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RE: Development of Alternatives for West Downtown Walnut Creek Specific Plan

Dear Mr. Smith and members of the Citizens Advisory Committee:

On behalf of our thousands of members and supporters, we thank you for this opportunity to provide input to support the development of the West Downtown Walnut Creek Specific Plan.

Our organizations bring a wealth of experience gained from helping communities throughout the Bay Area craft broadly-supported long-range plans for areas near transit that strengthen our economy, protect our environment, and enhance opportunities for all.

We are pleased to see the city embarking on a thoughtful, deliberative planning process to shape a positive future for the West Downtown. In particular, the city has fostered productive conversations and strong turnout through each of its community workshops, which speaks highly of the city's concern for community engagement and education. By harnessing the best ideas of residents and technical experts alike, this process can have a profoundly positive impact on the lives of current and future Walnut Creek residents as well as nearby communities across the East Bay.

We write today to provide recommendations for the next substantive phase of the West Downtown planning process – the creation and assessment of alternatives. In our experience, this activity, more than any other, can determine the success of a planning process by catalyzing a fruitful, data-rich community dialogue about real-world opportunities and trade-offs. Getting it right requires considerable patience and collective deliberation. We therefore offer the following five recommendations:

**1. Establish Metrics for Measuring Success**

To have a constructive community dialogue about your forthcoming alternatives, we recommend establishing clear, meaningful criteria for comparison, supported by relevant, quantifiable metrics. Some of the most important metrics to consider are:

- *Local economic impacts*
  - Changes to customer base, ability to attract next generation of talent, disposable net income after housing+transportation costs, construction jobs, etc.
- *Quality of life impacts*
  - Change in commute distances for local workers across the income spectrum
  - Options for various demographics at a range of income levels (current retirees, baby boomers without children, families with children, millenials, people with special needs)
- *Transportation impacts*
  - Change in percentage of trips taken by various modes (car, transit, walk, bike)
  - Major walking and biking impediments removed, connections established
- *Health impacts*
  - Impacts of transportation choices on health (obesity, heart disease, injury, etc.)
- *Environmental impacts*
  - Greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, etc.

## **2. Ensure Sufficient Variety in Alternatives**

Illustrating trade-offs is most successful when there is a sufficient number of alternatives and degree of variation between alternatives. We therefore recommend that the city prepare four to five alternatives that present a broad array of choices, particularly regarding housing options, densities, and heights.

To capture this broad array of choices, the alternatives should span from approximately 700 new homes built in West Downtown through 2040 up to at least 2,737. The low end of this spectrum would reflect the construction of the approved BART Transit Village and a handful of additional homes. The high end would reflect the fulfillment of the residential demand estimated for the West Downtown area from 2010-2040, according to the BAE 2012 economic conditions study included in the Plan Area Profile<sup>1</sup>.

One alternative should also assess the amount of development that would occur if height restrictions in the West Downtown area were relaxed to allow development at least up to the maximum heights allowed under the voter-approved height restrictions enacted 28 years ago through Measure A-1985.

## **3. Plan for a Complete Community that Supports Current and Future Residents**

Ensuring that there are homes affordable to the full range of incomes and needs is critical for creating complete, inclusive, successful communities. Moreover, policies to prevent displacement are needed to ensure that as growth and development happen, all people – current and future residents alike -- are able to benefit. As increased public investments and zoning changes result from land use planning, a portion of the value created by public action should be recaptured in the form of affordable housing benefits. These actions are particularly important in areas like West Downtown that have been identified for growth and are in close proximity to jobs, transit and services, as residents of affordable housing use transit at higher rates, spend money in local businesses, and contribute to the civic life of the community.

Fortunately Walnut Creek has a strong foundation to build upon, with its own inclusionary housing ordinance and other citywide policies to encourage the creation and preservation of affordable housing. The alternatives assessment provides an opportunity to take the next step in the city's ongoing dedication to serving those most in need.

We would like to see the analysis of alternatives assess:

- How each alternative demonstrates that it will fulfill the West Downtown's appropriate portion of the city's Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) at each income level.
- How each alternative incorporates additional inclusionary policies and affordable housing incentives such as an increased percentage or in-lieu fee requirement that benefit households at 60% Area Median Income (AMI) and below.

