

Editorial: A blueprint for San Jose

Residents have a chance to influence growth

Mercury News Editorial

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If you want a say in the kind of place San Jose will become over the next two decades, go to City Hall on Saturday morning. The task force assigned to update the city's blueprint for growth - its general plan - will be taking notes.

This communitywide workshop is critical because it will help shape the task force's agenda for the first general plan review in more than a decade. And power players know that if you're fighting for an idea or an ideal, setting the agenda is half the battle.

General plans sum up a city's philosophy of growth, highlight what's important to the community and prescribe where different kinds of development should go. San Jose's plan in the 1980s was visionary, adding an urban growth boundary to stop the city from sprawling into open land and over the hillsides.

The update in the early 1990s encouraged higher density housing at transit hubs and, after much debate, held off development of the Almaden Valley Urban Reserve. Each plan has tried to strike a balance of jobs and housing.

But any general plan is only as strong as the officials elected to enforce it. And council members

who weren't around when a plan was developed are less likely to buy into it, which is what happened in San Jose. The council has amended the plan so frequently for developers that it's become all but meaningless.

On top of that, each council district has gone its own way in planning development, often with little attention to the needs of the city as a whole.

This review is the community's chance to reassert its values and to pull the city's districts together in a sense of common purpose.

Mayor Chuck Reed and the council launched the task force with a set of guiding principles involving housing, economic growth and other needs. They're good ideas, but they leave lots of room for interpretation and priority setting.

For example, the general plan has to include enough new housing to accommodate population growth. The guiding principles also include protecting and enhancing the city's neighborhoods and historic resources - but in some areas, going for higher-density housing may alter the character of neighborhoods and business districts.

These are the kinds of ideas to get on the table Saturday. That will ensure they're explored in the coming months.

Residents also need to reiterate priorities they've worked to establish. For example, the general plan task force could revisit the city's formula for requiring new parkland to accompany housing development. Developers would like to see the acreage requirement reduced. Advocates can't assume that policies they won a few years ago will be reflected in the new general plan - unless they again demand it.

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The city is working hard to make this session inclusive, with simultaneous sessions conducted in Spanish and Vietnamese, and with activities for kids to help draw out their ideas. But if you care about such issues as trails, affordable housing or traffic - don't assume somebody else will be there to pipe up. Clear that calendar and show up yourself.

Willow Glen Resident

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NEWS

Residents turn into urban planners at city workshop

By Janice Rombeck

About 250 residents from across San Jose spent last Saturday morning as urban planners charged with answering this question: What should San Jose look like in 20 to 30 years?

Their collective answer: an energy-efficient and safe city with a vibrant downtown, accessible transportation, healthy neighborhoods, parks and business districts, inviting places to gather, respect for the environment and history, more jobs, affordable housing and better schools.

In other words, they want it all.

The thoughts and ideas that emerged from a three-hour planning exercise at the Oct. 13 Community Visioning Workshop at city hall will be considered by a task force appointed by the city council in August to help update the city's General Plan, which guides land use decisions and future growth.

Turning a collective vision into a blueprint for the city won't be easy.

"It's going to be very difficult to balance the vision and the practicalities and find the money to do all this," said Harvey Damell, a North Willow Glen resident and task force member, but he added, "I think it can be done."

The 37-member citizen task force guiding the General Plan update effort, called Envision San Jose 2040, will work for the next two years to help planning officials develop a blueprint for the future. Members include neighborhood leaders, environmentalists, builders, business and labor representatives, educators and seven former council members. The task force is co-chaired by Councilman Sam Liccardo, who represents the downtown area, and former councilwoman Shirley Lewis. Former Councilman David Pandori and current council members Pierluigi Oliverio and Judy Chirco also serve on the task force.

Although the group represents a wide variety of interests, Mayor Chuck Reed asked task force and community members gathered at City Hall to "put aside the special interests you may care passionately about" to look at citywide planning issues.

Through September, the task force will identify issues and create a vision, analyze existing conditions and turn ideas into proposals. By January 2010, the task force will set goals, develop policies and create drafts of the General Plan and environmental impact report. The city council will review the documents and give final approval.

San Jose's first General Plan was adopted in 1976 and was last updated in 1984.

The planning exercise began on a positive note as workshop participants broke into 30 smaller groups, including two youth groups and Vietnamese- and Spanish-speaking groups.

They were first asked to identify what they liked best about San Jose. The city's diversity, including ethnic groups, arts, businesses and generations, was at the top of most lists.

The next task was addressing priorities and issues for the future. Fiscal responsibility was a priority on many lists, along with giving all neighborhoods equal attention and resources, more pedestrian-friendly streets, an expanded city center with retail outlets and more jobs.

