

THE PLAN FOR CENTRAL
HERCULES
CALIFORNIA



*City of Hercules, California
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CHAPTER 1



*“It is time
to grow a
healthy heart
for the
town of
Hercules.”*

Why a Town Center?

Hercules, California sits at the edge of San Pablo Bay in western Contra Costa County, one of the most economically vibrant regions in the United States. Historically it was a factory town for the Hercules Powder Company. Now modern Hercules is on the verge of becoming a complete community, where residents can live, work, and play.

It is time to grow a healthy heart for the town.

While this maturing process unfolds, Hercules is struggling with issues that are familiar to all of the growing municipalities in the region, including a loss of the natural scene and sense of place, a rising tide of traffic, spiralling housing costs, and the scramble for needed municipal revenue.

There is also a growing understanding that the complex environmental systems of Northern California are threatened by unchecked sprawl. The next generation of growth must be channeled into places where it can make things better rather than worse. The Town Center in Hercules is one such place. Its development will not only improve the town but serve as a model for the entire region.

WHY HERCULES NEEDS A TOWN CENTER

From its incorporation in 1900 until the 1970's, Hercules was a modest but prosperous company town. Most of the functions that a traditional town center or downtown area would have offered were provided for by Hercules Powder Company, and later Hercules, Inc. After the last vestiges of both companies left town, the general plan was created calling for a suburb of homes, with a population of 22,000 by the year 2000, and this was realized.



Hercules Powder Company facilities



Hercules, California - existing conditions, 1990

During the 1970's, when Centex built the first contemporary large subdivisions of homes in Hercules, the optimistic notion of "bedroom communities" was still popular throughout America. Families flocked to places like Hercules in search of spacious, clean, and safe environments in which to live and raise children. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, suburbs like this one benefited from a lingering backlash against the aging industrialized cities. Developers strove to distance their product in every way possible from anything urban, and mixed-use development and higher densities were looked down upon. Hercules therefore grew up quickly but with very little in the way of institutional life or other town functions like shopping and entertainment. The few stores were of a convenience-retail type, situated near the highway interchange. Civic uses were afterthoughts. Places of employment were also scarce at first.

In those days all the new subdivisions in Contra Costa County were designed around the car. In the last years of the golden age of the automobile, with free-flowing traffic, it seemed practical enough to hop into the car for daily needs. The interstate highway system was extended across the region, making it possible at first to drive both fast and farther, and the "bedroom community" lifestyle briefly seemed viable and sustainable.

That was before the traffic snarl. Much of the county, and the state, was transformed into the same sort of auto-oriented subdivisions, economically connected to distant workplaces by a few roads. Since commerce and housing have been stratified by zoning, driving now seems to be required for almost every errand, too. Traffic congestion has therefore grown and grown; the free-flowing condition is a fading memory. Not surprisingly, the unbalanced suburbs must now reinvent themselves to include a broader mix of land uses close to home. Hercules' Town Center provides just that kind of opportunity.

Local government finance has also been transformed in recent years. Especially troubling for all California towns are the difficulties arising from two decades of structural change in the relationship of state and local finance in California, which makes it hard to raise the local revenue needed to provide crucial municipal services. Proposition 13, the largest and most significant of the fiscal shifts in California, signalled in 1978 a new era of tough government financing. Several decades into the Prop 13 era, local governments strapped for funds now routinely "cannibalize" the retail centers of neighboring communities in a quest for precious sales tax revenue. Planning issues are often subordinate to the overarching desire to increase sales tax revenue. Local land planning is thus said to have been "fiscalized." Hercules, however, was financially insulated for years from the full effects of this

“fiscalization” by income from a major refinery. But when the refinery shut down in the early 1990s, the City suddenly began to need alternative revenue sources just to maintain the high level of municipal services to which its citizens are accustomed. Smart development of the Town Center holds the answer.

The “brownfield” sites left vacant after the departure of Hercules Inc. comprise the physical and emotional heart of town. Now cleaned up and reclaimed, this land is adjacent to San Pablo Bay, Interstate 80, and San Pablo Avenue, making it the prime location for a town



There is a proliferation of strip center retail in the neighboring communities

center for Hercules. With the modern suburb fashioned around the old industrial site, the effect resembles the hole in a donut. It is appropriate now for Hercules to redirect its attention to the nearly vacant center, drawing developers to invest there instead of at the edges of town— if they will build it properly.

This is a perfect convergence of both need and opportunity. A town center can make Hercules a more satisfying place to live and work, boost its economy, and help resolve the municipal-finance dilemma. The population has evolved to a state where urban form is desirable and highly marketable. Land is available in the right place. The prosperous national economy has produced a new generation of willing investors. The time is right.

WHY SO MUCH FUSS ABOUT DETAILS?

Hercules, like all other California cities, is guided by a General Plan. However, General Plans and their corresponding zoning codes are crude classification systems offering little guidance on crucial matters of urban design. Five reasons indicate the importance of urban-scale design right now, in the center of Hercules:

To enhance the quality of life

A proper town center is a symbol of a community and reflects its hopes, dreams, and values. It provides the sense of place where the bonds of civil society are forged and fond memories are formed. This special setting is the physical place where many social needs are tightly concentrated: shopping, working, living, civic services, entertainment, and cultural activities. A design framework is the key to folding these activities into the kind of town center Hercules needs.

It's better for the bottom line

Because most late 20th century commercial development was designed in the form of unpleasant strip shopping centers along high-traffic corridors, many people now perceive that there must be a trade-off between the quality of life and economic development. That's a false choice. Sales tax revenue can be increased without causing more problems than it solves.

A traditional urban center is a place of trade, too, but the retail can make things better rather than worse, adding cash to the coffers while improving the City's character at the same time. Design, again, is the key.

Since sales tax is a primary revenue source for the local government, retail and restaurants and other

Town Centers have...

a network of human-scaled, walkable streets, forming a pattern of blocks.

streets that are framed by buildings, forming well-defined public spaces, faced by doors and windows.

a fine-grained mix of uses, vertically and horizontally, with everyday needs within a few minutes walk from home.

incrementally-built buildings of durable, reusable form, with wide architectural variety.

residents with a mix of ages and incomes.

a variety of attractive housing types and sizes to own and rent

a recognizable public plaza or square for each neighborhood, and a central common area or public green.

landscape used as a definition of space in public squares and plazas, as a greenbelt, and for shading.

Town Centers DO NOT have...

oversized, continuous parking lots.

isolated, low slung buildings in vast seas of asphalt.

mega-buildings which are not reusable, with blank walls facing the public space.

a separation of land uses, resulting in long distances between basic human activities.

oversized apartments buildings which generate social problems from failure to integrate a mix of ages and incomes.

landscaping that is used as a tool for disguising design mistakes and eyesores.

oversized commercial service areas facing adjoining residential uses.

a single property owner or landlord.

commercial businesses are highly valued. However, Hercules' citizens made it quite clear in the planning process that they are not satisfied with the character of the typical built result. The formulaic pattern of commercial development (large parking lots and bland chains in strip centers) is perceived quite negatively. Its unwalkable, single-use form exacerbates traffic problems, too.

In decades past, it seemed that the lucrative way to build was to clear large tracts of land, construct one-story, single-use buildings, pave the space between the buildings, and paint the yellow stripes denoting parking spaces. But in our era of overbuilt retail, these indistinguishable strip centers and conventional malls are increasingly in trouble, most notably in the eyes of their investors. Hercules needs to avoid the trap of short-term obsolescence, by growing a town center that will retain customer loyalty, withstand market-place shifts, and draw investment.

Fortunately, developers throughout the United States are reintroducing the physical features of the livable and walkable neighborhoods found in historic towns. These include real streets with wide sidewalks, elegant squares, a mix of architecture, and tree lined streets. A mix of places to live, work, and shop is an important amenity that real town centers have, and one in which developers are now beginning to invest again. These new developers and their investors need an urban-scale design to guide and coordinate their actions.

To preserve mobility

To be sure, traffic problems seem to be getting worse in Contra Costa County. Many car trips made by Hercules citizens today must stretch over into neighboring towns and farther. By creating an attractive mix of retail and entertainment offerings, workplaces, and lodging right within the town, however, these trips can be shortened. By building the Town Center in a highly walkable and bikable format, and by connecting it carefully to surrounding neighborhoods, other trips can be eliminated altogether. By growing in a reasonably dense, transit-supportive way, the Town Center can encourage the use of public transit, offering an alternative to life stuck behind the wheel. As some daily needs are met by walking, biking, or transit trips, Hercules' citizens will be saving fuel, reducing pollution, and preserving their wealth. A thoughtful urban design is needed to provide facilities and preserve these vital connections.

It's a greener way to grow

New places to live, work and shop in this area will reduce the pressure on undeveloped lands in the surrounding countryside. Intensifying certain areas like the Town Center is the best way to discourage sprawl. These urban places will be "recycled" by filling in empty or underutilized lots. The more compact urban form also reduces infrastructure costs because roads,



Sonoma, California's notable Town Center

sewers, and utility lines do not have to extend such great distances. More intensive use of the available land, however, absolutely requires careful urban design.

Ready for a town center

Hercules is somewhat of an enigma. It has a stable, well-educated populace; the location features spectacular views to San Pablo Bay; it is part of the thriving Bay Area and enjoys all the resources of the New Economy. Why then are there so few restaurants, so few offices, so few shops, so little park space? Why is there no central square or plaza? One can only conclude that the Town Center is an idea that had to wait for the right moment.

Now that that moment has arrived, this Plan is meant to guide the process of creating the Town Center Hercules deserves.

CHAPTER 2



“community members gathered to discuss and draw their hopes for the future of Hercules”

The Process To Date

The citizens of Hercules and their leaders have taken a critical step in bridging the gap of distrust that typically divides residents, developers and government in Bay Area communities. For this plan, all the decision-makers were brought to the table simultaneously, challenged to work together in an inclusionary visioning process. In this way Hercules used old-fashioned teamwork to lay a solid foundation for the future of the Town Center. Much consensus-building remains to be done, but the public planning process has established a degree of common ground needed to implement the vision. The debate about growth in Hercules moved to the solutions-oriented stage in 1999. The Hercules City Council, at the urging of the Planning Commission, undertook the highly public process outlined below.

THE PRE-CHARRETTE BRIEFING

On May 31, 2000, city officials introduced the upcoming charrette process and Victor Dover gave a lecture on the techniques of town planning. Public interest was phenomenal: the event was attended by more than one hundred and fifty concerned residents. The former Wells Fargo building could not contain the standing-room-only crowd.

At the pre-charrette event, citizens expressed concern over rapid development occurring throughout Hercules, and more importantly, about the perceived lack of communication surrounding all the projects— more than fifteen in all— that were winding their way into the approvals pipeline. Doubts about the various proposed developments were fueled by a lack of information about who was planning to do what, and when, and which developments were already approved. It was clear that an open and inclusive process including the citizens, property owners, developers, and City would be essential for trust building and the success of the Town Center Plan.



