ACHIEVING A VISION: MANAGING WALNUT CREEK’S DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

More than 10 years ago, City leaders began working with the community on a vision for the future of Walnut Creek.

More than 1,000 people participated in the process through 53 public meetings, stakeholder gatherings, and written comments. The result - General Plan 2025 - was adopted in 2006.

What is happening today in downtown Walnut Creek is the fruition of that plan to manage growth while protecting those community qualities residents hold dear.

Concentrating that growth in the downtown protects neighborhoods and open space, takes advantage of nearby public transit, and promotes a vibrant downtown and healthy economy.
Downtown Housing

Downtown is a hub of construction activity, thanks to the economic recovery and easier access to financing for housing and other projects.

- **Riviera Apartments** 1519 & 1738 Riviera 58 affordable apartments on two lots
- **Riviera Avenue Condos** 1605 Riviera 48 condominiums
- **Walnut Creek Transit Village** 200 Ygnacio Valley Road (BART) 596 apartments
- **Bonanza Heritage Condos** 1874 & 1882 Bonanza 15 condominiums
- **Parkview Condos** 1665 Camel Dr 8 condominiums
- **The Arroyo** 1250 Arroyo 100 apartments
- **VillageWalk II Condos** 1725-1727 Lascassis 12 condominiums
- **Coe Terrace Condominiums** 1756 Coe Ave 12 condominiums
- **Lyric** 1550 N. California 140 apartments
- **The Village @ 1500 Newell** 1500 Newell 49 condominiums
- **McDonald’s site** 1360 N. California Blvd. 119 apartments
- **Trinity Condominiums** 1950 & 1962 Trinity Ave. 13 condominiums
- **Fifteen24 Residential** 1524 Oakland Blvd. 6 condominiums
- **Brio** 141 N. Civic Dr. 300 apartments

Businesses investing in Walnut Creek

Businesses are investing in Walnut Creek in a big way, and bringing jobs with them. Here are a few examples and updates.

- Del Monte Corporation is relocating its headquarters from San Francisco to Walnut Creek. In May, four more San Francisco companies signed leases for Walnut Creek office space.
- Macerich’s $250 million renovation of Broadway Plaza will reach another key milestone this holiday season with the opening of a new parking structure behind an expanded Macy’s store. When the majority of the project is complete in Spring 2016, it will have 700 additional parking spaces. Specific details about the project’s status are available at www.broadwayplaza.com.
- Marriott has submitted an application to build a six-story, 160-room Residence Inn at 2050 N. California Boulevard, currently the site of the Bank of the West and the Flores Brothers used car lot. The project is under review by staff and will head to the Design Review Planning commission later this summer for study sessions. Because the proposed hotel would have a bigger footprint and greater mass than the General Plan allows, it will require City Council’s review and approval of a General Plan Amendment to move forward. Walnut Creek’s first rooftop restaurant, Rooftop Restaurant & Bar, is expected to open late this year, part of a two-story building at the corner of Main and Mt. Diablo. The project will also include Vineyard Vines store and café on the ground floor, as well as the area’s first authentic Spanish tapas restaurant Teleferic Barcelona on the second floor.
EVALUATION OF A PROJECT

Development projects evolve as they go through the application process. In the case of the Lyric project, the original design changed dramatically based on feedback from the community, staff and City officials. (Note: There is no “one size fits all” development process; the Lyric is being used as one example for this report.)

Role of commissions

The City’s five commissions each play a distinct role in the development process, and contribute in unique ways to the quality of development projects in Walnut Creek.

Planning Commission
Prepares and recommends, for adoption, the City’s General Plan and Specific Plans. Reviews projects for compliance with the City’s land use and zoning regulations; has approval authority for subdivision maps, use permits and variances.

Design Review Commission
Develops design standards and policies. Reviews project’s architecture, design and landscaping.

Park, Recreation and Open Space Commission
Advises on park, recreation, trail and open space needs. May weigh in on whether the developer’s parkland dedication fees can be reduced in context of other amenities the project is providing.

Transportation Commission
Advises on issues affecting all modes of transportation (walking, cycling, cars and transit) and parking. May weigh in on bicycle issues, relating to a specific project.

Arts Commission
Advises on facilities, programs and policies that enhance the artistic and cultural quality of the City; implementation of the Public Art Master Plan; selects public art for development projects.

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2011

PRE-APPLICATION PHASE

4/14/11
Pre-application filed for purposes of receiving feedback on proposed design.

2012

PLANNING PHASE

6/11/11
Design Review Commission study session

6/9/11
Planning Commission study session

12/20/11
City Council study session

6/6/12
Design Review Commission study session

6/14/12
Planning Commission study session

2013

SITE DEVELOPMENT PHASE

3/6/13
Design Review Commission recommends project move forward to City Council

4/11/13
Planning Commission recommends project move forward to City Council for approval

5/21/13
City Council certifies the Environmental Impact Report and adopts a General Plan Amendment to increase maximum allowable building height from 50 to 70 feet (final height is 66 feet)

2014

BUILDING PHASE

6/12/13
Planning Commission approves Conditional Use Permit to allow residential use in a commercial zoning district, and establishes residential density and parking requirements.

6/19/13
Arts Commission approves public art to be placed in the project’s plaza.

2015

Final approval: Design Review Commission grants approval of site design, building architecture and materials, and landscaping/lighting plan.