The alternatives should also:

- Designate sites, particularly within ¼ mile of transit and proximity to social services, for multi-family affordable housing development. These sites are particularly important for eligibility to secure federal and state grant funding that supports affordable housing development.
- Establish an affordable housing overlay zone and/or land value recapture mechanisms that incentivize affordable housing development through reduced parking requirements, increased densities and heights, expedited permitting, and other incentives or value recapture strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> This would roughly reflect the estimate in the Jobs-Housing Connection Strategy for the upcoming Regional Transportation Plan of 3,000 new homes within the city's Priority Development Area boundaries by 2040.

- Strengthen anti-displacement and renter protection policies so that low-income people are not priced out of the area as land values and housing prices increase.
- Allow affordable housing development on properties in the West Downtown area. Establish zoning that does not preclude future multi-family affordable housing development on all sites appropriate for residential development.

#### **4. Link Land Use Elements with Key Transportation Variables**

The performance of each alternative will depend heavily on the accompanying transportation context. We therefore recommend that the city assess how each alternative performs with an array of key pedestrian, bicycle, transit, and parking management improvements and best practices in place to assess the relative benefits they provide under each scenario. Please see Appendix A for a full discussion of these items.

#### **5. Compare West Downtown Alternatives to development elsewhere**

In the resource-constrained, competitive environment of the Bay Area, choices made in one community can have long-term impacts on nearby cities and towns. For example, if the employees of Walnut Creek businesses struggle to find housing options that are appropriate to their income, this may incentivize employers to locate elsewhere<sup>2</sup> and developers to build in areas with limited access to amenities and transit. As you assess each alternative according to your performance metrics, we recommend that you also examine the full range of impacts of development occurring in nearby greenfield areas with limited transit access.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for this opportunity to share these recommendations. We look forward to future opportunities to provide our expertise. Working together, we can harness the region's best practices and culture of innovation to create a world-class plan for West Downtown.

Sincerely,

Matt Vander Sluis  
Senior Field Representative, East Bay  
Greenbelt Alliance

Amie Fishman  
Executive Director  
East Bay Housing Organizations

Ann Cheng and Sandra Padilla  
Program Directors  
TransForm

Dave Campbell  
Advocacy Director  
East Bay Bicycle Coalition

Kristin Tennessen  
Board Leader  
Bike Walnut Creek

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<sup>2</sup> See Silicon Valley CEO Business Climate Survey 2012, in which business leaders list high housing costs as their #1 business challenge. <http://svlg.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/2012CEOSURVEY.pdf>

## **Appendix A: TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENTS TO INCLUDE IN ALTERNATIVES**

With carefully selected improvements geared to support travel by foot and bicycle and transit, West Downtown could become a truly unique local destination that complements and serves as a transition to Walnut Creek's vibrant, walkable downtown.

### **Pedestrian Improvements:**

- Create more destinations for walking and generate greater sense of safety by providing additional open space in small, high quality pockets. The presence of residents in these pocket parks will help increase safety and "eyes on the street," encouraging more people to walk.
- Consider requiring a publically accessible rooftop garden on any mixed use development at South California Blvd. and Olympic Blvd. (CVS/Genova Site). Due to the drop in elevation within the site, there could be a great opportunity to have an at-grade access to a roof top garden from the west side as you walk east along Mt. Diablo Blvd. that would capitalize on the beautiful views of Mt. Diablo and the Acalanes Ridge Open Space.
- Provide robust signage throughout the area, pointing to key destinations and total walk and bike times in addition to distances for increased usability (see Figure 1).
- Ensure pedestrian crossing signal times are long enough for disabled, elderly and families with small children. This is typically double the standard crossing time.
- Ensure all crosswalk signs are functioning properly. For example, fix the crosswalk signal on the southeast corner of North California Blvd. and Lacassie so that the "walk" sign displays when pedestrians are crossing Lacassie walking south along North California Blvd. Currently only the crosswalk signal on the northeast corner displays its "walk" sign when pedestrians have depressed the "walk" button.
- Strive to increase the total area accessible within a 10 minute walkshed of BART and downtown, (see Plan area Profile Figure 4.3). Work with private landowners to provide easements or to negotiate right-of-way acquisition.
- Provide significant improvements to the east side of Oakland Blvd. to protect cyclists and pedestrians from collisions.
- Provide safe and well-lit pathways for people walking and biking under the 680 overpasses.
- Provide a safe way for people on foot and bike to cross Ygnacio Valley Road at California Blvd. **and** Oakland Blvd. Ideally provide an over-crossing as well as a "pedestrian scramble" all-ways crossing at grade that includes substantial pedestrian safety improvements such as bulb outs and high visibility signage and lighting.
- Add at least one pedestrian mid-block crossing across N. California Blvd.



