

City of Los Alamitos

Agenda Report Discussion

July 19, 2010
Item No: 9B

To: Mayor Marilyn Poe & Members of the City Council
Via: Jeffrey L. Stewart, City Manager
From: Steven A. Mendoza, Community Development Director
Subject: Consultant Presentation of SCAG Compass Demonstration Project

Summary: Council will be provided a presentation of Southern California Association of Government's (SCAG) Compass Demonstration Project for the City of Los Alamitos.

Recommendation: Review and Discuss

Background

In mid 2009, a grant application was submitted to Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) to allow the City's primary corridors to qualify as a Demonstration Project Area through its Compass Blueprint Program. In the application, staff identified Los Alamitos Boulevard and Katella Avenue as corridors worthy of a visioning exercise. The City was awarded a grant which funded a land use consultant hired and managed by SCAG. The consultant, Mr. Collin Drukker of the Planning Center has been working within the community to bring the community's vision and ideas to paper. To date, the vision has been presented to the General Plan subcommittee, the Planning Commission and the original stakeholders whom provided input. Mr. Drukker will be joined by Mr. Steve Gunnels who will address the economics. Attached to this staff report is the presentation.

Discussion

The Katella and Los Alamitos corridors have the bones of great corridors. Key civic, institutional, and commercial anchors dot the corridors. The rights-of-way are of sufficient width to accommodate multiple modes of transportation while preserving efficient travel for the large volumes of traffic that use the corridors to access local destinations, adjacent cities, and nearby freeways. Additionally, OCTA is planning transportation investments that could influence development and activity along the corridors.

Through the SCAG funded demonstration project, Los Alamitos has the opportunity to revitalize the two corridors and grab control of the City's future. This demonstration

project analyzes and outlines actions the City can take to capitalize on the forthcoming Bus Rapid Transit routes/stations, stimulate new private investment and redevelopment, and ultimately create great places in Los Alamitos. In addition to the Compass Blueprint Principles the demonstration project is driven by six specific project goals:

1. Enhance the City's sense of identity along the corridors and at key gateways.
2. Create a central, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly place for those who live, work, learn, and shop in Los Alamitos.
3. Create a reason for people to turn left or right from Katella Avenue onto Los Alamitos Boulevard.
4. Consolidate scattered office, medical, retail, and service uses into logical districts and nodes.
5. Develop strategies for the reuse of key commercial centers and other underutilized parcels and incentivize lot consolidation.
6. Maximize the multimodal nature of the corridors and capitalize on future BRT investments.

The demonstration project sought out to study the Culture and History of Los Alamitos while examining the existing land use along the corridor and the current regulatory setting in the community. The next step was to consider the Traffic and Circulation for Pedestrians, Bicycles, and Public Transit and then study the economics.

Staff and the Consultant reviewed whether the city's goals and policies supported a need for stronger identity and sense of place. In doing so, heavy consideration was given to the goals of the Current General Plan and the 1997 General Plan. The consultant findings determined that the Town Center Overlay District may need retooling, parking standards (particularly for restaurants) may need to be revisited and that there was a desire for greater certainty from the development community in obtaining support for their development proposals.

The consultant and city staff developed an outreach program that mixed together new technology and old technology. Surveys were available on line and in person and through one on one outreach at the City's 50th Anniversary Carnival. Surveys were available at the Senior Center, Community Center, Chamber of Commerce and City Hall. Staff and the consultant completed a round of outreach meetings bringing together the development community, commercial real estate brokers, residents, bicycle enthusiast, small business owners, engineers, commercial property owners, traffic commissioners, planning commissioners, medical center personnel and a representative of the City Council.

To take this to the next step, staff then took updates of the project to the General Plan Subcommittee, the Planning Commission and the stakeholders as a group. Each presentation incorporated more input into project from various perspectives. The consultant was able to gather very specific comments about Los Alamitos regarding traffic, lack of a sense of identity a desire for improved aesthetics, and walkability. Excerpts of the public comments were as follows:

- "We need a central gathering space and a better sense of identity."

- “Los Al Blvd should be more walkable, narrower, and slow traffic down. Outdoor dining should be available all along the corridor. Both streets should have more street trees”
- “Everyone bikes in Los Alamitos. It should be easy and safe to ride your bike along the corridors. Safety is especially important around schools.”
- “The medical uses are one of the City’s biggest strengths. We should work to enhance and improve our medical uses”.
- “The City needs to modify development standards (especially parking) and provide greater certainty to incentivize new development.”

Through outreach, a working vision was developed. The Vision Statement below describes a future Los Alamitos worth reaching:

Katella Avenue and Los Alamitos Boulevard are attractive corridors that bring people into Los Alamitos. The two streets host some of Southern California’s most attractive and dynamic places to shop, work, live, and have fun.