$3.3 million in developer fees to date, includes:

$220,289 Public art fee
$319,520 Traffic impact fees
$412,190 School district fees
$720,000 Parkland dedication fee
$1,635,195 In-lieu affordable housing fees

Other project benefits:

• Public plazas
• Removal of blighted buildings
• New retail spaces
• More convenient housing in downtown Walnut Creek
• New Public Art
• Sidewalks wider and ADA accessible

EVOLUTION OF A PROJECT

Lyric @ 1500 N. California Boulevard

What it is: A 6-story mixed-use building with retail on the ground floor, 140 apartments on the upper floors, and 210 parking places.

What was there: The long-vacant California Café, Bishop Valley Bank and a private parking lot.

3/6/12
Formal application filed

After developer revises design based on Commission and Council feedback (From formal application to final approval of design; Environmental Impact Report and conditional use permit)

(Review of project prior to formal submittal; optional, but often recommended by staff

2014

Construction begins. Estimated completion is Fall 2016.

2015

Estimated completion is Fall 2016.
A Vision for West Downtown

5 things to know about the West Downtown Specific Plan:
1. It’s BIG! (172 acres)
2. Long-range vision
3. Promotes walking & biking
4. Process not over
5. Get involved

Those interested in weighing in on the next 25 years of Walnut Creek’s west side evolution have the perfect opportunity to do so with the West Downtown Specific Plan currently under way.

West Downtown stretches from the Walnut Creek BART station to Olympic Boulevard, 172 acres in all. A draft Specific Plan – the result of a two-year, community-based process – proposes creation or preservation of seven small districts, each with its own character. For instance, the small homes of the historic Almond-Shuey neighborhood would be preserved, while the Trinity/Lacassie area would transition into an urban residential neighborhood.

The long-range plan pays special attention to how people will get around, with new bicycle and pedestrian amenities and improved access to public transit. Fees from new development will help provide funding for parks, schools and workforce housing.

The draft is currently going through a lengthy public review process involving all five of the City’s commissions that will last, at a minimum, through the fall.

Following commission review and input, the West Downtown Specific Plan will be considered by the City Council.

The public is encouraged to attend any or all of these meetings and provide comments. To find out about meeting agendas, view videos of past meetings, and read the draft plan and other background materials, go to www.walnut-creek.org/westdown.

Why is the City allowing new housing at all?

There are two answers to this. First, like in most of California, population will continue to grow. In Walnut Creek, city and community leaders recognized that fact when creating the General Plan 2025, and acknowledged the need to plan for a population increase of about 7% percent per year (the equivalent of 355 people).

There are also legal implications if the City refused to allow new housing. The State establishes housing targets for each community. The City must demonstrate in its Housing Element and by local zoning that the new units can be accommodated.

Won’t all this new housing overcrowd our schools?

It’s true that school enrollment is on the rise, but most of the growth is coming from existing housing, according to school district officials.

The Walnut Creek School District used about $270,000 in school impact fees to help fund the initial renovations required to open a new K-8 school, TiCre School, this fall. Home of the former Parkmead Intermediate School, the property was leased to the private Dorris Eaton School for more than 30 years.

What benefits do current residents get as a result of these new projects?

Developers pay a variety of fees to the City and to the school districts to offset the impact of their project. Those fees are often used for amenities that have community-wide benefits.

Example: Multi-family housing contributes $4,000 per bedroom in parkland dedication fees. Parkland dedication fees collected by the City and County in Walnut Creek paid for almost half of the All Abilities Playground that opened last fall in Walnut Creek.

Won’t more housing mean more traffic?

Yes, every new housing unit means more cars. Still, while residents of downtown housing have cars, they need to use them less than the typical resident of a single-family home. Located multi-family housing downtown helps reduce the level of increased traffic because residents can walk or bike to work, local stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues; take the Free Trolley to get around downtown, or BART to get out of town; and have short distances to drive to the freeway.

City required the developer to define and implement the steps needed to minimize the impact. For example, a traffic study identified potential traffic impacts for the Brio project on Civic Drive. To mitigate these impacts, the City required the developer to install a new traffic light on Civic Drive to reduce the effects of vehicles entering and leaving the site, and to lengthen the southbound left-turn pocket from Civic Drive to Ygnacio Valley Road to create more room for vehicles waiting to turn.

Why build housing during a drought?

The new housing is exactly the kind of housing that should be built in a drought-prone state. Multi-family housing uses much less water than typical single family homes as there is little or no landscaping to water. In addition, the new units must meet current building code requirements for water conservation, such as low-flow showers and toilets.

Questions & Answers

Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about the impact of downtown residential development.
GETTING IN THE KNOW ON DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

Here are ways you can be informed and get involved:

Read the project pipeline report
This quarterly report gives details on all development projects from the time the first application is filed. www.walnut-creek.org/pipeline

Check out the interactive map of development projects
at www.walnut-creek.org/developmentprojects. The map includes project renderings and details.

Speak up at Council and Commission meetings
Agendas are posted on our website, www.walnut-creek.org/meetings. Or, send written comments to mayor@walnut-creek.org.

Can’t make the meeting? All Council and Commission meetings are televised live on Walnut Creek TV and streamed on the Internet. They are also archived for later viewing at www.walnut-creek.org/meetings.

Stop by the City Council booth at the Walnut Creek Farmers Market and talk to a Council member most Sundays from 9 a.m. until noon.

Coming Soon:
The City is committed to making it easier for people to find the information they want. Two significant changes are coming soon: online subscription service for updates on specific topics and a new website with simpler navigation and a robust search engine. To get an email alert when the subscription service is up and running, email community@walnut-creek.org.