet.³ All but the youngest baby boomers will have aged beyond America's average life expectancy of 79 years.

I'm pleased to have been asked to follow your long-range planning process. As much of my work has focused on transit-oriented development, I've been asked by the Bohannon Group and its team to help envision a mixed-use future for Hillsdale Shopping Center and Station Area – and how it can complement the community's vision for San Mateo. For thirty years, my career has concerned itself with how to make communities livable and sustainable.

The City is at a critical stage of the planning process. New information and different perspectives are about to broaden our shared understanding of San Mateo and the challenges it faces. At the same time, you are beginning to distill information and perspectives into a vision statement describing the community's most important aspirations. The purpose of policies that you develop later will be to implement this shared vision.

Planning works best when analysis is not for its own sake, but targets community challenges. *How can analysis help explain important challenges, and can defining important challenges help focus GPU analysis performed?*

To illustrate, below I offer a few observations on four planning challenges expressed at the Subcommittee's first meeting, and pose some questions. My intent is not to be provocative. I do not pretend to know the answers or pretend

¹ <https://www.oliverwyman.com/content/dam/oliver-wyman/v2/publications/2016/Nov/Mobility2040Report.pdf>

² <https://www.scpr.org/news/2015/09/14/54331/future-of-water-how-hot-dry-and-crowded-will-ca-ge/>

³ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/science/article/Many-coastal-properties-may-be-flooded-out-by-13002375.php>

to know what's best for San Mateo. Instead, I hope that these questions might help get at some of the concerns we heard from the Subcommittee and other community members, and help identify what kinds of information might be useful during the conversations that follow.

Traffic Congestion

Hard planning challenges are comprised of inter-related factors – some obvious and some less so. Frustration over congestion often focuses on the symptom – too many cars. *But what are congestion's underlying causes?* This might be answered with local and regional data that has to do with land use as much as transportation patterns.

For example, over recent decades, California's population grew 40%, while the number of vehicle-miles traveled doubled.⁴ There seems to be something in the way we are growing our communities that forces people into cars at ever increasing rates.

Studies indicate that vehicle-miles traveled – how much people drive – are largely a regional phenomenon caused by growth as: 1) housing and jobs are separated by long distances, and 2) retail, parking, schools and other local destinations are too far from homes for trips to remain on local streets inside of the neighborhood. Traffic studies often show that new infill housing growth adds relatively little traffic compared with regional traffic growth from segregating jobs, housing, and local destinations. *Are trips from new infill development a small fraction of traffic growth in San Mateo as well? And, if so, what is driving regional growth in vehicle-miles traveled? Also, to what extent do residents travel on arterial (city-serving) roadways for trips that might have been accommodated locally and without adding to congestion?*

The amount of congestion and vehicle-miles traveled also has to do with whether transportation alternatives to the car are available and convenient. Residents of areas within walking distance of conveniences and transit drive roughly 43% less than locations without these advantages.⁵ In Berkeley, 3,000 new dwelling units were assumed by the Downtown Area Plan, but only 3% of traffic growth was attributable to downtown growth and 97% was attributable to higher driving rates at the regional level.⁶ In Portland, Oregon, construction of a new northwest freeway was avoided entirely by concentrating growth around transit.⁷ *In San Mateo, can most new growth be transit-oriented to minimize traffic congestion and expensive road improvements?*

⁴ Holtzclaw, John, "Smart Growth – as Seen from the Air," National Sierra Club Transportation Committee, June 2000.

⁵ Gloria Ohland and Shelley Poticha (2006). *Street smart: streetcars and cities in the twenty-first century*. Reconnecting America (www.reconnectingamerica.org).

⁶ City of Berkeley, *Downtown Area Plan EIR*, www.cityofberkeley.info/dap.

⁷ <http://www.reconnectingamerica.org/index.php/resource-center/browse-research/1997/integrating-land-use-and-transportation-planning-for-livable-communities-making-the-connections-a-summary-of-the-lutraq-project/>

I've suggested two conditions that reduce congestion: bringing destinations closer together; and making walking, bicycling and transit convenient options. Another way is by adopting transportation demand management (TDM) programs. TDM programs make it easier to get around without a car. To do this, cities can require new housing developers and employers to offer free transit passes. Another TDM program is to "unbundle" the price of parking from the rent of an apartment, as even a small charge can encourage some households to get by with fewer cars. Berkeley incorporated these TDM features within its Downtown Area Plan and Zoning, which won the American Planning Association's national award for "best practices" in 2013. *What TDM programs have been adopted in San Mateo and what exemplary TDM programs from nearby communities might be added?*

Costs of Not Growing

Much may be lost if San Mateo fails to grow at pace with the Peninsula, in which it is an integral part. *What are the consequences of not managing that growth responsibly?*