Standing room only at the Wells Fargo building

What is an “urban design plan”?

An urban design plan is a series of maps and drawings that guide the overall design of the buildings, streets and other features that make up a neighborhood, town or small part of a city. The plan treats an area as large as a neighborhood or district, covering many individually planned development projects. The plan addresses all development that probably will occur over the next few years, extending out to as long as twenty years or more. The development constructed following this plan will exist for generations to come.

Why do this?

We have done this in order to create an urban place that makes sense to the people who will live and work in Hercules. This “sense of place” is the phrase that most people mention when they describe a neighborhood or town in which they would like to live. We want Hercules to continue to have a desirable, high quality of life; this process was undertaken to make sure that it turns out that way. Without this initiative, our sense of place would probably be diminished. Hercules is proactively seeking to avoid the usual effect of the unplanned suburban development patterns experienced across California and nationwide. This effect is sometimes called “sprawl”, and it causes citizens to be concerned about the inevitable land development necessary for our economic expansion and population growth.

Why was this effort necessary in 2000-2001?

As indicated by the developers’ of big projects, changes are coming soon. Hercules has not changed this much since the old dynamite plant was closed in the 1970s. At that time, a team of professional planners prepared the 1972 urban plan that governed the development of the 6,000 homes in which 20,000 of us now live. That plan’s design guidance must now be updated to include the central area, which was not considered for development in the 1972 plan. Hercules is in a unique position among California cities. It has a large area, in the center of town, ready for development all at once. We have a short window of opportunity to establish a unified design for this important set of major projects that will determine the quality of Hercules for the next several hundred years.

THE CHARRETTE

In June 2000, this plan was created through an intense design event, called a “charrette.” Over the course of eight days, a series of work sessions were held with community volunteers and a team of design professionals. The team was led by town planners Dover, Kohl & Partners and assisted by Gibbs Planning Group, Zimmerman-Volk Associates, and Fehr and Peers Associates. Community participants included property owners, neighbors, business owners, developers, members of the City Council and Planning Commission, local and regional transit engineers, city staff, and others.



Design team touring Hercules

The Study Tour

Before starting on the design of the Hercules Town Center, the design team, members of the Planning Commission, and city staff toured peer communities throughout the Bay Area. Communities such as Sonoma, Benecia, Richmond, and Sausalito were analyzed to compare the varied scales and feel of their town centers, their classic street dimensions, block patterns and the like. Architecture was studied, too; regional building types and construction traditions of the Bay Area were analyzed in depth.

The driving tour also afforded a reminder of Hercules' place in the greater Bay Area. Road connections such as I-80 and State Highway 4 were placed in a larger regional context. Transit connections such as WestCAT and BART were analyzed, as well as alternative transportation options such as the Bayfront Trail, Amtrak's Capitol Corridor train and existing and potential ferry service.

The design team also spent considerable time in and around the Town Center study area itself, becoming familiar with the terrain and views, the geometry of the parcels, transportation links, and the character of the historic town.

The Kickoff Briefing

To start the charrette, an evening kickoff event was held at the Refugio Valley Swim Center. The briefing was detailed; the goal was to add the kinds of information people said they wanted at the previous meeting. At the kick-off presentation, representatives of the Planning Commission and design team discussed the development opportunities in Hercules, shared previous plans made by developers for the various parcels, and reviewed the format for the upcoming Saturday hands-on session. Experts made presentations about retail trends and workable options for the trade area and about best practices in transportation planning. A market analysis covering prospects for residential development was presented in great detail.

Over one-hundred citizens took part in the event. An open-microphone session, surveys and a "What's Most Important to You" exercise were used to solicit early feedback.

The Hands-on Session

The next day, at the Saturday hands-on session, community members gathered to discuss and draw their hopes for the future of Hercules. These "citizen planners" were not shy about designing or clearly articulating what they wanted. More than 200 people, armed with markers and pencils, gathered in small groups around tables, rolled up their sleeves, and drew their ideas on poster-sized maps. Later in the day, a spokesperson from each table presented their main ideas to the larger group. Surveys were also passed out asking for further input, and a website was established for communication about the Plan.



One of the small groups at the Saturday Hands-on Planning Session

What you told us...

Create one coherent vision

Establish meaningful neighborhood centers

Interconnect it all...living, shopping, and employment

Make the most of natural resources and views of the Bay

Make it walkable

Create places that are harmonious with the character and feel of Hercules

Adjust the rules so that the vision becomes a reality



Citizens made presentations during the Hands-on Session

Passionate voices were heard during the public meetings at the charrette. People want a place where they can go shopping or go out to nice restaurant without leaving Hercules. They want a social center where they can gather with neighbors, friends and family. They described a traditional town center with more intense, diversified development than conventional suburban sprawl, and demanded that this center be packaged in a human-scale environment. There was not a “no-growth” vision— far from it, there was wide acceptance of the fiscal need for commercial development in town— but they made it clear that the growth must occur on their terms.

The most commonly mentioned ideas from the citizens included keeping the town center green, not allowing national chains to dictate the character of the town, and providing walking and biking connections from the Town Center to the existing neighborhoods that surround it.

The Design Studio

After the close of the Saturday hands-on session, the designers set up an on-site studio at the former Wells Fargo Bank building in the Creekside Center. Throughout the remainder of the week, meetings and interviews were held to gather more information. Designers worked with development interests in order to create alternative scenarios to present to the community. Recurring “pin-up” reviews of initial ideas were held all week as the work progressed. The designers combined all the input from the various meetings into a single plan and a draft for an accompanying development code for Hercules.



The “citizen planner” maps were studied in the design studio and turn into rough sketches that are finished after the work-in-progress presentation.

The Work-in-Progress Presentation

At the conclusion of the charrette week, the design team presented the work created at the on-site studio to a crowd of over one hundred and fifty at the Swim Center. The presentation employed extensive visuals and examined both “big picture” ideas and technical issues of a work-in-progress draft of the plan and code.

Large plans, cross-sections, perspective drawings, and computer simulations were used to explain the concepts of the Town Center Plan. At the conclusion of the work-in-progress presentation, designers recorded comments and concerns from the citizens and property owners for inclusion in later drafts.

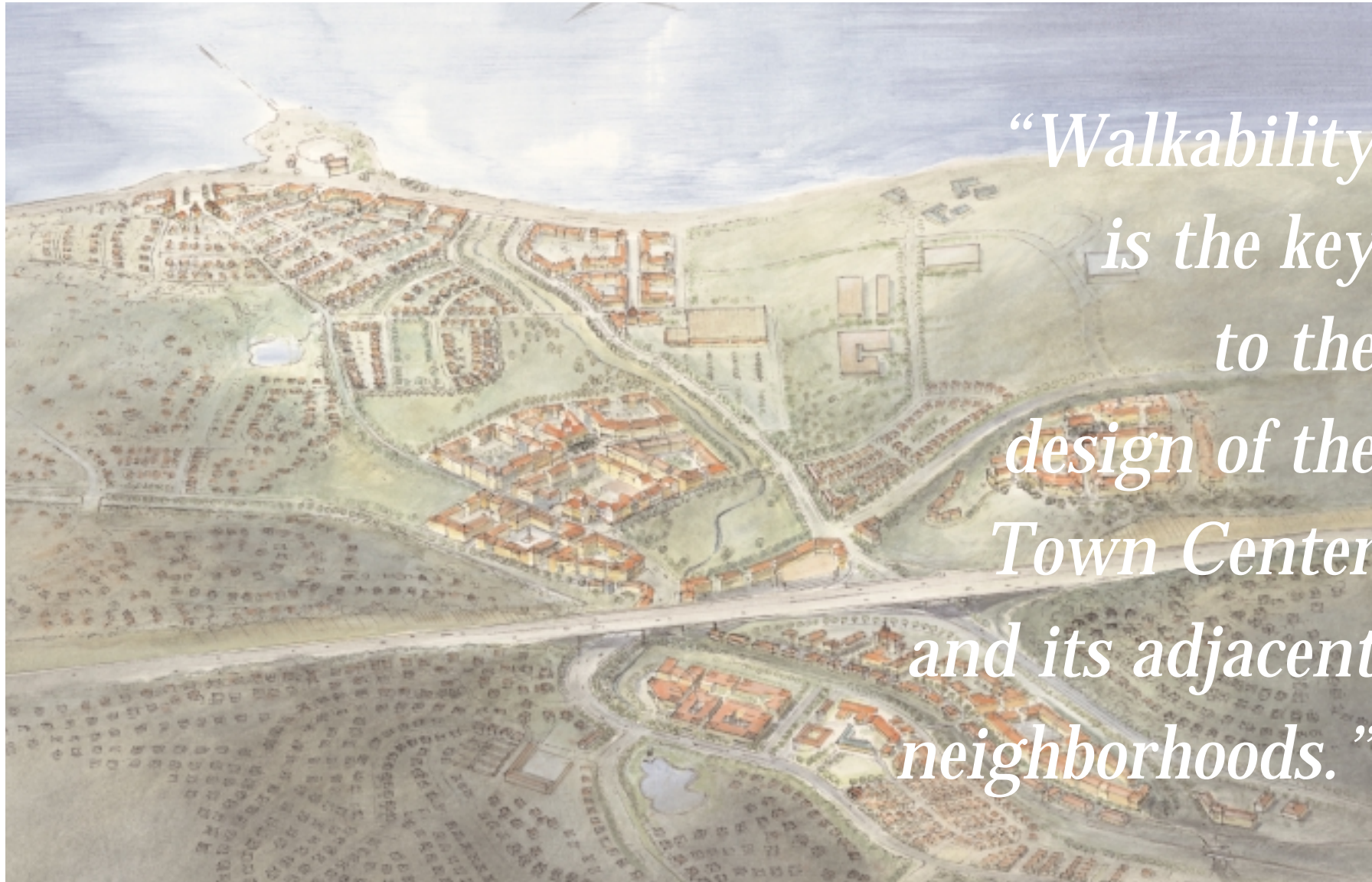


Working in the design studio

BEYOND THE CHARRETTE

After the charrette, the designers returned to their offices and continued to refine the Master Plan in close consultation with City officials, property owners and affected agencies. The details of that effort are contained in this booklet, presented in draft form to the City of Hercules in the autumn of 2000.

CHAPTER 3



“Walkability is the key to the design of the Town Center and its adjacent neighborhoods.”

The Overall Vision

Without a true center to anchor it and no vision to guide its development, the commercial heart of Hercules would gradually become just another anonymous convenience retail node along I-80. Retail is indeed an important component in a successful town center, but by no means the only concern, and retailing today exists in many forms, only some of which are appropriate for this place.