The look and feel of the buildings, landscaping, signs, and spaces reflect the City’s small town character while supporting successful businesses, a world-class medical center, unique shops and services, wonderful restaurants, and a wide range of places to live. The businesses provide the City with a diversity of tax revenue and fiscal support, helping ensure Los Alamitos is economically sustainable.

The streets are safe for everyone and every form of transportation—be they children, families, workers, or customers who walk, bike, ride transit, or drive along the corridors. Traveling by bicycle is easy and safe along Los Alamitos Boulevard and throughout much of the City. The corridors attract a large number of commuter and recreational riders living and working in Los Alamitos and those traveling along the nearby San Gabriel River Trail.

Katella Avenue offers landmark gateways that signal passage into and out of Los Alamitos. The uses are organized into attractive and logical clusters enabling the region’s and city’s residents to easily find what they want.

Los Alamitos Boulevard provides a central place for the residents, workers, and students of Los Alamitos to meet friends, stroll, grab some great food, and shop. The Boulevard forms a downtown with walkable streets, great design, a mix of highly desirable uses, slow traffic, and plenty of parking concentrated in central lots or structures. It is the place that defines the popular image of Los Alamitos.

The results of the outreach has been the development of strategies to reach the vision.

- **Strategy #1: A Pedestrian- and Business-Friendly Boulevard** - A redesign of the Los Alamitos Boulevard right-of-way recaptures the spaces dedicated to the car and gives it back to the pedestrian. Enlarged parkway and sidewalk areas create safe and inviting walking environments and creates opportunities for outdoor dining. A reduction in roadway space maintains the existing travel lanes while slowing down the speed of vehicular traffic through along the Boulevard. Slower traffic will not only

create a safer environment, but will also give local businesses greater exposure to the passing cars. The narrowed roadway will connect businesses and spaces within the corridor while creating a town center and distinct identity for those who live, learn, work, and play in Los Alamitos.

- **Strategy #2: New Corridor Districts** - The creation of a new series of districts along Los Alamitos Boulevard and especially along Katella Avenue would help the City define itself internally, brand itself to those outside of Los Alamitos, and enhance the economic synergy amongst related land uses.
- **Strategy #3: Plan for Bus Rapid Transit** - OCTA is planning a BRT line and two stations along Katella Avenue that will offer a combination of quicker, more frequent service and a large service area, to attract not only the transit-dependent rider, but also many discretionary riders (those who could easily travel by car) who work at or visit major employment centers such as the Medical Center.
- **Strategy #4: Improve Bikeway System** - Improving bicycle connections to the San Gabriel River and Coyote Creek Trails, introducing new bikeways, and enhancing wayfinding signage and bike racks will create a comprehensive bike system that allows commuters, families, and students to safely and conveniently ride their bikes in Los Alamitos.
- **Strategy #5: Pedestrian Bridges** - The introduction of pedestrian bridges along the corridors could provide safe routes to school, alleviate traffic congestion points, and bolster the City's identity.
- **Strategy #6: Redesign and Redevelop** - The development and analysis of two conceptual plans for key sites along the corridor revealed that the existing property owners are in the best position to explore new development opportunities. Current commercial and office lease rates are too low to justify the construction of new development and acquisition of land by a brand new developer. As the market improves, areas along the corridors could be redesigned and redeveloped to take advantage of the proposed roadway improvements. New uses and designs envision outdoor plaza and dining space, and new commercial, office, and potentially hotel uses that leverage the existing homeware/hardware market niche and nearby medical center.

To achieve the vision for the Los Alamitos Commercial Corridors, this consultant and staff worked together to present a number of concepts and strategies. The design strategies represent ideas on how to make the corridors more livable, create pedestrian friendly environments, reorganize land uses into logical clusters, and enhance alternative means of transportation around and through the City. The last design strategy presents an urban design study of how two key areas along the corridors could potentially be configured or redeveloped. The resulting site plans were evaluated through a pro forma analysis to determine their financial feasibility and uncover any unexpected constraints posed by the City's existing development standards.

Accordingly, two concepts were explored that narrow the roadway and enlarge the parkway and sidewalk areas along Los Alamitos Boulevard. The first concept is called

the “Straight” option and expands the sidewalk and parkway area equally on both sides of the right-of-way, while slightly reducing the internal drive and turning-lane widths. The two primary goals are to slow down passing traffic and increase walkability. The second concept is called the “Curvilinear” option and explores maximizing the sidewalk and parkway area around key parcels: the Los Alamitos Plaza and Center Plaza. The two primary goals remain to slow down passing traffic and increase walkability. The two concepts will be extensively covered in the presentation.

The finished product being presented walks and talks much like a specific plan. It has many of the same concepts and has the potential to drive the City towards the development of a tool to usher in change in the vision for the City and its corridors including Commercial Design Guidelines and the incorporation of Economic Development Strategies.

