

August 17, 2021

Ms. Christina Horrisberger,
Community Development Director
City of San Mateo
330 W. 20th Avenue
San Mateo, CA 94403
Via email: chorrisberger@cityofsanmateo.org

Subject: Planning for residential historic districts

Dear Ms. Horrisberger,

Summary

There are four residential neighborhoods west of El Camino Real potentially eligible for listing as historic districts in the California Register of Historical Resources. General Plan policy revisions, zoning changes, planning applications and residential design guidelines should be evaluated in terms of these potential districts and the contributor buildings within them. To be eligible for listing on the California Register, one of four criteria must be met. The City of San Mateo Historic Building Survey strongly suggests these potentially eligible neighborhoods may meet two of these criteria. The General Plan update process is an opportunity to evaluate these neighborhoods' significance to the community, determine if they rise to the level of importance and integrity of designated historic districts, and add General Plan policy language accordingly.

Background

Thirty two years ago, in 1989, San Mateo adopted a Historic Building Survey as part of its General Plan update. That survey serves as a basis for review and regulation of San Mateo's historic resources, including the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance, the Zoning Code, and CEQA. The 1989 survey was a significant achievement, but also limited in budget and scope. The survey concentrated its attention on the downtown commercial district and the oldest residential neighborhoods, mostly east of El Camino Real where historic resources were most threatened with demolition and redevelopment.

Many individual buildings and two historic districts - the Downtown Commercial District and Glazenwood Residential District - were identified as historically significant and as a result were listed on the California Register of Historical Resources. Residential neighborhoods west of El Camino Real were never completely or adequately surveyed, although several are referenced in the survey report as potentially significant historic districts.

Potentially Significant Historic Districts West of El Camino Real

The author of the 1989 Historic Survey, in consultation with the State Office of Historic Preservation, determined that the best approach to documenting the neighborhoods of "Baywood, Baywood Knolls, Aragon and San Mateo Park would be as potential historic districts since these neighborhoods contain a large number of older buildings that relate historically and have a high degree of architectural consistency."

According to the Historic Building Survey, it was when these neighborhoods developed in the first few decades of the early 20th century that “the patterns for the community’s development took shape,” and “the community began to follow a typical pattern of suburbanization. In San Mateo, this pattern is clear.”

In addition to Aragon, San Mateo Park, and Baywood Knolls, the survey singles out Baywood, which developed in the late 1920s and 1930s, as “a neighborhood of large, period revival residences” that today “remains intact. Wide curving streets are lined with well-maintained Tudor Revival and Spanish Colonial Revival homes.” Therefore, Baywood appears to qualify as a district because of its “contribution to the broad patterns of local or regional history,” the California Register’s first criteria for significance. It also appears to meet criteria three because it “embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction,” as exemplified by the “rich assortment of historically important architectural styles,” predominantly intact Spanish Colonial Revival and Tudor Revival homes.

These neighborhoods west of El Camino Real, the report explains, are “well-established,” and while they are zoned R-1 at the present time, dramatic changes can occur through state legislation, general plan policies or individual property owners. Therefore, the long range preservation goals of San Mateo, the report concludes, should feature “future study of these neighborhoods as either local or National Register Historic Districts.”

415 Fairfax: A Case in Point

Built in 1933 in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, 415 Fairfax is located in the Baywood neighborhood. The current owners have submitted a pre-application for demolition of the home and replacement with a new contemporary style residence that disregards the context of the surrounding neighborhood.

The City of San Mateo Community Development Department, as part of their due diligence, asked a historic consultant, Architecture + History, LLC., to evaluate the existing structure for “individual” historic significance. The consultant determined that it did not qualify as “individually” significant. But more importantly, the consultant was *not* asked to evaluate the structure as a contributor to a potential residential historic district. Substantial evidence in the 1989 Historic Survey identifies Baywood as a potential historic district because it appears to meet two criteria for listing on the California Register.

415 Fairfax is a fine example of the Spanish Colonial Revival style, typical of the period, which has retained its integrity, as have most of the homes in the neighborhood. Both its style and integrity seem to qualify the home as a contributor to an eligible historic district. Therefore, thorough due diligence suggests re-evaluation of 415 Fairfax in this context, as a contributor to a historic district. With regard to similar planning applications in the future, Community Development should include evaluation for both individual eligibility *and* as contributors to a potential historic district.

General Plan

Several members of the City Council have expressed interest in expanding the boundaries of the ten General Plan study areas to encompass San Mateo’s single family neighborhoods. The idea is that R-1 neighborhoods should be up-zoned for higher density. Most San Mateans think this is a bad idea, believing that ADUs and the ten identified study areas allow enough opportunity for increasing density and meeting our future housing needs.

But if single family neighborhoods are designated General Plan study areas, or if state legislation up-zones them for us, the General Plan update must evaluate these neighborhoods as potentially eligible historic districts as well. An adequate evaluation would study National Register, California Register, and local eligibility. It would also examine any significant adverse impacts that would accrue to the architectural/historical integrity of the neighborhoods, or imperil listing of these neighborhoods as historic districts.

Conclusion

In order to make informed planning decisions that support City policy goals, policy makers need baseline information on potential historic resources, both individually and collectively as districts. Before buildings are torn down or neighborhoods irreparably 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.

Completing the historic resources survey at this time, in tandem with the current General Plan update, would accomplish a strategic direction identified by the City Council in 2016 to “support efforts to improve residential neighborhoods and preserve and enhance neighborhood character.” It would also help ensure that San Mateo continues to be the “healthy community that respects the quality of its neighborhoods,” as declared in the 2040 General Plan vision statement.

As development pressure continues to mount, and San Mateo examines its future through the General Plan revision process, it becomes more critical than ever to identify, retain and preserve the historic resources and neighborhoods that contribute so much to San Mateo’s identity, character and value.

Please let me know if you have any questions or if you would like to discuss in more detail.

Sincerely,
Keith Weber
San Mateo

Cc:

Drew Corbett, City Manager
Zachary Dahl, Deputy Community Development Director
Eric Rodriguez, Mayor
Ramiro Maldonado, Planning Commission Chair
Margaret Williams, Planning Commission Vice-Chair
Bridget Maley, Architecture + History, LLC.
Mike Nash, Baywood Owners Improvement Association
Mitch Postel, President, San Mateo County Historical Association
Julianne Polanco, State Historic Preservation Officer
Jon Mays, San Mateo Daily Journal