This plan proposes how to stitch together all the components into a coherent ensemble. A high-quality town center relies on many factors, including a mix of uses, an appropriate scale, and an interconnected street and pedestrian network. The existing conditions in Hercules are conducive to the creation of a town center, but many steps need to be taken to get there.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Central Hercules is comprised of over twenty properties that are either vacant, underutilized, about to be developed, or pivotal to the creation of a town center for Hercules. The key properties can be divided into distinct categories: *the Waterfront, the Central Quarter, the Hill Town, and the Civic Center /Hospitality Corridor.*

The Waterfront Neighborhood

The water's edge in Hercules is characterized by vacant industrial land, business park uses, and small wetlands. Single family homes are being constructed rapidly on the west side of San Pablo Avenue and, given the hot market for houses, would probably, in the absence of government intervention, fill all the remaining vacant land. This factor is important in light of the City's calculation that single-family dwellings are a net drain on the tax base, and the supply of land on which to grow the revenue-producing commercial uses (and needed mixed-use development) is limited.



The Bixby Company is preparing a master plan and design code for part of the property incorporating the old powder plant. The developers propose to utilize the concepts of traditional town planning and will incorporate historic structures from the old company town as significant features in the plan. This development proposal is highly compatible with the town center plan proposed in this document, will serve as a model demonstration of a better way to grow new neighborhoods, and should be encouraged in every way.

Several other towns in the Bay area focus development along the water's edge. Today San Pablo Bay has become an amenity, where as in the past it served a solely industrial purpose. The lure of the waterfront has caught the attention of Hercules as well. The Waterfront neighborhood provides the opportunity to spatially reconnect the town to its bayfront in a truly meaningful way.

The Central Quarter

The area surrounding the intersection of San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore Avenue is the heart of town. It is at the geographic center of Hercules and its 'Main & Main' location is ideal for commerce, for pedestrian accessibility, and for establishing the image of the town.



At present, however the center of Hercules is dominated by nondescript, auto-oriented uses and vacant parcels vulnerable to becoming more of the same. The major parcel at this important crossroads is currently a park and ride lot for the Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART). Adjacent to this area are Interstate 80, a railroad overpass, a fast food restaurant, a gas station, and a nearly vacant strip mall.

Across San Pablo Avenue, parcels owned by Remediation Financial Incorporated (RFI) are being cleared and stabilized for commercial and residential uses. These parcels include over 50 acres of prime, prominently visible land and comprise a substantial portion of the new town center.

The Hill Town

The Hill Town neighborhood is now the site of the PG&E tank farm. This 62-acre parcel has been purchased by Tosco and is unlikely to remain forever in industrial use. It is a crucial location for



establishing the image of Hercules because of its astonishing visibility from Interstate 80. It also has outstanding potential to be one of the town's finest and most sought-after neighborhoods, given its dramatic views to San Pablo Bay and overlooking the rest of the Town Center. Over time, this place could evolve into a mixed use neighborhood with homes, offices, and some small commercial areas. Its steep terrain and inferior vehicular access, however, diminish its appeal for large amounts of commercial development as compared to the areas in the lower Refugio Valley. Development of this parcel is a long term opportunity, but not an urgent priority

The Civic Center/Hospitality Corridor

The Civic Center neighborhood is anchored by the Hercules City Hall. Its location on Sycamore Avenue is near the intersection of Sycamore and Refugio Valley Road, a major



city street. The area is also home to numerous retail and office uses, but there is potential for a much more complete and interconnected mix. The Creekside Center is slated to be removed to make room for an "Outlet Village" project designed and approved prior to the creation of this plan. The outlet mall will hypothetically become a sub-regional draw for shoppers, bringing sales tax revenues. A drug store, restaurants, and a few medical offices are the only uses that remain in the nearly vacant strip shopping center.

Across Sycamore is a relatively thriving Albertson's Center that is the location of most successful retail in Hercules today. This neighborhood holds much promise for increased residential and office uses to complement the retail uses.

Today this area is characterized by an utter separation of land uses, especially from a pedestrian's point of view along Sycamore Avenue and San Pablo Avenue. The only way for most residents of Hercules to use these facilities is to drive there. There are practically

no stores or commercial uses with walking access from the surrounding subdivisions.

Civic uses such as City Hall and the Post Office are integral parts of any town center. In Hercules, however, they are standalone objects, isolated from where the action is. Other civic needs like a library, performing arts facility and casual community gathering space are lacking entirely and are missed by the citizenry.

Parks in Hercules are well used by the residents, but not well located for many of the future homes. The waterfront, a tremendous potential resource, sits stranded by the powder company property, cut off from the rest of the community by wetlands, hills, and the roadways.

HOW CAN THE FUTURE BE DIFFERENT?

As we have seen, there exists in Hercules all of the raw material for a town, but the individual pieces are not connected in a meaningful manner. The way that moving from one place to another requires undue dependence on private automobiles even for local trips is symptomatic of an inefficiency that pervades other aspects of the pattern. But are these ingrained habits the only way to grow? Do the existing conditions in and around the Town Center point to the best way to fill in the remaining, most crucial pieces of town? No.

Enduring towns in the Bay Area and throughout the United States share several recognizable urban characteristics. These basic urban forms were briefly overlooked—back in the 20th century!—as motorized lifestyles began to alter the built environment. But it is now widely understood that these basic urban forms hold the key to a sustainable, livable community. To understand the differences, it is necessary to contrast the patterns of conventional suburban development with the patterns of enduring, traditional urban design.

The flirtation with building cities around the cars, instead of merely accommodating them, started when land in places like Hercules was inexpensive, traffic was light, and poorly designed, low-intensity structures could be disguised with setbacks, berms and buffers. Newly unconstrained, the components of town life that were once tightly bound together were flung apart, outward, as if propelled by centrifugal force. Activities were spread out horizontally as parking lots pushed buildings back from the street, setbacks pushed neighboring uses farther apart, and road-building programs expanded the thoroughfares without thought for pedestrians.

Walking, biking, and public transit became secondary to the automobile in federal and state funding. Gated communities and bland subdivisions replaced traditional neighborhoods where neighbors knew each other.

A city of disconnected places...



a zone of commercial,



a zone of residential.



WHAT MAKES A TOWN CENTER?

Town centers are pedestrian oriented, fine grained places for buying and selling things, living, working, and enjoying civic life. Specific design conventions allow this. The factory town of Hercules Powder once exhibited many of the elements of a true town center. Vestiges of this town can be found in the worker housing on Bay and Pinole streets and in a few remaining company buildings. As the company died away, however, the urbanism that supported it was largely lost, too.

Within the Town Center, the following rediscovered principles will be important for new development:

Building Placement & Height

Streets should be thought of as three-dimensional public rooms with the buildings serving as the walls. The proportion of this “wall height” to “room width” should feel comfortable to the pedestrian. If the buildings are too low, relative to street width, the sense of space dissolves. One-story buildings on a grand street such as San Pablo Avenue are inadequate and inappropriate. A minimum of two or three stories should be required for buildings fronting main streets, civic squares, or plazas, to enclose the “room.”

Deep building setbacks with large parking lots in front are devastating to the street space and overall pedestrian environment. The most effective way to ameliorate this condition is to replace the suburban notion of a “front setback” for buildings (which implies that anything goes, as long as the building is somewhere behind the line) with the more appropriate “build-to line”(where one must build up to a certain alignment).



Build-to line - The building is built up to the edge of the sidewalk



Setback line - The building is built far away from the street.

Mixing Land Uses

A mix of retail, offices, and housing should be encouraged throughout a healthy town center. While conventional zoning contradicts this simple concept, a mix of residential and commercial uses creates alternatives to the automobile by placing diverse needs within walking distance of many people. Residents can walk to many daily destinations such as banks, grocery stores, retailers, and restaurants. Sites for civic uses such as the post office, day care, and places of worship should also be within walking distance.

Adding apartments to the upper floors of office and retail buildings, as in classic main streets, is one way to create this mix while creating attractive, well located, and highly prized residences. The apartments above shopfronts can vary from affordable housing for service workers and seniors to luxury dwellings for professionals and empty-nesters. The City calculation that is used to discourage single-family development, that says homes are a net drain on municipal coffers, need not hold true for these types of residences. On the contrary, the occupants of these upstairs apartments will form an outstanding customer base for the retailers and restaurants below. They are much more likely to patronize neighborhood businesses than are customers who drive there, and will be much more loyal to local enterprises. Assuming the mixed-use environment is

built with high production values and promoted on the basis of its sense of place and urbane lifestyle, it will be attractive to well-heeled tenants. These residents will be likely to have more discretionary income, more time for civic affairs, and smaller demands for municipal services than is the case for conventional, “tract house” suburbanites. Last, since the feasible commercial frontage on key streets will still be captured for sales-tax producing uses in this mixed-use approach, the inclusion of dense residential development need not be seen as competing for land that is needed for commercial purposes.

Other immediate benefits of having mixed-use buildings on the commercial streets include:

“Eyes on the street” – Extra, naturally occurring security is generated when the buildings are occupied during more than just business hours.

Walk to work – This pattern allows a lifestyle that reduces dependence on cars. Walking to work or to the WestCAT, BART, or Capitol Corridor stations will help stem the rise of daily car trips and congestion.

Less parking – A true mix of uses allows for shared parking and a reduced need for dedicated parking spaces. Nighttime uses such as entertainment and restaurants can share a common parking supply with largely daytime uses such as offices.

Identifiable Centers and Edges

Hercules needs two different kinds of centers. The first need for Hercules is a primary center of town, the physical and psychological “heart” of the community. The most logical location for such a center is at the corner of Sycamore Avenue and San Pablo Avenue. This location is nearly the geographic center and is at the crossroads of major streets and highways in town.

The other kind of center is at the neighborhood level. Each urban quarter or neighborhood also needs a defined center and legible edges of its own. These give identity to the parts of the City and create the necessary sense of place. Neighborhood centers can coalesce around many things: a park, a small store, an elementary school; it depends on the character of the particular neighborhood.

Mobility

Taking a broader, more comprehensive approach to transportation, one that accounts for all modes of travel, is a crucial step for success in the Town Center. Streets should have amenities for pedestrians as well as facilities for bikes and transit riders. The WestCAT and BART facilities in town should be accentuated and improved. Regional transportation problems necessitate these new ways of thinking about walking, biking, auto use, carpooling and transit.

The overall intention for the Town Center Plan is to use traditional urbanism to create the new quarters and connections within the City of Hercules. Connections between existing land uses are important, especially for short-term projects that can be started immediately. Using traditional neighborhoods and urban quarters as building blocks, Hercules will create a town center that is distinctive and thus worthy of civic pride.

