

OLD NORTH DAVIS NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION  
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DAVIS, CA 95616

DRAFT

January X, 2020

Mr. Eric Lee, Planner  
Department of Community Development and Sustainability  
City of Davis  
23 Russell Boulevard  
Davis, CA 95616

Dear Eric,

On behalf of the board of the Old North Davis Neighborhood Association, I am pleased to submit our comments on the Draft Downtown Davis Specific Plan (Oct. 2019) and its companion draft revision to zoning code Article 40.13: Downtown Zones. We appreciate the effort and outreach that has gone into preparation of this document and the opportunity to have a member of our board on the advisory committee that assisted with this document. We embrace the overall goals to enhance our downtown to become even more vibrant and, importantly, to bring more housing opportunities to this area. Perhaps more than most, we understand the many benefits and attributes of living downtown with its ready access to services and transit. We would welcome more people to share in this very unique and special area.

As with any similar planning process, much initial conversation was about high-level goals which most can support. Now with the release of the draft plan and zoning code these goals are translated into what will serve as regulatory standards for new development. This draft was relatively recently released so we have worked to review what are very lengthy and detailed documents. While there are many issues worthy of comment, we have focused on those that most affect Old North: these are principally related to the proposed zoning for the east side of north G Street (above 5<sup>th</sup> to Sweet Briar) and issues that may affect our neighborhood as a result of more intensive development in the downtown generally.

We hope these comments are of value. We look forward to learning what changes will be made to the draft plan prior to City Council review. Understandably, our comments may be amended as we learn of proposed changes to the plan and the results of environmental review.

We have highlighted principle recommendations in bold. Please do not interpret these as our **screaming at you**, as they serve only to highlight important issues.

As mentioned, while we have a number of comments, the majority focus on the north G Street area, so we will begin there.

## North G Street

Opportunity. One of the significant challenges in realizing the aspirations of the draft plan is that downtown consists of many small lots with separate ownership. Without the powers of redevelopment, it is difficult to assemble parcels into sizes where projects can have enough scale to be economically viable. Two blocks which do have such potential are the 500 and 600 blocks north of Fifth Street and east of G Street. The area north of the Davis Food Coop (600 block) does seem to present an opportunity to repurpose an underutilized strip mall. In addition, the property just north of the strip mall and south of Sweet Briar has been vacant for several decades. With the closure of Hibbert Lumber, the 500 block also includes a very large parcel under single ownership, although the small dwellings on this block adjacent to G Street present special design challenges.

Underscore importance of transitions in scale. Throughout the planning process there has been recognition of the importance of thoughtful transitions in scale as parts of the downtown intensify with increased building heights and lot coverage. The west side of the north G Street area and north Sweet Briar are shown as “Neighborhood Small” within the draft plan. This is the only area with such a designation and is the least intensive land-use category. We support this designation. It allows structures up to two stories (and in some cases a third story if treated as a rooftop room). This proposed land-use addresses comments we received from those on the west G Street blocks on the F Street side of the alley who were concerned about the transition to a more urban scale across this alley.

The two eastern blocks of north G Street are proposed to be Main Street Medium. This designation allows up to 4 stories (with a step back on the 4<sup>th</sup> story when across from Neighborhood Small). It also allows the building structures to have so-called Block Form. That is, buildings may be located directly behind the sidewalk as you would find in an urban environment. While we recognize that these two blocks have great potential for redevelopment, **we have concern that this transition from Neighborhood Small directly to Main Street Medium across the street is too stark.** This could be especially deleterious to residences on Sweet Briar (which has a narrower right-of-way than G Street) as new development would be just south and therefore affect solar access. Similar concerns of scale arise from homes on the west side of G Street. While the two blocks of western G Street (as well as the 500 block of eastern G Street) are mixed use—they continue to have many owner-occupied homes of one and two stories. Therefore, the transition to a larger urban scale is important and **we believe increased setbacks from the property line should be considered in addition to upper story step backs.**

Contents of Draft Plan vs. Draft Zoning Code. The Downtown Plan suggests at least a portion of the 600 Block of east G Street be placed in a “Designated Special Area” to recognize both its opportunities and challenges. The closure of Hibbert Lumber occurred after publication of the draft plan—**we recommend that the 500 block of east G Street also be included within the Designated Special Area.** That said, it is unclear what this designation actually portends. The draft plan contains illustrations which reflects some thoughtful transition in this area from Neighborhood Small to Main Street Medium, especially on the parcel just south of Sweet Briar. However, these illustrations have no regulatory authority and the draft zoning code does not require any transition other than a 4<sup>th</sup> story step back. **We recommend that specific standards for the transition in areas of the northeast G Street blocks that are across from single family**

homes on Sweet Briar and west G Street. Consideration should be given to a 3-story limit with a 3<sup>rd</sup> story setback when directly across from single family dwellings in addition to increased set back from the property line while allowing other portions of the site to be Main Street Medium.

