

Baty, John

From: LAmes@aol.com
Sent: Friday, March 05, 2010 11:53 AM
To: District3; Prevetti, Laurel
Cc: Brilliot, Michael; Crabtree, Andrew; Butler, Lee; Baty, John
Subject: Envision 2040 -- a fan letter

March 5, 2010

Co-Chairs Sam Liccardo and Shirley Lewis
 and the Envision 2040 Task Force

This is basically a fan letter:

I just wanted to send a note to say I'm pleased with the direction the General Plan Update is headed.

I sensed a slight feeling of uncertainty at the last meeting, a concern that the plans you are developing might not ever be fully implemented. I want to say that, even if the City never makes it to the planned final build-out, at least it is headed in the right direction.

~~~

A historical perspective:

\* In the 1970's, the car was king in San Jose, and urban sprawl was unabated. Nearly all growth was in the south (Almaden and Blossom Valley), and all the jobs were in the north (Mt. View, Sunnyvale, and Palo Alto). The big concern was traffic and how to get the residents from the south to the jobs in the north, and the City was willing to sacrifice established neighborhoods in order to cut through more and wider expressways. While they tried and succeeded in some areas (note the damage done to the Washington/Alma area by Vine and Almaden), they were blocked in Willow Glen when they tried to make Cherry and Bird into 6-lane expressways.

\* Around 1984-85, the City had a Task Force to work on "Horizon 2000". I look back in my notes and see that the Task Force dealt with issues such as urban growth limits and the development of the Coyote Valley, the stretching thin of city services (sound familiar?), and transportation issues. The question of Cherry Ave. came back. Other issues were transportation "level of service", which required developers to improve roadways if their projects too severely impacted traffic; the first "Midtown" study; and the designation of "Neighborhood Business Districts".

\* Around 1993, San Jose undertook the next update: "General Plan 2020". This was the time when San Jose decided to draw a line in the sand and say "no more sprawl". We who lived near the center of the City knew that that meant that future growth would be "in our back yards", but we felt that in-fill (provided it was accompanied by the appropriate improvements in infrastructure -- parks, schools, city services) was better than living in the middle of a forever expanding sea of sprawl (and the resultant swarm of commuters passing through our neighborhoods rather than living in them). The residents of Willow Glen did not pull a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), but instead embraced the in-fill concept and worked with the City and developers on Tamien and the Midtown Study for high-density, walkable, transit-oriented in-fill developments, with at least the promise of parks, trails, and a balance of jobs and housing.

\* And now: you on the Task Force have shown the desire to expand the City upward rather than outward, and there is even discussion about pulling back in some places from the Green-line limit to preserve even more open space. You are working to not destroy neighborhoods in order to improve traffic, but instead you talk about "building cities for people, not cars", about developing additional neighborhood "villages", and about "complete streets" that cars have to share rather than own. You do not talk about discouraging growth, but instead you are channeling it in beneficial direction. Thus, even if the City doesn't eventually meet all the 2040 build-out goals for jobs or housing, at least you are headed in the right direction.

~~~

Concerning Villages:

I guess I view myself as a prototypical villager, perhaps just a few years ahead of the curve. My wife and I arrived in San Jose fresh from college at the height of an energy crisis, and, even though I had been born and raised in the suburbs, we had no desire to purchase a home out in the suburbs where we would have had to forever be dependent upon the automobile. We chose our home in Willow Glen because it was within walking distance of needed services (groceries, shops, restaurants, library), a lovely park was just a couple blocks away, schools were nearby, it was convenient to public transportation (a bus-stop at the end of our driveway and the main train station a short bus-ride away), and it was within biking distance of my job. As I've said more than once at these hearings, I'm quite happy with my life in San Jose -- my wish is just that the rest of the residents can have it as good.