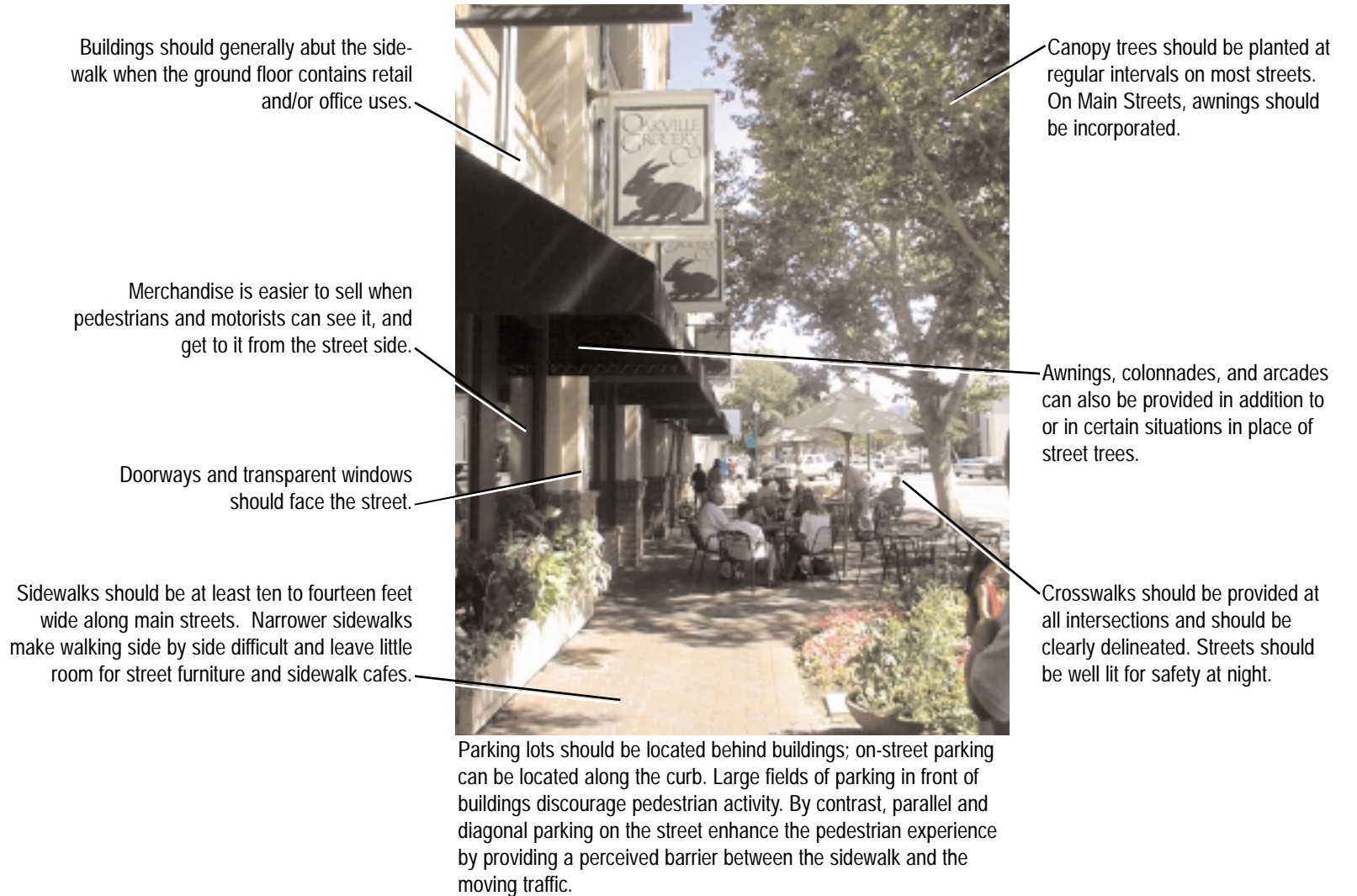


Automobile-oriented intersection in front of the Creekside Center

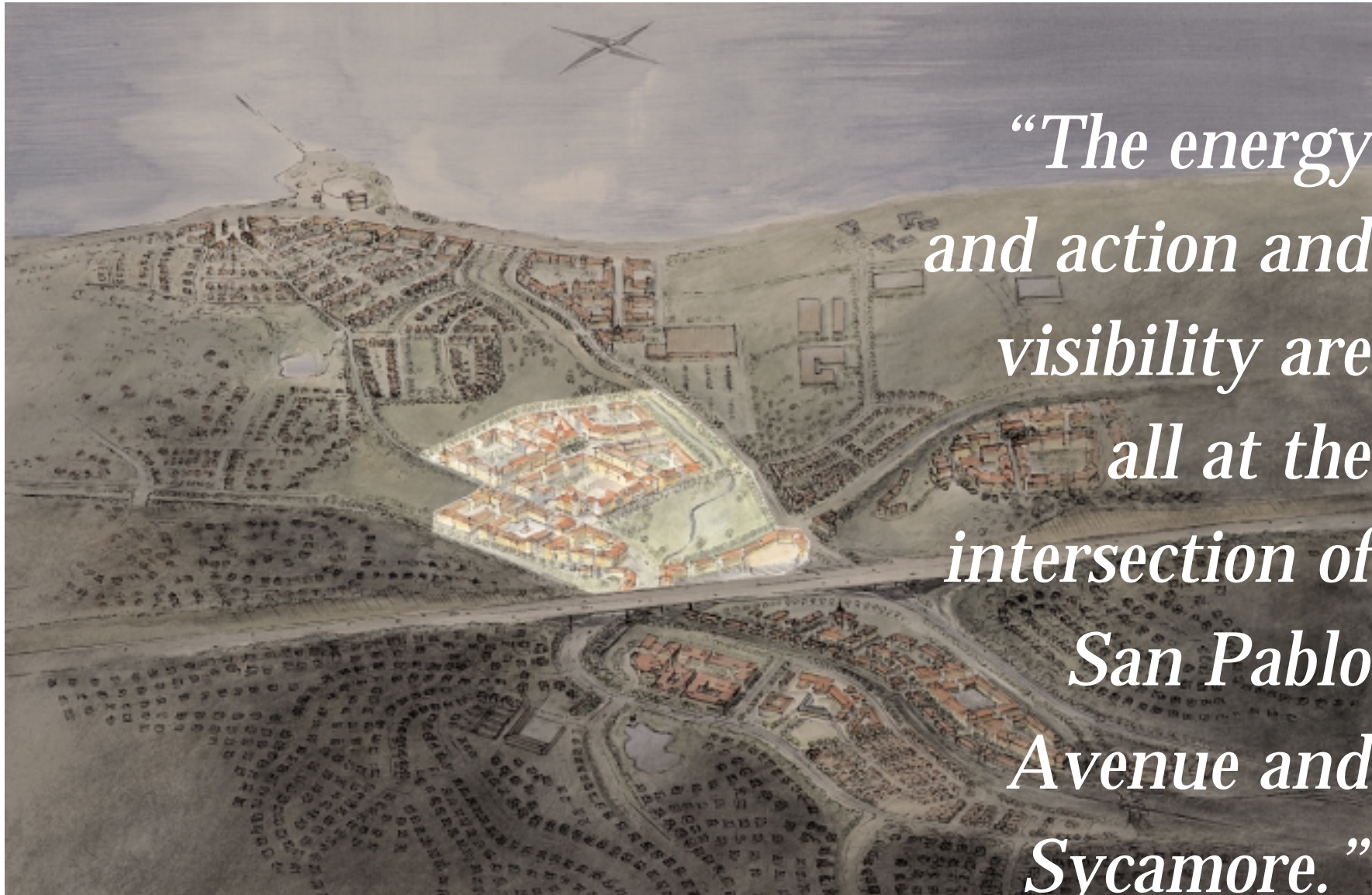
Pedestrian Oriented and Walkable

Walkability is the key feature in the design of the Town Center and its adjacent neighborhoods. It results from a combination of a wide variety of places to shop, work, and be entertained, all within walking distance of one another, and properly detailed streets as ways to move between them.

To make walking comfortable and safe along the streets of the district, certain details are required, as shown to the right:



CHAPTER 4



“The energy and action and visibility are all at the intersection of San Pablo Avenue and Sycamore.”

The Central Quarter

Every city has an epicenter, the “Main & Main” location immediately recognizable as the physical and psychological heart of town. Usually this spot coincides with a well-travelled crossroads or other natural gathering space, making it an optimal location for commerce. Citizen participants, traffic experts, retail specialists and leaders were asked to identify where that spot could emerge in Hercules, and one location stood out above all the rest. The convergence of Sycamore Avenue and San Pablo Avenue has the potential to be the Main & Main intersection for Hercules.

A REGIONAL CONTEXT

San Pablo Avenue, the old State Highway 40, is the most important street in the region. Although today much of the commuter traffic is carried by the interstate highway, San Pablo is an important link to the towns of Western Contra Costa County. In historical examples like Pinole, San Pablo was deliberately made the main street in town. Important civic and institutional uses in these towns such as City Hall, the bank, and commercial buildings faced San Pablo. Secondary streets ran perpendicular to this main arterial, creating natural locations for residences and apartments and the less important commercial buildings. When passing through a town like Pinole, the epicenter is evident

because of the placement of buildings close to the street edge. In this traditional urbanism the buildings form a container around the street, defining it spatially and making it feel like an outdoor room—the town’s living room.

In contrast, Hercules has not yet developed a strong orientation toward San Pablo. Industrial sites and the highway pushed eastward the commercial, housing and civic uses that typify the center of a town. A vague sense of center exists east of Interstate 80 near City Hall, the Albertsons strip center, and the Creekside mall, but these suburbanized locations have a “backstage,” uphill, cutoff feeling (perhaps providing one



San Pablo Avenue in neighboring Pinole



San Pablo Avenue in Hercules

partial explanation for the disappointing performance of retail there). The energy and action and visibility are all at the intersection of San Pablo and Sycamore.

Recent developments and permitting activity along San Pablo indicate that this location has now been discovered, but the generic gas station and strip center built so far both fail to create the sense of place worthy of this address. For a Main & Main location to work properly, its real estate dynamics depend on the economics concept of “aggregation of value;” each increment of development must reinforce the others, so the whole is literally greater than the sum of the parts. The dissolute, strip commercial pattern emerging there— which will get much worse if more strip centers are built on the surrounding parcels as some

have unfortunately proposed— cannot tap the potential aggregated value and will not endure.

There is, however, still time to redirect the trend and choose a different outcome.

LOCAL CONNECTIONS

The intersection of Sycamore Avenue at San Pablo is a focal point, but it is also a key transportation node for the city. For many residents, Sycamore is the route into and out of town, the road to the houses in the hills. Traffic departing the highways uses Bayberry and Sycamore to enter and move between neighborhoods in Hercules. Motorists use San Pablo to return to the freeway. All of this will become even more true when waterfront development, the planned outlet center, and other components of the town center come on line. This role in handling converging traffic, therefore, provides both the opportunity and challenge for the Main & Main concept: the location is attractive for commerce because there are many passersby, but pedestrian access must not be sacrificed in order to engineer extra convenience for those motorists.

THE LOGICAL LOCATION, BUT...

Development interests have already considered this retail location prime for several years. Some plans have called for big-box destination retail, similar to recent development in the Hilltop Mall area. Driving

by Hilltop’s “power centers” during the study tour, however, local leaders pointed to that sprawl and said, “That’s exactly what we don’t want.” Given the significance of the Sycamore / San Pablo intersection, and the strong citizen support for enhancing the sense of place there, the design team set to work to establish an image for what the area should become as it develops.

