San Jose Envision 2040 Task Force
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San Jose Envision 2040 Task Force;

The Historic Landmarks Commission of the City of San Jose has been following the work of the Envision 2040 Task Force and the development of the new General Plan with a great deal of interest and anticipation. The work to date appears to embody many creative and useful concepts. The Historic Landmarks Commission has continued to review draft portions of the Plan as they are available, focusing on issues that may affect historic preservation in San Jose.

Following up on our letter of October 16, 2009 we are taking this opportunity to forward some comments related to portions of the Plan that have become available over the past few months. We anticipate that we will continue to review the emerging Plan and forward comments to you regarding historic preservation from time to time.

The comments below are directed to three 'chapters' of the Draft Plan – Vibrant Arts and Culture, Environmental Leadership and Quality Neighborhoods – plus the recently posted Draft Land Use Plan. Many of these comments and recommendations are intended to reflect one of the major recommendations made in our October 2009 letter – that historic preservation policies be woven into the Plan for the best effect. Policies that are being addressed are identified by chapter, sections within the chapters, and Policy and Action numbers:

Vibrant Arts and Culture; Historic Preservation and Archaeology

Policy HP-1.11 states: Maintain and update an inventory of historic resources in order to promote awareness of these community resources and as a tool to further their preservation. (San Jose 2020 GP, modified) In updating the inventory, the primary focus of City resources should be on the identification of Historic Districts. (Draft Plan, underlining added)

HLC Comment: This is perhaps too strong a bias toward districts and could result in passing over individual buildings while also failing to indentify districts because of the much greater cost and effort to survey districts. Perhaps the following revision of the underlined sentence would balance out the priorities:

In updating the inventory, priority should be given to identifying and establishing Historic Districts when any available or reasonably anticipated funds are sufficient for that purpose.

Policy HP-2.3 states: The City shall consider demolition of any structure listed on or eligible for the Historic Resources Inventory only as a last resort, to be permitted only if rehabilitation, re-use on the subject site, and/or relocation of the resource is not feasible; demolition is necessary to protect the

health, safety, and welfare of its residents; or the public benefits outweigh the loss of the historic resource. (Draft Plan, underlining added)

HLC Comment: Why would demolition be necessary to "protect the health, safety …… of residents"? Wouldn't residents usually be evacuated from a dangerous building? If the residents had some interest in moving back in, for example if they were owners or renters, repair might be much more feasible than new construction. This seems like a gratuitous and confusing exemption from preservation requirements.

We suggest that the underlined wording be eliminated; the infeasibility of rehabilitation or re-use on the subject site would cover any case where repair is not feasible.

Action HP-2.7 states: Amend the applicable design guidelines and City policies to prioritize historic preservation over conventional development guidelines by providing additional flexibility in the development review process (for example, with parking, independently accessible private open spaces, requirement for units to be attached, etc.) that encourages the preservation and rehabilitation of historic resources.

HLC Comment: Although the intent behind this policy is a good one, its wording seems very open-ended and dismissive of city development policies, not to mention the interests of the communities where these flexibilities might be applied. Suggested approach:

Action HP-2.7 Amend the applicable design guidelines and City policies to add flexibility to the development review process (for example, regarding parking policies, private open space requirements, requirement for units to be attached, etc.) to encourage the preservation and rehabilitation of historic resources consistent with the character and needs of the surrounding properties and uses.

Environmental Leadership; Green Building

GB Policy 1.7 states: Recognise the interconnected nature of green building systems and, in the implementation of green building policies, give priority to green building options that provide environmental benefit in reducing water and/or energy use. (Draft Plan)

HLC Comment: There should be some recognition in this section of the 'greenness' of preserving existing buildings that can make a contribution to the quality of the community. For example:

GB Policy 1.7 Recognize the interconnected nature of green building systems and, in the implementation of green building policies, give priority to green building options that provide environmental benefit in reducing water and/or energy use and, also, that preserve existing buildings with special community value thus avoiding the loss of building materials, other construction resources and community icons.

Quality Neighborhoods; Vibrant, Attractive and Complete Neighborhoods

HLC Comment: Even though historic neighborhoods are typically the essence of 'vibrant' and 'attractive' and, often, also 'complete', there is no acknowledgement of that in this section with a policy specifically intended to support the preservation of such neighborhoods. This omission should be remedied by adding a new Policy:

QN Policy 1.X Recognizing that historic neighborhoods, and even partially historic neighborhoods, already possess the characteristics of vibrancy and attractiveness, and frequently completeness, or the very strong potential for those characteristics, the preservation and protection of historic neighborhoods should be a primary objective.

Draft Land Use Map

The recently posted Draft Envision 2040 Land Use Map shows a number of land uses overlying historic properties, districts and conservation areas with uses that are, or could be, incompatible with the preservation of the historic resources. The HLC is concerned that this practice is confusing and will invite the loss of valuable historic resources in these areas.

'Two Acre Rule' Policies

Since several of the existing Two Acre Rule policies have tended to discourage the preservation of historic resources, the HLC is interested in how these kinds of policies, offering a wide range of flexibilities, will be incorporated into the new General Plan.

The Historic Landmarks Commission appreciates any consideration you can give to these suggestions. We believe they will help make the intent of the new General Plan regarding historic preservation more clear and accessible.

Patricia Colombe, Chair
Historic Landmarks Commission, City of San Jose