**Figure 1. Signage for OakCliff Neighborhood in Dallas. Image by Roy Appleton/Staff Dallas News**

<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/community-news/oak-cliff/headlines/20121010-new-bishop-arts-signs-give-walking-biking-travel-times-to-oak-cliff-destinations.ece>

- Prioritize pedestrian improvements to address areas with greatest injury and exposure for people on foot and bicycle throughout the area. Utilize injury data from the Contra Costa Health Department.
- Ensure minimum sidewalk widths of 3 ft. throughout the plan area. Figure 2-1 in the Plan Area Profile is a valuable data source of sidewalk availability in the area. However, the scale used to group the various sidewalk widths combine acceptable sidewalk widths like 4 ft. with unacceptable sidewalk widths of 1 or 2 ft. Sidewalks must be at least 3 ft. in order to accommodate a standard wheelchair. Thus, Figure 2-1 offers no indication of whether a person on a wheelchair can count on traveling safely down a sidewalk or will need to travel in the road. The final plan should distinguish between sidewalks of 3ft. – 4 ft. from those less than 3ft. and use this information to prioritize the latter for improvements.
- Clearly separate and designate areas of the sidewalk that should be maintained obstruction-free from areas for property frontage zones for sidewalk street furniture. When designating minimum sidewalks widths, delineate minimum widths for each sidewalk zone. Areas intended for high volumes of pedestrian travel should be at least 10-15 feet of clear travel zone. (Example: Sidewalks adjacent to the BART Station property along both California and Ygnacio Valley appear to be roughly 10 feet wide. However, this does not account for tree wells which consume about half that distance.)



**Figure 2 Sidewalk Zones from the Grand Boulevard Multi-modal Transportation Corridor Plan: Street Design Toolbox**  
[http://www.grandboulevard.net/toolbox/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=65:sidewalk-zones&catid=8:sidewalk-frontage&Itemid=42](http://www.grandboulevard.net/toolbox/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=65:sidewalk-zones&catid=8:sidewalk-frontage&Itemid=42)

- Provide consistent pedestrian-scale lighting along paths to and at transit stops and stations to ensure safe access to transit.
- Create policies that require active street walls and establish build-to lines that help define the sidewalk to strengthen the walkability and walk-appeal of the area.
- Mitigate high levels of noise that inhibit walkability by adding street trees, traffic calming features, and potentially sound buffers along the 680 freeway overpass.
- Work with property owners of the long linear vacant lot across from 1381 Oakland Blvd. to determine feasibility of a pedestrian walkway in this area.

## Bicycling Improvements:

- Upgrade bike lanes on California Blvd. with buffered bike lanes, green paint in the conflict zones, and bike boxes (both advance and queue) to facilitate left turning movements off of California into the West Downtown Area and into Downtown. (See: <http://nacto.org/cities-for-cycling/design-guide/> for good examples from other cities that are incorporating these features to attract less-experienced cyclists.)
- Provide a completed bikeway, including a bike traffic signal, leading into the BART station at the intersection of Oakland & Ygnacio Valley for safe crossing.
- Provide safe east-west bicycle connections throughout West Downtown, including on Trinity Blvd. and Mount Diablo Blvd to connect all residents coming from either West Downtown or farther west to the heart of downtown shopping opportunities and provide access for students to reach the nearby Los Lomas High School and Walnut Creek Intermediate School, the public library and Civic Park. This would also allow seniors to connect to the Senior Center in Civic Park.
- Make substantial upgrades for bicycling on Mount Diablo Blvd to better accommodate the current and future bicycle use (see consistent peak hour bicycle traffic volumes in Figure 3-2 of the Area Profile). Improvements should include buffered bike lanes to address high traffic volumes and speeds and bike boxes for safe turning movements. Study parking utilization along Mt. Diablo Blvd. to evaluate the potential impact of removing portions of the on-street parking to make room for high-quality, buffered bike lanes.
- Provide a safe bicycle connection between the BART station area and the Iron Horse Trail. The Iron Horse is less than 1/4 mile from the edge of downtown, making it a priority gap in the bike network.
- To ensure connectivity into the West Downtown area, provide a safe pathway crossing for people on bicycles entering and exiting the BART station from the northernmost station vehicle exit onto California Boulevard. This currently leads to a fenced-off median. The pathway crossing on the east side of California should include a queuing area for bicyclists turning left into the station.
- Ensure plenty of long-term and short-term bicycle parking facilities distributed strategically throughout the plan area. For secured short-term parking, consider additional BikeLink electronic lockers. Currently four lockers exist at City Hall. At \$0.03 cents an hour this is great incentive for biking to BART and through the West Downtown Area. More information about the bike locker network, with hundreds of lockers throughout the region, can be found at <http://www.bikelink.org>
- Prioritize bicycle improvements to address areas with greatest injury and exposure for people on foot and bicycle throughout the area. Utilize injury data from the Contra Costa Health Department.
- Consider installing temporary cycletracks on major high-vehicle-volume streets to buffer cyclists from moving vehicles with parked cars. Figure 3 shows a cycletrack in Portland where parking