How will the stores sit on the land? Where will the entrances be, in relation to the street? How can we avoid the blank-wall syndrome? Where will the parking be, and how much is enough?

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Much of this area is currently a mix of wetlands and “brownfield” sites, as it used to be the outlying area of the Hercules Powder Factory. At present, the corner of San Pablo and Sycamore is occupied by a gas station, a fast food restaurant, a nearly vacant (newly constructed) strip shopping center, the BART park-and-ride lot, and a wetland associated with Refugio Creek. West of the intersection, towards the Bay, are wetlands and the former Powder Company land.

For a Main & Main intersection, not much is there yet! The gas station and park-and-ride lot serve a practical function, and are well utilized. But this key corner should say more. This spot will one day be a prime image-setter for the whole town, a postcard location that reveals local pride and tells the story of



The existing conditions of the intersection of Sycamore Avenue at San Pablo Boulevard without a Town Center. Currently, this “main & main” intersection caters only to the automobile, with wide travel lanes and auto-oriented uses, such as, the Shell Gas Station and the parking lot for the BART system. This critical main street in the city fails to display the look and feel that Hercules should embody in its most visible part.



A first step towards the development of a Town Center at this key intersection is to bring buildings closer to the edge of the street and restore on-street parking. Mixed-use buildings will replace the BART park-and-ride lot. This initial change will help create a sense of place which is compromised when the proportion of road width to building height is too wide.



As time passes, later buildings will follow the lead of the earlier ones, improving the pedestrian environment dramatically. The center of Hercules, at Sycamore Avenue, will offer a quality experience along San Pablo Avenue for residents and visitors alike. Properly sized and scaled sidewalks, on-street parking, enticing storefronts all will contribute to the making of a vibrant Town Center.

Hercules in a glimpse. Locals and visitors will identify with this place. That's no small part of building community pride, but perhaps more crucially, that identification is essential to positioning successful commercial development. To achieve its sales tax goals, Hercules must compete for mindshare in a crowded marketplace, and the best way to do this is to create a memorable, satisfying place.

CHANGE OVER TIME

The Future of the Central Quarter

It is important to realize is that all of the vision cannot—indeed, need not—be built overnight. Places rich in character that are desirable to residents and visitors alike take time to develop. The plan can be accomplished in phases. Some of the easiest and most critical issues can be tackled first, creating a momentum.

Park-and-Ride Lot

The most obvious starting point for the new town center is the BART park-and-ride lot on the northeast corner of the intersection. This lot operates at capacity every day, filling up early, and certainly serves important needs of commuters. This activity need not be a negative thing, if Hercules can devise ways to persuade these guests to spend money in the Town Center as they arrive and depart. In the absence of

such offerings, however, the lot today probably contributes little to the Hercules economy. Transit riders depart the bus, get behind the wheel and speed away. Nevertheless this parking lot occupies perhaps the most prime real estate in the city center, storing the cars of people who are off making or spending money in another part of the Bay Area all day. The lot is also terrible for a pedestrian environment; no one wants to walk next to such a thing. Its visual blight is comparable to that of a strip shopping center, without the sales tax benefits.

The lot should be relocated to the Hospitality Corridor, but transit riders should obviously still be encouraged to spend time in the heart of the Town Center. If possible, two express-bus stops should be established, so that there is one adjacent to the relocated lot, and one at Main & Main.

Line the Lot

The first move is to build a street-oriented, mixed-use building or buildings along San Pablo and Sycamore, wrapping the parking lot (or parking structure that replaces it). This multistory development should house retail below and offices, residences, or lodging on upper floors. Given the phenomenal exposure on San Pablo, this location should prove attractive to credit-rated tenants, provided the street is reconfigured to incorporate on-street parking. The building placement is essential—buildings should be built to

the edge of the right-of-way, and doors and windows should face the street. This will effectively create the first corner of Main & Main in Hercules. It will also screen much of the Interstate 80 viaduct from the pedestrian's point of view, and relieve the emptiness that characterizes the area now.

Line the Gas Station

A next step is to transform the southeast corner of the intersection. At present, this area is occupied by a Shell gas station. Over time, this use can remain, but the scene can be improved greatly by lining it with another mixed use building, basically an outparcel on lost space (see images on previous page). This shifts the gas station to an alley location, but if the idea is implemented carefully with clever signage and sight lines, motorists will still be aware of the gas station. This is an opportunity to multiply profit centers for the landowner and support both auto-oriented and pedestrian-oriented needs. It will, however, require retooling the road and reshaping the land development regulations.

But what about the parking?

With all this development planned for such a prominent location and replacing a parking lot as well used as the BART park-and-ride lot, many will ask, what happened to the parking? This plan suggests moving the park-and-ride lot just outside of the central quarter and into the newly created Hospitality Corridor



John Muir Parkway extended

Central Wetland Park

San Pablo Avenue

Sycamore Avenue extended

Liner building on park-and-ride lot

Gas Station liner building

along Bayberry / Willow. This location is easily located near exits for both I-80 and Highway 4 and frees up the heart of town for its highest and best use.

Parking for this area on the east side of San Pablo will still remain behind the liner buildings on the BART property. The “liner” building, which must be a minimum of two stories tall but can be as tall as four stories, will provide a perfect screen for a multistory parking garage that backs up to the Interstate 80 embankment. Sufficient parking will be provided, in a format consistent with urban centers, but with less of the negative visual impact that exists today with the surface lot.

The Other Side of the Street

The west side of San Pablo Boulevard is occupied by the former Gelsar site, now controlled by Remediation Financial Incorporated (RFI). As part of the process to create a developable site on this parcel, Gelsar was granted a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to mitigate a portion of the onsite wetlands and in return, create two wetland preserves and an enhanced riparian corridor along Refugio Creek leading to the Bay.

The location of the centralmost wetland is not ideal from a town center perspective; it will push apart the very activities one would like to bring together. Nor

will most of it be the kind of park that serves as a human gathering place or recreational land, since the priority is restoration of sensitive habitat. However, the arduous regulatory process of defining the wetland boundary takes years and has already been completed. For this reason the design team accepted the wetland as a given constraint, weaving it into the proposed framework of blocks. It will have the benefit of visually providing “green relief” within the built-up environment, and sets the stage for long views of the remaining RFI parcels from Interstate 80. It will be a continuation of the green network begun along the creek in the eastern parts of town, a kind of central park for Hercules. The greensward along the extended John Muir Parkway will also provide a green amenity at the heart of town.

The last parcel in the Central Quarter is between San Pablo and the western extension of Sycamore, on the southwest corner of “Main & Main”. This parcel is owned by American Stores. The site has been approved for a grocery store and yet another strip center, but it is unlikely that those plans will ever be realized. The Town Center plan directs the development on this site to mirror that of the park-and-ride lot with street-oriented buildings, providing access by extending the network of streets across the parcel. This triangle of development will anchor the third corner of “Main & Main” while directing attention to the newly extended Sycamore, along the path to the newly developed Waterfront quarter.

“PARCELS A/B”

The RFI parcel has been conceptually divided into sub-parcels labeled A, B & C (see map). The development pattern on these parcels will establish the character of the whole and greatly affect the prospects for the American Stores and BART parcels. This Plan recommends these individual pieces be coordinated into one interdependent plan, not seen as isolated chunks of real estate.



Proposed Mixed-Use Town Center

Supporting the Town Center

While the Sycamore and San Pablo Avenue intersection is of utmost importance, the quality of the surrounding urban fabric is crucial too. This whole quarter will become a focal point in Hercules. A mixture of residences, offices, retailers, and public gathering spaces are the basic elements for the Central Quarter. Buildings will face a network of tree-lined streets. On-street parking and wide sidewalks should be normal on streets in the Quarter. Some streets will also be equipped with bike lanes. The goal is for these streets to be suitably equipped for all types of travel -- walking, biking, automobile, or using transit. Public space is also important, although the urban open spaces need not be large; small, intimate squares and plazas are best. The large wetlands and the linear park that runs the length of Refugio Creek will provide a sufficiently generous network of greenspace.

The Neighborhood Character

The Central Quarter is to be the most urbane part of Hercules. Residents of the Central Quarter will be those seeking the convenience and ease of living near transit and work opportunities. Housing types should include apartment buildings, townhouses both for rent and for sale, and a variety of apartments above shops and offices.

Office buildings in the Central Quarter will satisfy the

need for live/work type arrangements as well as those seeking SoHo/SoMa-type lofts for small businesses. Vigilance should be applied to make sure that state-of-the-art, high-speed telecommunications access is maintained in this part of the town, even as technology rapidly changes.

The residents of Hercules expressed a desire for retailers both local and national. There will be a need here for both first-class locations demanded by national tenants, such as the San Pablo frontage, and for more affordable commercial locations. [For more detail, see the Gibbs Planning Group retail analysis for central Hercules, June 2000.]

Street Connections and Mobility

An important element for the success of this quarter is an interconnected network of streets. These streets will create fairly small blocks that are comfortable for walking. The arrangement of blocks will encourage people to walk to the store or run an errand, adding local buying power to those visitors who may choose to drive. The walkable pattern is thus crucial to the performance of the commercial enterprises.

The new street network in this neighborhood begins with an extension of John Muir Parkway from San Pablo west towards the Bay. This connection will link the highways to the industrial park next to the Town

Center as well as to the new train station at the water's edge. A second major connection is the extended Sycamore Avenue which will cross San Pablo, pass through a section of main street retail in the Central Quarter, then wind into the heart of the Waterfront Neighborhood.

Taming the "box"

To capture more tax revenue, there has been much discussion about attracting a major retail store to this part of Hercules. Such a retailer could serve as an anchor for the area, using its regional drawing power and advertising presence to benefit other businesses. Previous proposals envisioned such a store on RFI's Parcel "A."

However, an ordinary "big box" surrounded by a giant sea of asphalt will not suffice for this crucial location. The store would have to be designed in such a way that will not detract from the scale, connectivity, image and walkability of the neighborhood. Of particular concern is the giant parking lot in front, common to such stores. This requires a departure from the typical chain prototypes, something national retailers are loathe to do, and will only do if they covet a given location and are firmly instructed by local government on this imperative.

The requirement for small blocks and discouragement of front parking lots do not inherently prevent a "big box" store, but these goals do mean that the store

must be adapted for the urban condition. Numerous strategies were compared to find a way for the large-format store to fit into the Central Quarter, each requiring one or more fundamental deviations from the typical prototypes. Below are some different ways to accommodate a large anchor store:

The 2-story “big box”: smaller footprint

Beyond a footprint of about 20,000 square feet, the store and its associated parking inevitably begin eroding the walkability and block pattern. Beyond 50,000 SF, the pattern falls apart. Big box retail in excess of

50,000 SF is damaging to the pedestrian nature of neighborhoods and town centers and should be avoided. “Megabox” stores of this size are best consigned to warehouse districts. Of particular concern is the noisy activity that takes place on the back side of such a store, with its all-hours loading docks. This is particu-



Central Quarter Example 1: 27,000 SF hardware store



Central Quarter Example 2: 40,000 SF grocery store



Central Quarter Example 3: 107,000 SF - 2 story hardware store

larly a problem when the box is located at the back of the parcel with all its parking in front, resulting in the noxious backside of the box pressed up next to residential development (like that envisioned in previous proposals for RFI's Parcel B). An intervening area of parking in the back, such as employee and overflow parking, is beneficial in this regard.

