

July 27, 2011

Co-chairs Sam Liccardo and Shirley Lewis
Staffmembers John Davidson and Andrew Crabtree
200 E. Santa Clara Street
San José, CA 95113

re: draft PEIR for Envision 2040

Dear Sirs and Madam,

I am writing to give my personal thoughts and comments on the draft Program Environmental Impact Report for the San José General Plan Update – the Envision 2040 PEIR. I have spoken at a number of the meetings during the Public Comment time, and I have submitted a couple written comments. However, this is the time to give overall comments and detailed corrections, “for the record”.

I have been very impressed by the thoroughness and openness of the Envision 2040 process. A knowledgeable and diverse task force was selected by the City that well-represented the diversity of the community, geographically, demographically, and by occupation and interest. The co-Chairs did a remarkable job at keeping the discussions civil, on-topic, and to-the-point; the City Staff were excellent in their preparations and presentations. There were roughly fifty open-to-the-public working meetings, plus a couple field-trips and several weekend community outreach meetings: we, involved members of the community, had ample opportunities to provide written and verbal comments throughout the process.

The Envision 2040 Task Force has had a monumental challenge: how to plan for the anticipated growth sustainably. It’s as if the entire city of Oakland (or half of San Francisco) were to be added to San José, while staying within the current borders, and doing so without impacting the habitat or damaging the quality-of-life here.

I have followed the various General Plans over the years, and I applaud the change in emphasis that is apparent in this General Plan Update. The Task Force worked by the mantra “Design a city for cars and you’ll get more cars; design it for people and you’ll get a better city.” I recall that San José’s 1985 General Plan was all about how to move cars faster to the edges of the city; the “Horizon 2000” tried to make the traffic more bearable with development tied to “Level of Service” at intersections; “San José 2020” worked to limit urban sprawl with “the Greenline” Urban Growth Boundary and the concept of in-fill; and now Envision 2040 strengthens the Greenline and aims for a walkable/bikeable city with a reduction in Vehicle Miles Traveled. By concentrating growth in denser village-like nodes along the transit corridors, the plan encourages walking/biking for shopping and entertainment, and transit for the daily commute. In addition, by concentrating the development in limited regions of the city, there is less damage to the riparian habitats, hillsides, and baylands, and also less damage to existing historically-interesting residential districts.

Enough compliments: I do have a couple concerns as well:

- As I have said on a couple occasions, I am troubled by the goal of 1.3 jobs per employed resident. I support the goal to “Shift the focus of the city’s growth to establish San José as a regional employment center to enhance the City’s leadership role”, and I understand the city’s desire to “grow up” and cease being just a bedroom community. I also understand how jobs provide more tax revenue and less of a financial drain than residences. San Francisco has a high jobs:resident ratio: it can do so because it draws in workers by BART and CalTrain from the adjacent Peninsula and East-bay cities. San José, however, is surrounded by Palo Alto, Sunnyvale, Mountain View and Santa Clara, all of which already have high jobs:resident ratios and thus will be unable to provide a large supply of workers to San José. On the east is the Diablo Range, and San José is trying to preserve a greenbelt between it and Morgan Hill to the south: to bring in workers means long commutes from the nearest towns. I feel it is great for the city to plan on being able to accommodate a large number of high-quality jobs (e.g., in the design and manufacture sector and not just in the service industry), but it does not seem environmentally sustainable to plan on encouraging a high level of long-distance commuting. Also, based on past experience, it seems that whenever there are lots of jobs here, the demand for housing increases, driving up the cost, which causes a call for the building of more affordable housing, which in turn lowers the job:resident ratio again.
- There was considerable public input and Task Force support for the “Three Creeks Trail”, which is planned to go along the abandoned Willow Glen Spur railroad corridor. I note that Fig. 2.2-17 does not properly reflect the alignment: it has the trail following a previously considered alignment along Alma Street rather than on the former railroad right-of-way. I have heard that this is just a clerical mistake and that the map will be replaced with an updated version. Nonetheless, for the record: there should be a dotted black line just south of Alma from Minnesota to Senter. Also, is Table 2.2-15 correct in calling for Alma to be converted from 4 lanes to 2-lane multimodal? – I thought it was one of the few designated truck routes.
- As I said during public comment, I wish that Lincoln Avenue would be added to the list of streets under consideration for reduction from 4 to 2 lanes of traffic. It is being designated as the “Main Street” that serves the historic downtown neighborhood commercial district of Willow Glen. While it does have to carry a fair amount of traffic, the current four lanes are not optimally configured: in places one lane is blocked by left-turners, other places the other is blocked by parallel-parkers, and the through-traffic is already effectively a single lane that weaves around the obstacles. If Lincoln were converted to one-lane each way, with a 2-way left-turn middle lane and bike lanes along the side, the traffic would move more smoothly and efficiently, the neighborhood commercial district would better serve the local community (by being more accessible by bike), and I would predict that the impact on the through traffic would be minimal. (I’d recommend having the 3-lane configuration run the full length from Almaden Expressway to San Carlos, so as to avoid having a lane of traffic peel off into one local residential street or another.)
- Table 2.2-15 lists a new freeway interchange at Senter at I-280, which is also shown in Fig. 2.2-18. I don’t recall this ever being mentioned during any of the presentations. I can see how it could help with traffic near “Little Saigon” and Kelley Park, but I wonder how it can be configured so as to not impact the nearby McLaughlin and 11th Street intersections. But the main reason I mention it: the alignment is adjacent to a historic train trestle on the abandoned Willow Glen Spur line. Just north of here, the right-of-way is being planned for

“the Five-Wounds Trail”, and it would be wonderful for the trail to continue under I-280, across the trestle, and over to Kelley Park. Would the Senter Rd. intersection be compatible with such a trail? (Note: such a trail would provide access to the planned BART station, and would also provide an off-road bypass around a difficult-to-construct segment of the planned Coyote Creek Trail through downtown.)

The saying is “the Devil’s in the details”, and there is a lot of detail in this PEIR! I’m afraid I’ve run out of time for reviewing and commenting. However, besides the few points of concern mentioned above, I find that a lot of the details are good:

- I am pleased to see Policy ER-3.1 – ER-3.4 in Section 3.0 on Riparian (“streamside”) setbacks. The riparian habitats are vital for the environment. San José has had a Riparian Setback Policy for decades now, but it has just been a “guideline”. Sometime it is followed fairly well (e.g., at the Monte Vista project along the Los Gatos Creek or the new complex at Hillsdale on the Coyote), other times the developers seem to “get away with murder” (recent examples include Malone at the Guadalupe or the newly approved “right-up-to-the-edge” project on Guadalupe Mines Road). I hope that, by being part of Envision 2040, the riparian setback policies will be more rigorously implemented.
- I’m glad to see in Table 2.2-18 that an intersection is planned for US-101 at 4th Street. This will tie into an extension of Skyport Drive, providing improved access from US-101 to San José International Airport.
- Figure 2.2-18 shows that the Almaden / Vine one-way pair will be decoupled. This will be very beneficial to the local community. However, unless measures are taken in advance, this may result in more of the Almaden Expressway traffic peeling off on to Lincoln. (This is yet another reason for converting Lincoln Ave. into a “complete” street, so as to avoid having the Almaden/Vine improvements adversely affecting an adjacent community!)
- And I especially appreciate the passage starting on p. 126 that lists the “basic objectives” for the policies and goals: they are wonderful!

Congratulations on completing this significant step in the long and thorough process of updating the General Plan!

Dr. Larry Ames

cc: Planning: Joe Horwedel and Laurel Prevetti
Councilmember Pierluigi Oliverio, D6