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Summary of ARB/Council session August 19, 2013

The ARB Chair and Vice Chair, and several ARB members described efforts underway to address the April 15, 2013 Council Colleagues Memo 'requesting staff, ARB and PTC review sidewalk widths with a focus on El Camino Real and the Grand Boulevard Plan and return to Council with suggested Zoning Amendments'. A hard copy of a power point presentation (not displayed during the meeting due to technical issues) was provided to all and the participants glanced intermittently at some of the pages including the Grand Boulevard Initiative (GBI) sidewalk width image.

The initial discussion generally addressed constraints on El Camino Real, such infrastructure, small lots and the limited occurrence of lot consolidation needed in order to realize projects envisioned in the South El Camino Real Design Guidelines (SECRDG) and goals of the GBI. ARB members noted that addressing the sidewalk width alone would not solve the issues on El Camino Real, that there are use issues and need for the City develop its own sense of the zone and an approach to Caltrans. During the session, the ARB and Council agreed that a higher standard is needed and at the end, the Mayor asked that specific suggestions for changes and a timeline come forward.

Councilmember comments

Councilmember Kniss queried the ARB about the GBI discussions, and asked whether a dose of reality was needed to understand shortcomings and clarify the vision.

Councilmember Price noted the lack of lot assembly and asked whether there was a lack of willing property owners to consolidate lots.

Councilmember Burt stated that "sidewalk width" is really code speak for the issue, which includes lack of a building setback, the "walled in" feeling of continuous length of a building, and the need for softening of the facades. He noted three key opinions: 1) when change occurs, the replacement buildings should be of greater quality, 2) the City doesn't want to drive rapid change, and 3) the City needs to ask what the correct balance is and allow a certain amount of growth.

Councilmember Schmid noted that buildings should encourage interaction, and that recent buildings on Alma Street are not welcoming.

Councilmember Holman commented about codification of the SECRDG and Grand Boulevard Initiative, noting that inclusion of what is compatible and tolerable is important.

Vice Mayor Shephard noted that Mountain View has taller buildings along El Camino Real to achieve better at grade/ground floor usage, and noted that additional height may be acceptable depending where placed on El Camino Real; ARB member Malone Prichard agreed this could work with wider sidewalks in the node areas of El Camino Real.

Mayor Scharff noted that there may need to be a mechanism to allow projects to go up to Council when staff and the ARB agree that ground floor retail is needed. He implored the ARB and staff to bring forward specific suggestions and a timeline as to when changes to the SECRDG and code would be coming forward. He noted that the recommendation should note which changes could come forward now and which changes would need more study. He agreed with the ARB that a higher standard is called for.

ARB member Lew noted Hayward's Mission Boulevard as a case study and noted that Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley achieves mixed use buildings including new buildings with more traditional architecture. He also noted the issue of opaqued window coverings installed by high tech companies and referred to the struggle that occurs with applicants as ARB tries to encourage ground floor uses that enliven the storefront, citing Hilton Garden Inn as an example. He cited several recent examples of lot consolidations with mixed-use projects.

ARB vice chair Lippert cited the issue with the Hetch Hetchy pipeline location affecting what could be done on El Camino Real in the medians. He noted there was pushback from interests that needed to be resolved. He offered information about mixed use floor area and the possibility of encouraging the arcading of buildings – i.e., having a deeper setback at the ground floor with retail use required, and allowing the upper floor(s) to extend toward the street. He noted the ARB had conducted retreats about the SECRDG and GBI and the possibility of using form code.

ARB member Popp stated that he agreed that the ARB should be requiring higher standards, and recognize nodes and corridors as having different character since El Camino Real is not a “one size fits all” development scenario; that the City should direct growth in the areas where growth is desired.

Interim Director Aknin noted that one approach to breaking up the continuous setback issue was to have an average setback so building facades would not be all in the same plane.