The easiest way to accommodate the required bulk of a big box retailer, then, would be to place the store on two or more levels and divide its parking so that far less of the parking is located in front of the store. This scenario is workable for some kinds of retailers—department stores have used such a format in town centers for a century— but admittedly not for others. It is, for example, an awkward way to configure a major home-improvement center that includes a lumber yard and garden center.

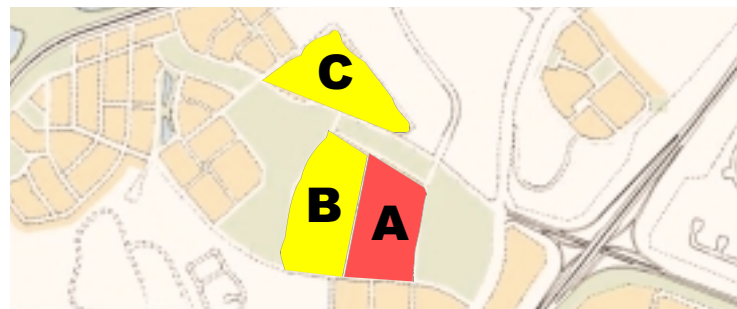
A downsized “box”

Because of recent trends in retailing (and in response to the rising outrage at the character of these stores from residents around the country), many big box retailers are seeking alternative retailing formats. One popular new trend is simple: creating a smaller, more custom-sized box. Home Depot, for example, has introduced its “Villagers Hardware” format for situations just such as this one. This option would appear to be desirable in Hercules by providing the big box format without many of its disadvantageous condi-

tions. A 30,000 square foot store could be incorporated in the Central Quarter with far less difficulty than a megabox, and need not result in substantially smaller sales. Retailers are reporting that their new, smaller-format stores, when well-located, are generating some of the best sales-per-square foot figures in the chains. This option should be particularly attractive to a chain that already has a presence in relatively nearby cities, and will need to differentiate the Hercules store from the others. It may also prove attractive to a chain that does not yet enjoy a strong presence in the region, if they are thus motivated to depart from the standard-issue box in order to secure a foothold in this market. How the City regulates these parcels will determine the outcome.

No big box in the Central Quarter: alternate site

The best solution for this Quarter, especially if the big-box retailer is to be a warehouse-style home improvement center, is to locate the store on Parcel “C.”



In that location, the store can still enjoy high accessibility and visibility from the highways, yet it will be nestled where it backs up to the hill (instead of homes), among other boxy buildings at the foot of the industrial park. Here the store can be built largely in conformance with the chain's standard prototype, instead of greatly deviating from the prototype as will be required on Parcel A. Parcel B is the big winner: reunified with Parcel A in a compatible setup, the residential component there will be far more livable.

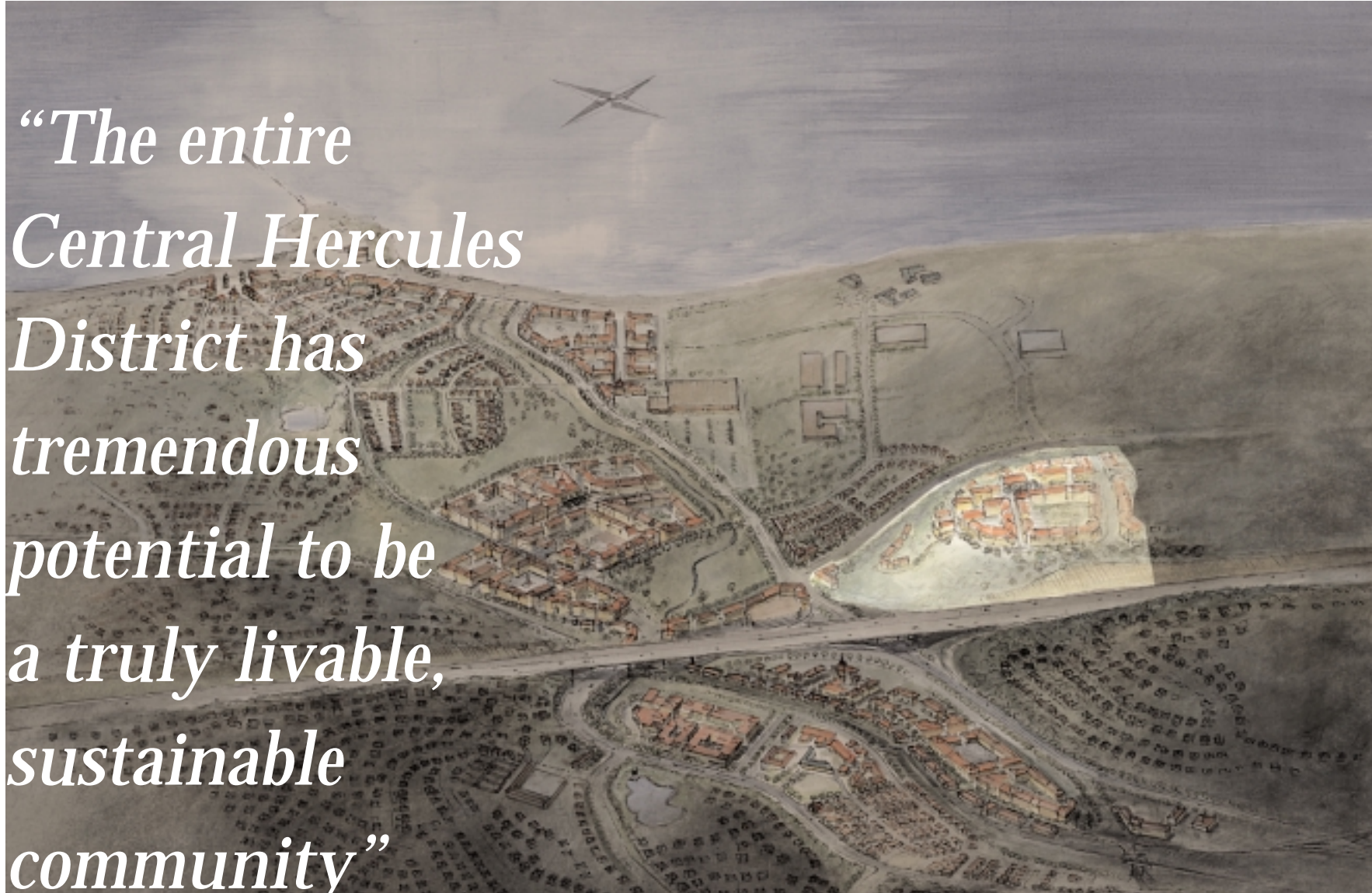
Shifting the box out of the Central Quarter's core improves the prospects for other types of retail and entertainment on all the other parcels. The residential component, once envisioned for Parcel C as housing, can be realized instead as apartments and townhouses embedded right within Parcels A & B.

This option is also better for the industrial park. Corporations there expressed grave concern about the compatibility of residential development on Parcel C, but should welcome the alternative proposed here.

Lastly, locating the box store on Parcel C also makes it more acceptable for more of its site to be dedicated to surface parking, and makes access generally convenient for motorists arriving in town. Trucks making deliveries and some users of this regional facility will be able to come and go without unduly impacting traffic in the heart of the Central Quarter.

CHAPTER 5

*“The entire
Central Hercules
District has
tremendous
potential to be
a truly livable,
sustainable
community”*



The Hill Town

From atop the surrounding hills, the view to San Pablo Bay and the central part of Hercules is extraordinary. The hill where the PG & E tank farm is located today is especially striking. Today, this site is occupied by prosaic oil storage tanks. But, in the future, it can become a fine symbol for the City of Hercules. This “tank farm,” positioned along the side and on top of a hill, is prominent from Interstate 80 and has the potential to be the city’s unique landmark.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

The Hill Town location is strongly evocative of the Italian hill towns built centuries ago. In very different times from today, these towns were created for a wide variety of reasons and took many forms, but even today, they remain fine places; prized for tourism and being able to deliver a fine-grained mix of uses and urban density in a highly livable, marketable, picturesque package. The most widely recognized of these towns are Assisi and San Gimignano, two country villages in Tuscany.

Many observers have pointed out that Contra Costa County and Italy share geographic and climatic similarities; the hills, the best soils for cultivating grapes, temperate weather, and beautiful views to the water. Reusing this former industrial site by following the

tried and tested methods of building from the Italian hill town traditions would make a delightful new neighborhood for the City of Hercules.

In addition to the Italian tradition, there are other reasons to pursue this particular development form.

Working with the site characteristics - The design of the Hill Town exploits the hilly nature of the site rather than treating it as an obstacle. Features such as roof terraces and sloping parks provide visual variety and an overall richness in the living environment. This sort of terraced construction is certainly more expensive than



San Gimignano: Buildings are terraced up the hillside.

conventional grading, but its views and unique location fix this property's destiny for upmarket development. The higher construction cost can therefore be absorbed accordingly. Also, there is no rush to develop this parcel. Implementation of this part of the Town Center plan can be delayed until housing prices justify the extra expense to build it properly.

Fits closely with and minimizes impacts on the environment - Unlike developments around the region that feature excessive grading to provide a cheap surface for building, the Hill Town uses the topography to its advantage, maximizing views and relating to the natural scene. Utilizing underground or mid-block parking can reduce the amount of space needed to store automobiles and also helps promote a more walkable neighborhood.

Functional motivation - The buildings of the Hill Town are positioned to respond to the regional climate. South facing exposures allow for effective climate control and provide spectacular views to the Bay.

Limited size and incremental development - By positioning development on a relatively small portion of the hill, development is limited physically in size. Additionally, this pattern in the Hill Town is such that incremental development, from the center out to the edge, over time is feasible. It does not have to be built all at once.

Landmark in the landscape - The signature location of the Hill Town high above I-80 will make it a landmark

for the City of Hercules. Tens of thousands of people will pass by the site every day. If it is designed properly, it will become another postcard location for Hercules and help to "put the town on the map" as the old saying goes.

Directing growth toward the center - The dense form of the Hill Town is in stark contrast to the sprawling development at the edge of town. Local citizens and environmentalists are alarmed at the way farmland



Modern precedent - a new hilltown in France designed by Francois Sperry.

and natural areas in the outer reaches are being bulldozed to make room for more expensive homes. This manner of development is further propelled by the scarcity of housing and the prosperity of the nearby Bay Area. There is widespread agreement that developments must be created and built in a manner that encourages and allow people to live (and possibly work) closer to the center, thereby reducing pressure at the edge.