Part of what makes Willow Glen special is its sense of "history". I am proud of my now-85-year-old house, with all of its eccentricities and "character". Even though there has been a lot of in-fill, rebuilds, and remodels in the area, there are a number of homes on Willow that are from the 1800's that add to the sense of "place". I was born in the suburbs and lived "at exit 7"; as a teenager I lived in a different suburb and was "near Wilmot and Broadway"; but now I don't say I live near 280 and Meridian, but instead say "I live in Willow Glen" -- a place. Thus: historic preservation can help with village development to serve as the kernel for future growth. (And, if you need a cautionary tale, you need look no further than Sunnyvale, which gutted its downtown for the promise of a gleaming shopping center, only to find that the few remnants of the old downtown are the only parts that are still viable.)

A key feature of the village is that it is "walkable". In the suburbs, one gets into the car and drives out to the strip-mall; in the village, one can often walk along tree-lined streets. One can meet one's neighbors on the sidewalk or at the local shops; one can enjoy the margarita at the local restaurant and safely return home; one can "belong". As I mentioned during one of my 2-minute opportunities, the Envision 2040 needs to promote policies that enable walkable communities. This does not mean developing a complex network of walking paths, but rather the development of policies that encourage walkability. A couple examples:

* We used to be able to go to the end of our street, walk through the church parking lot, come out on another side-street, and then easily reach the library. However, the church got no benefit from our crossing their lot, and there was perceived to be a slight liability that might affect their insurance policy, so they closed off the cut-through.

* We used to be able to walk through the parking lot of an apartment complex and reach the local coffee shop. The apartment complex got no benefit from our crossing their lot, again the perception of an increased liability, again the walkway was locked.

The neighborhood (and the City as a whole) is worse off, but each individual made the logical decision based on their own self-interest. For villages to work, either land-owners have to act out of concern for the greater good, or the City has to encourage (subsidize) or enforce (regulate) the development and maintenance of these very local walkways.

A lot of growth is planned for San Jose in the coming years. In-fill is the way to go, as opposed to continuing sprawl. In-fill in the form of 4-plexes replacing single houses results in boring and undesirable neighborhoods, whereas development of vibrant local shopping districts with collocated and adjacent high-density housing creates desirable villages.

~~~

Regarding scenarios:

At the recent public workshop, I and the participants at our table came up with a "Scenario 5-prime": the same number of housing units as 5, but with a 1.0:1 job/resident ratio. This would put the dot on the plot to the left of scenarios 2 and 5, and on the same 1:1 line as scenario 3. Our thought process: if San Jose has a job:housing ratio higher than 1:1, that means that people will be commuting into San Jose for work and then leaving in the evening, possibly to Gilroy, Livermore, or the Central Valley. While a high job ratio might help somewhat with the City's budget (at least by the current tax codes), it would contribute to traffic congestion, pollution, and greenhouse gases. We felt that scenario 3 involved too much growth, even though it is job:housing balanced. Scenario 5' is a scaled-down version 3, but we call it 5' rather than 3' because we want to emphasize that the City should aim for the high-end driving job-skill mix associated with Scenario 5, rather than the lower-end service-industry job-skill mix of Scenario 3. Our main discussion was whether to vote for the original Scenario 5 with the expectation that the job growth would never be met, or whether to actually plan for what we want: the 5-prime scenario.

With the advent of High Speed Rail and BART, combined with the existing cultural amenities downtown and the promise of tying in even better with the San Jose State University community, the downtown area is poised to become a vibrant hub -- the heart of Silicon Valley -- and home to many new residents and jobs alike. (And don't forget the walkability, the bike-lanes, parklands, riparian corridors, and historic preservation!) The various villages can serve to support the nearby community (with restaurants, shopping, banking, etc.), and also provide additional housing (e.g., studio, 1- and 2-room apartments above the ground-level retail). The villages can also serve as potential locations for "job-incubators" (for the prototypical "started in a garage" start-ups), where the nearby shops and services help support the start-up businesses and their employees.

~~~

Anyway, it would have been hard to have tried to express all of this in the allotted 2-minute public-comment segment, so I appreciate this opportunity to address you in writing.

Good luck!, carry on!, you're headed in the right direction!

~Larry Ames
San Jose resident in the village of Willow Glen.