Figure 3 A cycletrack in Portland, OR. Image from NACTO.



Figure 4 San Jose Buffered Bike Lane. Image from Andrew Boone  
<http://bikesiliconvalley.org/2012/08/san-joses-new-buffered-bike-lanes-benefit-everyone>

spaces and a buffered bicycle lane protect cyclists from moving cars. Figure 4 shows a buffered bicycle lane recently installed in downtown San Jose on Fourth Street.<sup>3</sup>

- Utilize the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) Bikeway Design Guide to design and build complete streets in the plan area. Unfortunately, there are currently not sufficient tools in the California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) and Caltrans Highway Design Manual to build safe bikeways for all roadway users, as required by Walnut Creek's new Complete Streets policy. Most of the bike facilities in the NACTO Bikeway Design Guide are approved by the MUTCD. Bike traffic signals are one particular feature where California has taken the lead. Cities like Pleasant Hill, Dublin, Pleasanton, Richmond, Oakland, and Fremont are starting to incorporate these new bikeway designs on their city streets. It's time for Walnut Creek to join this growing movement to build modern bikeways that provide comfortable, attractive and inviting spaces in the transportation network to encourage significant increases in bicycling rates.

#### **Transit and Carsharing Improvements:**

- Add additional stops to the free downtown shuttle to better serve the West Downtown area. Consider using revenue from street parking to help fund increase in service frequency.
- Work with Central Contra Costa Transit Authority (CCCTA) to develop a bulk transit pass program so that future development can cost-effectively provide free or significantly reduced transit passes to future residents and workers.
- Work with carsharing providers (City Carshare or Zip Car) to determine how to bring a carshare network of at least 3 pods with 9-12 cars each, in and around the Walnut Creek BART Station area and West Downtown. Consider requiring all future developments to provide free memberships in carsharing programs to ensure a variety of transportation choices are well used and supported, helping to minimize local vehicle traffic.

#### **Parking Management:**

- The City of Walnut Creek is uniquely positioned for success because for the first time, parking needs for the downtown and surrounding areas are being managed cohesively through the Assistant to the City Manager, Matt Huffaker. With this coordination across departments, adoption of performance-based parking occupancy goals and a history of providing community benefits such as the free shuttle with parking revenues, the city can seriously consider dramatically reducing off-street parking requirements from new developments.

If public parking and a robust variety of mobility options are well managed, reductions in parking requirements can have a profoundly positive impact, making development more feasible and affordable, particularly for affordable housing construction, freeing up funds for other uses, and creating greater opportunities for high-quality architecture and streetscape design. Parking can cost over \$20,000 per space within a structured garage, so reducing parking requirements on a single project by only 50 parking spaces would make \$1 million available for other pressing needs. Consider shifting the balance from parking requirements toward requirements to provide a range of transportation demand management (TDM) strategies such as free transit passes and car/bike sharing to accommodate new residents

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• <sup>3</sup> For more examples of temporary devices and barriers that could be pilot tested in Walnut Creek, visit: <http://www.trafficlogix.com/en/productsservices/cyclelane>

without generating additional traffic. Maintain close coordination with the city's parking operations coordinator.

- Include the West Downtown Area within the Downtown Parking Taskforce management area and extend implementation of the city's downtown parking occupancy goal to appropriate areas within West Downtown. (The city has established a goal of maintaining an average on-street parking occupancy rate of 85% for all parking zones in the downtown, ensuring 15% on-street parking availability<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See Wilbur Smith Associates' summary report on the 2011 Advanced Planning Lab for Walnut Creek [http://www.mtc.ca.gov/planning/smart\\_growth/parking/2011/Walnut\\_Creek\\_201\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.mtc.ca.gov/planning/smart_growth/parking/2011/Walnut_Creek_201_FINAL.pdf)