The Hill Town offers an alternative for upscale residents and should be marketed based on its urbanity, convenience, and views. The demographic segment to whom this alternative will appeal, with its high discretionary income, is exactly the kind of population that will help generate business in the commercial components of the Town Center as well.

PROPERTY IN TRANSITION

Today the Hill Town is occupied by an aging complex of tanks and pumping equipment originally built to serve an oil pipeline from Point Molate to power plants in eastern Contra Costa County. Tosco recently purchased approximately 62 acres from PG&E and the future of this site remains uncertain. It is unlikely that it will remain an industrial use for long as it is in a prime location for residential development. The steep topography make this site difficult to develop as a conventional planned unit development (PUD) with single family homes on large lots.

The visual impact of any development on this site should be studied and considered very carefully. A thorough, special review of any future development proposed for this highly visible parcel must be undertaken before its approval and should be aided by extensive visual analysis.



The Hill Town today



The Hiltown at full buildout



Plan view of proposed Hill Town

THE HILL TOWN PROPOSAL

Much of Hercules has developed along the ridgeline of the hills or in down in the valleys. The city was originally built with the idea of blending architectural and natural features, but the most recent developments in the City are less than sensitive to the ecology and shape of the land around them. These developments, motivated by a short-term financial horizon, prefer to scrape the hills off rather than working with them to add value and visual excitement, that will be incorporated in the City for years to come. The Hill Town suggests a way to get back on track.

The Hill Town is organized around a main staircase that transverses the entire quarter*. This stair and its attached platforms serve as a promontory that would overlook the city of Hercules and San Pablo Bay. The stair is flanked on either side by two- and three-story buildings that can serve office, inn or residential functions. A small amount of retail can occur to serve the needs of the quarter, but retail enterprises should be limited to serving as an amenity for the residential or lodging uses. A hillside cafe may be supportable, given the attractive views from the property.

** The proposed plan illustrated in this document was designed with limited information about specific site constraints. Any future construction plans should incorporate any site specific constraints.*

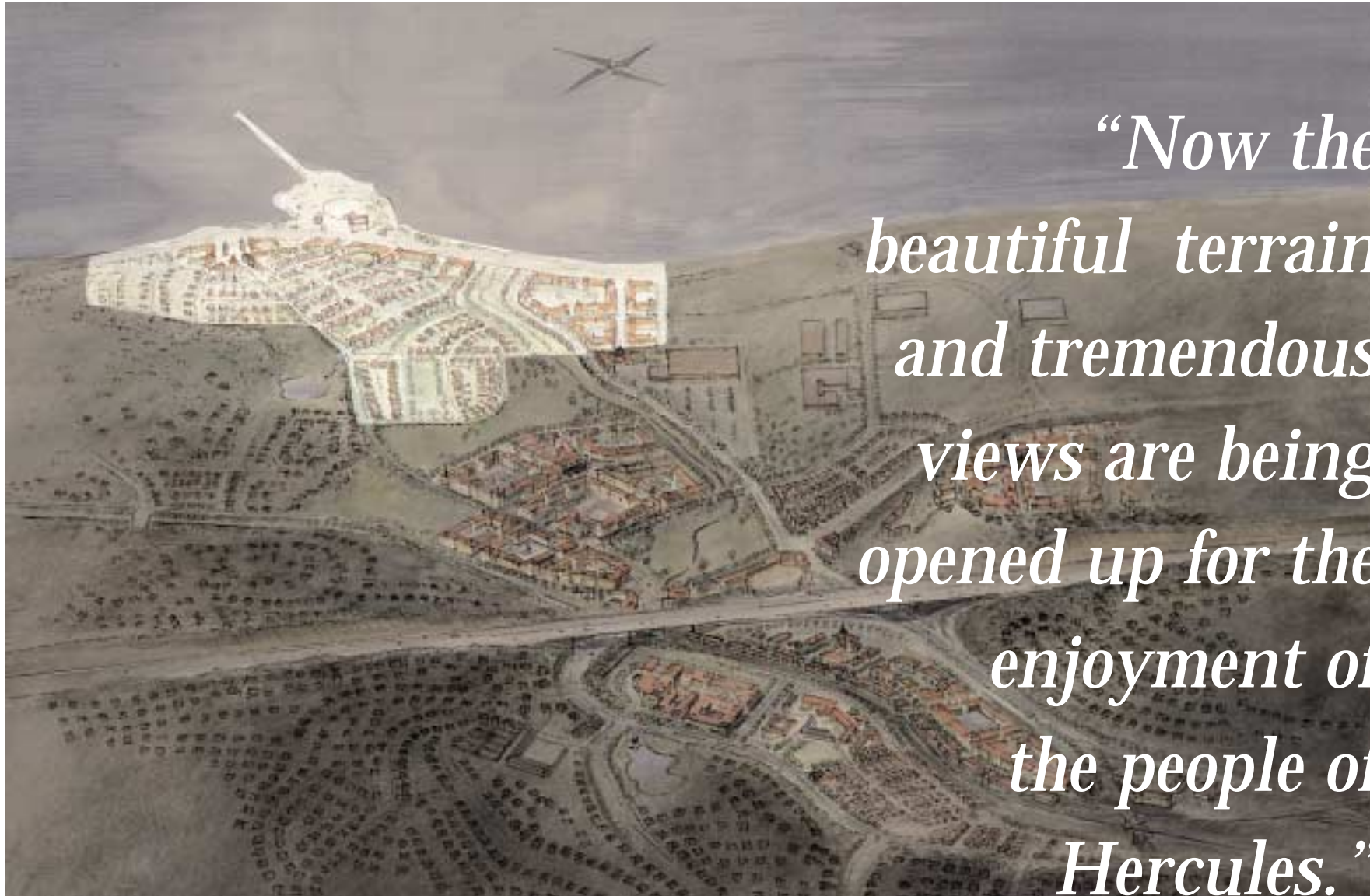
Automobile traffic is circulated along the road that rings the development. Parking and service areas are tucked underneath, forming a podium for the development. This allows the developer to utilize the terrain for its maximum value.

Burying the parking below will also support the pedestrian environment. With parking hidden, buildings can be close to the street and create the proper sense of enclosure. This sense of enclosure aids in the perception of safety that people need to feel comfortable walking along the street. Doors and windows facing the street add to this perception as well. Pedestrian connections to the center of Hercules will be provided to reduce the dependence on automobiles for quick trips as well as for transit riders seeking to access WestCAT or BART.

SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY

The entire Central Hercules District has tremendous potential to be a truly livable, sustainable community. The Hill Town is one of the crucial pieces of the Central Hercules District that cannot, and should not, be developed without careful attention to detail and urban design characteristics.

CHAPTER 6



“Now the beautiful terrain and tremendous views are being opened up for the enjoyment of the people of Hercules.”

The Waterfront

The San Pablo Bay waterfront, home of the Hercules Powder Company factory, has essentially been cut off from the rest of the community for many years. Now the beautiful terrain and views of the water are being opened up for the enjoyment of the people of Hercules, as a new traditional neighborhood rises on the former “brownfields.”

BUILDING ON TRADITION

This special place in Hercules will now become available and accessible. For the people of Hercules the questions were, how should the land be developed and what should be there? The debate over commercial versus residential development saw strong proponents on each side, but a combined solution including both will yield the most benefit for the greater community.

The land has been purchased by the Bixby Company, for which Civitas has designed a traditional neighborhood to replace the former dynamite factory land. This design employs many of basic features of good urbanism. It will foster walking and biking by having a network of streets and small blocks. There will be a mix and variety of housing types. Special civic buildings will occupy locations of geometric importance, like the top of a hill or at the end of a street vista. Along the

waterfront, there should be an even greater mixture of offices, residences, restaurants, and some retail stores. Its residents will have the opportunity to take care of daily needs within the neighborhood. For the rest of Hercules’ citizens, this publicly accessible area will be an attractive place to mingle with friends and neighbors again and again.



The view to San Pablo Bay



Dining on the Bay

COMPLEMENTING THE CENTRAL QUARTER

The relatively remote place by San Pablo Bay will be special and different from the rest of the Town Center. While it will have small stores and restaurants, it will not threaten other commercial areas in Hercules. The other areas will have retail that depends on a regional base of customers from a larger trade area. This variety of mixed-use locations will enable the City to support itself financially as well as have both a vibrant town center and neighborhoods.

In the waterfront neighborhood, Gibbs Planning Group recommends up to approximately 34,000 square feet of retail space. These retail spaces would best be filled with destinations and entertainment, such as retail,

restaurants, apparel stores, galleries, and day spas. These would not necessarily depend upon a regional base of daily customers, but could become a place of special allure to visitors, like Carmel or Sausalito.

The cost of housing in the region has risen dramatically. Housing for smaller households and households of moderate income is especially scarce. Apartments above stores and live/work spaces diversify the options for housing, even when land is scarce. These housing types are a natural part of a Town Center. This living environment has been found to be popular among both New Economy employees and people who want to reduce their time spent in the car. The new neighborhood should therefore offer dwellings of varied prices and sizes.

GETTING AROUND IN THE BAY AREA

Commuting in the Bay Area is a nationally known phenomenon, and for the people that live in Hercules it can be a great source of frustration. As the Town Center develops and matures, additional options for travel will become necessary. Having a traditional neighborhood with small blocks and a mix of uses will allow for many daily trips to be taken care of by a short walk or bike ride. But there will still be the need for residents to travel to other parts of Contra Costa County and the region.

In the future, the Capitol Corridor train station servicing Sacramento and San Jose will stop at a new station to be located here. This will allow a new way to commute to both San Jose and to San Francisco with a BART transfer in Oakland.

The Point was historically served by a ferry and could be again in the future. There is a regional ferry run by MTC and the Bay Area Water Transit Company which could service Hercules in the future. Using the Point as a ferry location would further support any retail activities nearby and make for an even more ideal residential location. However, the Town Center does not depend upon near-term implementation of a ferry for its success. Dredging and environmental chal-



A new look for the point



The new neighborhood by the Bay

Challenges may prove the ferry to be technically infeasible, so the plan looks upon the ferry service as a potential extra enhancement, but not a requirement.

OPENING UP THE BAY

For years, the factory limited access to the bayfront, but now it will be accessible for recreation as well as living and working. An important first step is to continue the Bay Trail across the land and open up the Point to the public.

As the Point is redeveloped by private interests, the City could construct the appropriate pedestrian access across the Capitol Corridor rail line, supporting the

private developers in their willingness to open up this area to public access.

Currently the Point has some old structures that remain from the days when the site was a factory. There is also a variety of mature trees and topographic features interspersed between the old structures. These features should be preserved and incorporated into the neighborhood plan.

Its proximity to the Bay and its natural beauty make the Point a fine location for a public park. Other cities have had great success in renovating old factory structures in parks of this kind. The quirky old Hercules Powder Company factory structures could be adapted to new uses, becoming landmarks in the Bay Area.