Answers to the final workshop, during which participants had to determine what would make San Jose a great city 20 to 30 years into the future, included putting San Jose in the forefront of sustainable energy and environmental protection, making it the model for urbanization, bringing BART to San Jose, fully developing the trail system, creating a large central park, strengthening neighborhood identities and providing daycare with job growth.

But participants also believed San Jose should appreciate what it already offers.

"We need to capitalize on what we already have," said Helen Chapman, former parks and recreation commissioner.

Envision San Jose 2040 task force meetings are open to the public.

For future dates and more information, log on to www.sanjoseca.gov/planning and click on *General Plan Update* or call the *planning division* at 408.535.3555.

San Joseans offer vision for city's growth blueprint

RESIDENTS OFFER VISION FOR GROWTH BLUEPRINT

By Deborah Lohse
Mercury News

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Build more eco-friendly buildings. Improve public transportation to ease traffic. And by the way, let's give ourselves a hand for the vast diversity of San Jose's residents.

Those were some ideas that bubbled to the top of an intense, three-hour public brainstorming session Saturday morning at San Jose City Hall.

Nearly 250 members of the public showed up to voice their ideas to San Jose officials who are embarking on a multiyear process of updating the city's general plan. That master blueprint guides where San Jose does and does not build, what its civic priorities are, and what services will be required to accommodate that vision.

The general-plan process, a few years overdue from the recommended once-a-decade schedule, will be San Jose's fourth major such update effort since the mid-1970s. Officials are calling the project Envision 2040, reflecting their goal to include priorities - such as environmental preservation or building targets - that will hold sway 30 years hence.

"Think broadly about the entire city, and a long-term view of where we could go, what we could be," Mayor Chuck Reed exhorted the crowd, before it broke up into more than two dozen discussion groups huddled around tables in the sunny City Hall rotunda.

"This plan needs to inspire the city," said David Pandori, the former city councilman who is vice chairman of the city's 37-member, general plan task force.

'Vision statement'

The task force and a consulting firm will take the input from Saturday's session and add it to the "vision statement" that will guide the next two years of task force meetings. City officials hope to present a final general plan to the San Jose City Council in early 2010.

The participants, dressed casually and sporting name tags, proved an eager bunch, smiling and laughing frequently and applauding one another's ideas.

They seemed to agree with San Jose's longtime efforts to keep its hillsides free of development and to encourage "in-fill" construction in existing neighborhoods, rather than sprawling housing developments.

"I like that the hills aren't covered with condos," said Tom McCarter, who lives in North San Jose.

Having a sufficient number of schools and enough firefighters and police to serve new developments and new residents was also on many people's minds. So was keeping jobs in San Jose rather than allowing so much residential development that the city has no land for industries to return.

"We are going to have to ship people 50 or 60 miles to work" if San Jose keeps converting its dwindling supply of industrial land to residences, said Atul Saini, a small-business owner who lives in Berryessa.

Still, increasing the supply of affordable housing was also atop many groups' lists, including the Vietnamese and Spanish speakers who met separately to converse in their native languages.

Participants' priorities

Surprisingly, few groups voiced strong opinions about whether the city ought to allow development of Coyote Valley, the 7,000-acre stretch in South San Jose that has been the subject of years of planning to build 25,000 homes and accommodate 50,000 jobs. That process has been slowed greatly as the new mayor and city council have focused on drafting a fresh citywide general plan.

Instead, Saturday's participants focused on other priorities, which each table's moderator read off in a wrap-up session in council chambers. Some other common themes:

- Expand San Jose's hiking trails and link them with others in the county.
- Encourage a more diverse nightlife downtown - not just the rowdy nightclubs that currently dominate.
- Keep plenty of development-free "open spaces."

There were many other suggestions for preserving the environment, including one to "produce more power than we consume" - an idea that earned a loud burst of spontaneous applause.

Another popular idea was to focus on what makes

San Jose great, and to not "try to make it San Francisco or Austin or someplace else," as one moderator put it.

While many of the 250 attendees were longtime community activists or homeowners or business owners, there was a small contingent of younger participants. A dozen or more members of the city's Youth Commission were there, as well as some De Anza College students involved in a program to preserve wildlife in the Coyote Valley corridor.

Some of those young people urged the city to focus on improving dirty or unsafe schools.

Jessica Reese, a West Valley College sophomore, kept her table of elders riveted as she described students having to sit on the floor at Oak Grove High School because there were too few desks. She also told them about students being fearful of being jumped by gang members.

Some of the youth commissioners said they considered it important that they attend, as the implementation of the long-term vision will fall to them.

Said 16-year-old Kevin Liao, "By the time a lot of these policies come into place, we'll be running the city."

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