- *Will housing costs and apartment rents continue to climb and consume an even greater share of household income, if San Mateo fails to grow as California's Office of Economic Development and the Association of Bay Area Governments studies indicate?*
- *Is San Mateo becoming a less diverse and exclusive place, as median incomes rise and incomes remain tied to racial and ethnic characteristics?*
- *What housing opportunities are available today for millennials who grew up here, and might some be forced to move because there is not enough housing? Has that been happening already?*
- *Can local retail survive as more sales occur online without more local patrons? How much growth will be needed if the community wants to enjoy about the same amount of retail as it enjoys today?*
- *Can the City remain fiscally strong as its infrastructure ages, without growth and new sources of revenue?*

Housing Affordability

While nearly everyone agrees that San Mateo has a housing crisis, its causes and consequences are complex and not well understood. *In the absence of fact-based policies, what assurance is there that housing policies will result in enough housing supply to meet expected demand?*

Housing prices have escalated as median incomes on the Peninsula have risen and as the ratio of jobs to housing has grown. While the Association of Bay Area Governments reports that eight jobs are added to the larger Bay Area for every one housing unit, what has the trend been in the Peninsula subregion?

Care should be taken in drawing conclusions. For example, in the Briefing Book, historical analysis uses different years as starting points or the years are not referenced. Baseline years might correspond with the US Census and Association of Bay Area Government studies, including information from 2010 and 2000, for a cleaner comparison of longer trends over time.

It's also important to recognize that jobs and housing connect across municipal boundaries, but knowing a city's jobs/housing ratio can still be useful since this is the only geography that local land use controls can regulate. Communities with significantly higher ratios may suffer higher housing costs, while communities with lower ratios likely suffer from fewer jobs and less municipal revenue. The Bay Area as a whole has roughly 3.46 million employed residents and 2.76 million housing units,⁸ for a region-wide ratio of 1.25 employed residents per housing unit. *How does San Mateo's jobs/housing ratio compare with the region as a whole?*

At the same time, jobs-housing ratios are an inexact indicator for why a community experiences a lot of commute traffic, as the "match" between local jobs and housing also plays a role. Commute trips into San Mateo may be because housing is too expensive for many people in the local workforce who live in places with lower housing costs. If true, this pattern contributes not only to traffic congestion, but also higher transportation costs for these households. The Center for Neighborhood Technology and other organizations consider the combined cost of housing and transportation to be a more fair assessment of affordability than rent alone.⁹ *How affordable is San Mateo when transportation costs are also factored when considering someone who lives, and someone who works, in San Mateo?*

Many residents in San Mateo commute to jobs in Silicon Valley and San Francisco. *What kinds of jobs fit the profile of San Mateo residents who commute out of the City, and can these kinds of jobs be recruited to reduce commute distances long term?*

Housing Capacity

In its report on Downtown San Mateo from 2016, the Urban Land Institute remarked "to accommodate the growth of San Mateo and the overall region, the city must build more densely, increase height limits, and take advantage of its access to mass transit."¹⁰ *What analysis might substantiate this assertion?*

In this analysis, consider that change in traditional residential neighborhoods and historic districts will be difficult to attain and may be inconsistent with their

⁸ 2010 American Communities Survey of the US Census

⁹ <https://www.cnt.org/tools/housing-and-transportation-affordability-index>

¹⁰ http://1o91j73ixgji10eaou3ddjy-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/47/2016/06/Downtown-San-Mateo-ULI-TAP_Final.pdf

protection. Quite possibly, the character of San Mateo's most valued places can be maintained if the potential for transit-oriented development that excludes these areas is sufficient. *To understand the potential of transit-oriented areas, can the extent of land suitable for development be measured – not just residentially-zoned land but also aging commercial properties? Are transit-oriented opportunities sufficient to accommodate growth through 2040? And how tall might some new places need to be to protect San Mateo's most valued existing places?*

Next Steps

Yours is sure to be an exciting process of realization and creation.

The General Plan Update is the community's opportunity to chart a course for the future that is inclusive, resilient, sustainable, and responsible. To do this, the community will want to address its challenges squarely. It will want to embrace change associated with demographic trends, economic development, transportation behavior and technology, and millennial preferences – to name just a few.

An exemplary plan can emerge from a clear understanding of challenges, penetrating analysis, and solid information – all pointing toward a compelling vision for the future. It might be that a preferred outcome may not require difficult trade-offs. A win-win scenario might be possible, which conserves San Mateo's most valued places, while maximizing favorable growth where it makes the most sense.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matthew Taecker". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial 'M'.

Matthew Taecker AIA AICP