500 Block of East G Street small structures/homes. Different from 600 block of G Street (Food Coop), the eastern 500 block (Hibbert block) contains single story dwellings facing G Street. All but one has been converted to office/business use. However, the remaining single-family home is owner-occupied and recommended for a historic designation (as is the Hibbert building). Should this new zoning designation be approved, what is the fate of this (potentially historic) single-family home? Does it become a non-conforming use? While additional setbacks are required when developing adjacent to historic structures, clearly **special care and creativity will be required if a development of scale is to be proposed adjacent to this and other small-scale structures on the east side of G Street.**

Yolo Federal Credit Union Parcel. Also shown as Main Street Medium is the credit union's parking lot and open parcel just north of the current structure. The relatively new credit union building is two stories. This designation on the open parcel would allow for up to 4 stories (with a 4<sup>th</sup> story step back) between the new 2 story credit union and a single-story dwelling (now converted to a business use) that would be allowed to be redeveloped to 2 stories under its Neighborhood Small Designation. **This does not seem to reflect an appropriate transition and we request that allowed height be decreased and that the set back from the property line be increased.**

Required Street. The draft plan map (pg. 74) shows a "required street" in the middle of the eastern side of the 600 block of G Street. Admittedly, we may not fully understand what is meant by this, but it seems that **access to a redeveloped portion of this block should be within the private development and not a public street**, especially as it would not be aligned with either the 6<sup>th</sup> Street or 7<sup>th</sup> Street intersections.

Pedestrian Improvements. The draft specific plan proposes many pedestrian and intersection improvements within the downtown area. **We believe pedestrian improvements are warranted at 6<sup>th</sup> and G Street which serves as a principal pedestrian corridor from Old North to the Coop shopping center.**

Bars and Night Clubs. The draft code allows bars and night clubs to be allowed with a conditional use permit. We believe **bars and nightclubs should be below Fifth Street and not be allowed in the North G Street area.**

Street reconfiguration and tree canopy. The draft specific plan suggests some reconfiguration of North G Street to improve bicycle and pedestrian circulation. We applaud this goal, but ask that it be approached while maintaining our street tree program which results in an extraordinary canopy throughout the neighborhood. Also, some of the sidewalks in this area have historic imprints (i.e., original lot number and dates, one being from 1913). We hope steps can be taken to preserve these markings in some manner.

## Other broader Issues

Conservation Overlay District. The draft plan recommends eliminating the current “master” district and replacing that with individual neighborhood districts. Of special note is the recommendation for special transition areas between the downtown commercial core and Old North and Old East neighborhoods. While such an approach is intriguing and its goals welcomed, as previously mentioned, the current draft zoning code does not reflect this approach. So, the timing of completing the work necessary to convert to a new system is important. It appears that until such work is complete the current Old North neighborhood design guidelines would remain in place, with the understanding that the North G Street area would be subject to what is ultimately approved in the new zoning code.

What becomes of Old North? Old North was born out of the current conservation district and this draft plan recommends new boundaries for individual districts. The new boundaries show North G Street becoming part of the proposed Depot District. Given that Old North is partially a city construct, we need to discuss expectations for and of the Association. While we believe our small neighborhood community should stay intact, a conversation about this is warranted.

Parking. The draft zoning code does not include any minimum requirements to provide parking. Certainly, much of the rationale for undertaking a new downtown plan is to create more housing opportunities adjacent to transit and major employers. Housing in such locations should reduce single occupant vehicle trips. The elimination of parking requirements may also assist in making projects more affordable or at least more feasible for developers. We believe that as we undergo a transition to a less car reliant culture, many who occupy new downtown housing will still own automobiles. There may be far less single occupancy vehicle trips to work, but in our suburban location, many individuals will still choose to own cars. And, to state the obvious, these cars will need to be stored (i.e., parked) somewhere.

Old North is proud to have one of the least exclusionary parking districts in the city. Certain spaces are designated with a marked “N” for residents with permits and the remainder of curbside parking is open anyone. Given the substantial number of the proposed housing units reflected within the draft downtown plan and the provision that there are no minimum standards for these projects, it should be expected that parking demands in adjacent neighborhoods will increase. **Old North has long offered to partner with the city to develop management practices for this increased demand. It is our hope that such an approach may also result in investment in needed traffic and pedestrian safety improvements.** It is our expectations that a parking strategy will be developed prior to major building projects being approved. We are also concerned that three of the five sites identified as “Reserved Sites for Additional Parking” are within Old North. We believe these sites should be conceived with a much more vibrant use than automobile parking.

Review of projects. A tenet of the draft plan is to create certainty for both developers and neighbors as to what is allowed and what can be expected from projects in different parts of the downtown planning area. In most cases this can allow for staff approval if projects meet the new zoning requirements. This certainty can then lower costs and make projects more feasible. **While there are many positive elements in the new form-based code approach, we still have a desire to comment on proposals—**

**especially those with transition issues as mentioned above.** This is not raised in a spirit of opposition, but rather to enable conversations to work toward projects that do not have unintended consequences.

Conclusion

Again, thank you for this opportunity to comment on portions of the draft specific plan. We look forward to future engagement with this project and assisting with its successful adoption and implementation.

Sincerely,

John Meyer  
President, Old North Davis Neighborhood Association