Commercial Design Guidelines - Existing architectural styles and building designs found in Los Alamitos represent an eclectic blend of architectural expressions, primarily characterized by a variety of “franchise modern” or “builder style” influences from the past 50 years. From the City’s early days of incorporation, growth has resulted in no singular or dominant authentic architectural style. Instead, a variety of semi-Mediterranean architectural designs have gained a foothold, characterized by stucco-clad facades and red tile roofs.

The City desires to have a more cohesive image along the two corridors, particularly for their commercial buildings. But the City also wants to maintain flexibility and allow the property owner or developer to express their vision. A set of commercial design guidelines is provided to expand upon the City’s existing architectural design guidelines and demonstrate the art of building composition using pictures. Their primary function is to provide prospective architects, builders, and developers with a clear statement of the appropriate design direction for commercial development within the City of Los Alamitos. The guidelines will address 11 different aspects of a commercial development’s structure, appearance, layout, and function. The guidelines can and should be implemented in any new construction. These guidelines also apply to existing development and should be implemented as improvements (incremental or comprehensive) made to private and public buildings and spaces. The intent is to encourage creative individual architectural statements that, when viewed as a whole, produce an equally outstanding commercial district.

Economic Development Strategies - The City of Los Alamitos would need to implement two types of economic development strategies to implement plans for Los Alamitos Boulevard and Katella Avenue: funding strategies and economic activity strategies.

Funding Strategies and Options - These strategies provide funding to construct and maintain public and private improvements and to provide incentives for developers and property owners to develop buildings and sites that implement the plans.

- Community Redevelopment Agency
- Assessment District
- Specialized Assessment District

- Business Improvement District
- Landscaping and Lighting Maintenance District
- General Fund
- Grants

Economic Activity Strategies - These strategies are the activities and actions—the “doing” part of economic development—that can be undertaken by City staff and the City’s partners to increase economic activity along the two corridors.

- Special Events
- DIY Home Improvement
- Branding and Marketing
- Business Development and Attraction
- Medical Services as an Anchor
- Parking Strategy

Next Steps

To realize the vision for the Los Alamitos commercial corridors and the City as a whole, this report recommends a series of steps and activities that should be taken within the next few years.

1. **Incorporate the Corridors Report into the General Plan Update** - The City of Los Alamitos will initiate a general plan update in the Fall of 2010. The principles and concepts contained in this report should be incorporated into the update process, specifically regarding the citywide vision, policies, and land use and circulation plans.
2. **Adopt Commercial Design Guidelines** - The City should adopt (by resolution) the commercial design guidelines on a citywide basis and apply them to all commercial and office properties.
3. **A. Meet with Property and Business Owners** - The City should meet with property and business owners within the Boulevard District about the possibility of forming assessment and/or improvement districts. Once a certain amount of consensus is reached, the City could then form a Town Center Committee.

B. Obtain Consumer Input - At the same time, the City could work with the existing businesses and others to obtain information about why people shop and dine in Los Alamitos and what they would like to see in a future town center.
4. **Establish a Town Center Committee** - Either as part of the general plan update or as a separate effort, the City should convene a Town Center Committee to guide changes to Los Alamitos Boulevard and its role as a town center. The Town Center Committee could also form the nucleus of a future business improvement district or similar entity.
5. **Prepare an Area Plan, Revised Zoning District, or Specific Plan** - Implementing the changes envisioned in this report could ultimately lead to the preparation of a targeted planning effort exclusively focused on the corridor(s).

These efforts could take the form of an area plan, a revised zoning district, or a specific plan.

Area Plan. As part of the General Plan update, the City could develop an area plan or community plan for the Boulevard District or other parts of the corridors. An area plan would consist of refined policies and design guidance focused on a specific part or community of Los Alamitos. The area plan could contain specialized designations and a recommended land use plan.

Revised Zoning District. The City could, in place of or in addition to an area plan, revise and expand its Town Center Overlay (TC Overlay) District to the Boulevard District or a larger area along the corridors. Revisions to the district could include the removal of its overlay status, and instead the new district could replace the existing districts that are currently applied to the corridor areas.

Specific Plan. A specific plan is a kind of hybrid between an area plan and zoning district. It provides both the policy foundation of an area plan and the regulatory authority of a zoning district. The analysis that accompanies a specific plan is also usually more comprehensive and conclusive than an area plan or zoning district.

6. **Formation of Assessment and Improvement Districts** - After the City receives direction through the previous steps, the assessment and/or improvement districts should be established.

In conclusion, staff has been very satisfied with the involvement of the community, the consultant, the stakeholders and SCAG. Special appreciation should be noted for the work of the Planning Center, SCAG and the community members of Los Alamitos whom worked together to bring forward the vision.

Fiscal Impact

There is no fiscal impact.

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Approved By:

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Attachments: PowerPoint presentation