The park on the Point

CHAPTER 7

“In the future, this area will redevelop as a focal and unique precinct in the town,”



The Civic Center

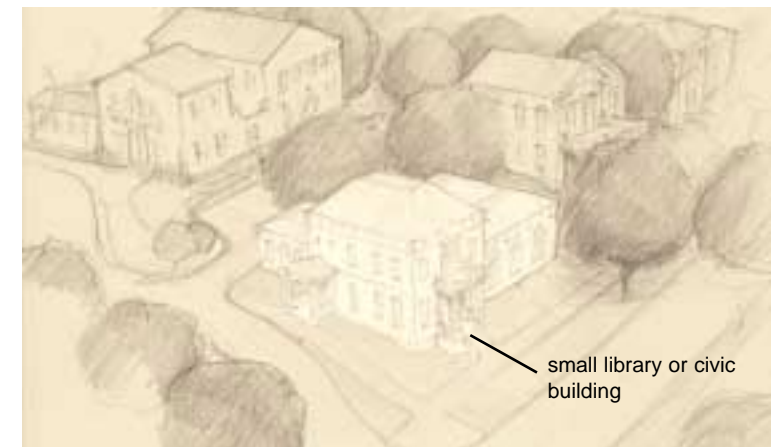
Today, City Hall stands apart on a hilltop, separated from the surrounding neighborhoods. This part of the town feels somewhat blank and incomplete. In the future, this area will develop as a focal and unique precinct in the town, with a new residential quarter, revived retail destinations, and expanded civic presence.

BEGINNING AT CITY HALL

With City Hall as the most prominent building in this neighborhood, subsequent development should build on its civic importance and closely connect to it. New residential areas should have street connections to City Hall and to the new civic building (an ideal site for a branch library). This part of the neighborhood sits on the slope of a hill, making it especially prominent. As the hill rises, it is appropriate for proud, larger houses to grace the streets, signifying the importance placed on this spot begun by the grand gesture of locating City Hall here. The overly modest City Hall itself, as it is upgraded and expanded over time, should be made more architecturally substantial, less suburban, and more “civic.”

The Bayberry Avenue area is largely undeveloped except for a Caltrans staging area. An existing cloverleaf exit ramp makes any type of development difficult. But with a new alignment of Bayberry Avenue and a diamond exit ramp for Palm Avenue, however, the central portion of this neighborhood should become the “Hospitality Corridor” depicted in this plan.

This new exit ramp will ease the traffic going to the eastern neighborhoods. With the current cloverleaf alignment, nearly all traffic in Hercules must go through the intersection of Bayberry and Sycamore Avenues. In addition, because of the layering and geometry of previous transportation corridors (first the



The CivicCenter neighborhood

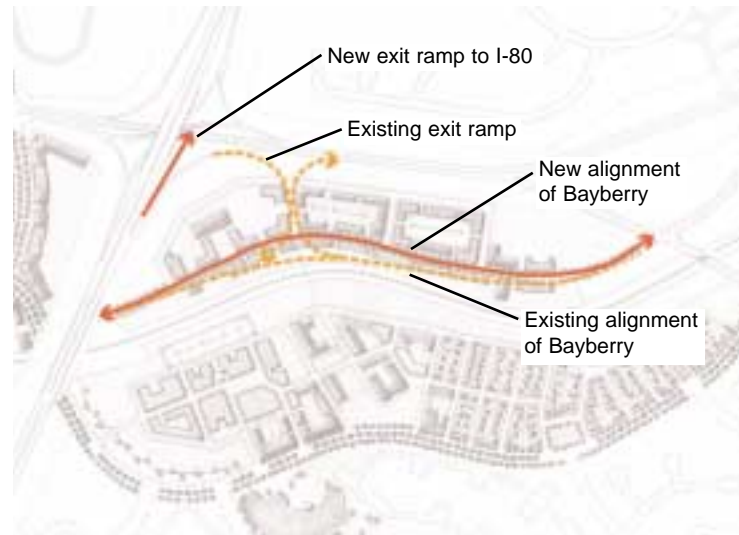
railroad, and later the interstate) the intersection has been abandoned by pedestrians and all but the bravest of bicyclists. The remaining fragmented, oddly shaped parcels of land have been “lost space,” tough to develop. With a redesign and realignment of the Avenue, a pattern of real city blocks can be created, and some powerful pedestrian improvements can be made.



Before:
The underpass is very unfriendly to pedestrians, effectively cutting off the Creekside area from the Central Quarter except by car.



After:
The same spot with a connected sidewalk and street trees. Pedestrians need a safe and comfortable place to walk, so visitors to the Creekside area will be encouraged to patronize businesses in other parts of the Town Center.



New I-80 exit ramp and realignment of Bayberry

The Transit Solution

Remaining parcels in this area will become the new park-and-ride lot for BART. The existing lot is on the other side of Interstate 80 and is comprised of surface parking only. In the future, the new location can accommodate a combination of surface parking and a garage, and potentially more development.

Constructing a parking garage will provide a transit center for both Westcat and BART. It will also increase the number of commuters who can take advantage of parking their private automobiles and using transit to get to their destinations. Additionally, the parking garage can hold overflow parking for the hotel, thus ensuring plenty of parking, without being visually dominated by it, and using the valuable land efficiently.

The new parking garage should have a “liner building.” This type of building wraps an ordinary parking garage with a layer of occupied spaces, such as retail, offices, and even loft apartments. The retail uses in this building should be oriented to the commuter. Delis, coffee shops, dry cleaners, banks, small post offices, a copy shop, computer services, and day care are among the possibilities. These uses should be designed and positioned so as to intercept the transit riders before they reach their parked cars, so that instead of just storing cars in Hercules, these visitors are enticed to contribute to the local economy, too.

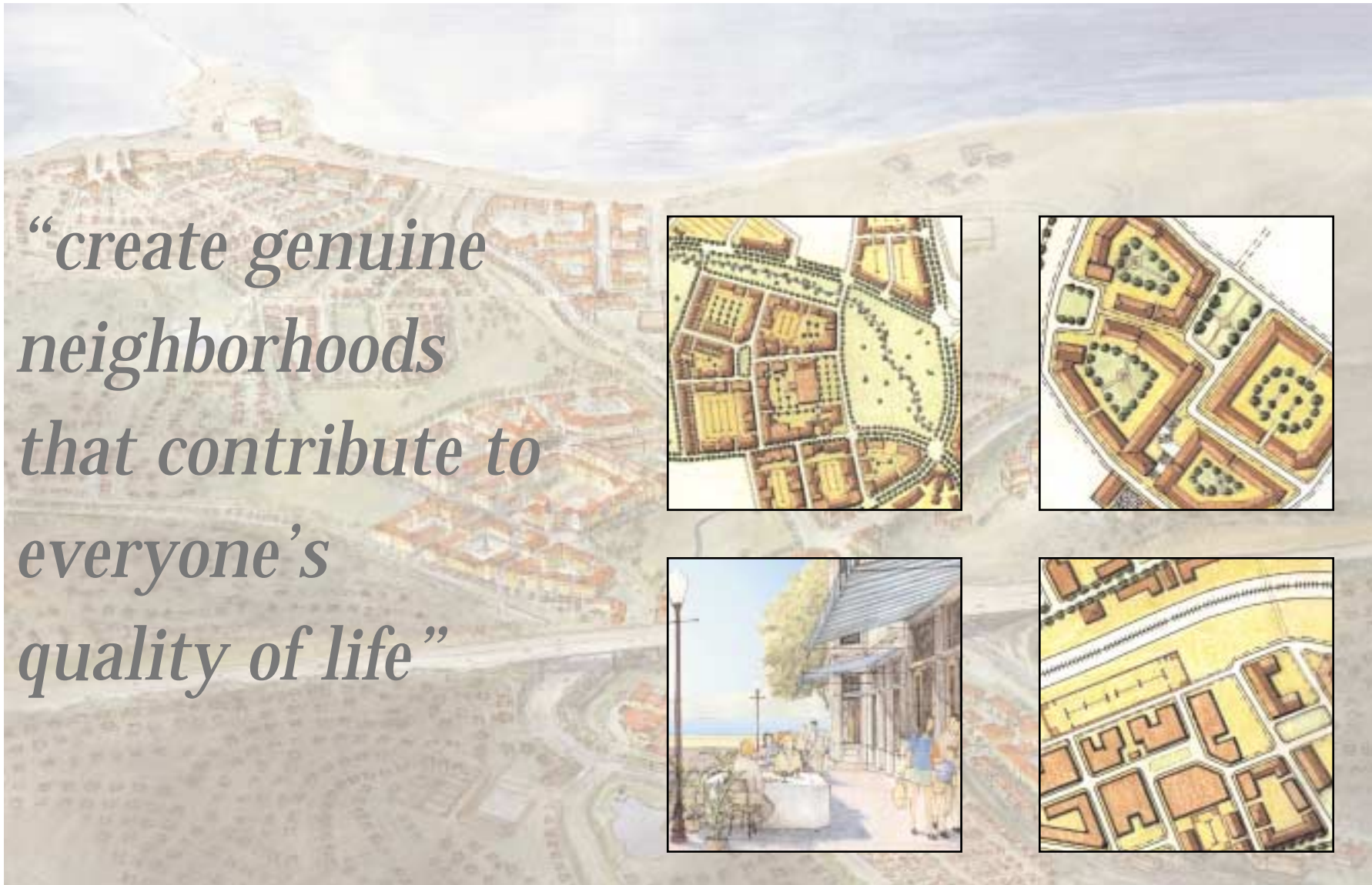
The Hospitality Corridor

A new hotel will be an important anchor for this neighborhood. Nearby the hotel will be one or more restaurants, a bank, and medical offices (relocated from the Creekside shopping center). The realignment of Bayberry Avenue will allow buildings to be built along both sides of the road. Therefore, the neighborhood can have multi-story buildings with storefronts on the first floor, other uses upstairs, and on-street parking. Buildings in this format will contribute to the pedestrian environment adding safety and purpose for any walking trip. The architecture should utilize awnings, colonnades, or balconies and add comfort by protecting pedestrians from any inclement weather.



The Hospitality Corridor, looking northwest

CHAPTER 8



“create genuine neighborhoods that contribute to everyone’s quality of life”

Implementation

With so much potential and ready-to-go development interests in Hercules, the opportunity must not be missed and this plan must be implemented. The City of Hercules has an opportunity to realize the financial benefits of commercial development and also to create genuine neighborhoods that contribute to everyone's quality of life. To do this, the City should:

Adopt this plan.

The Planning Commission and the City of Hercules should pass an Adoption-in-Concept resolution giving this plan official standing. Adopting the plan will send an important message to property owners and residents that the Planning Commission and the City of Hercules support the Plan and intend to implement its principles. This resolution will give clear direction to staff and other development officials to instruct all applicants to meet the goals of the Plan in their designs.

Adopt the Central Hercules Code.

The Central Hercules Code will be the official implementation vehicle for this Plan. The City should finalize this Code and make it official as soon as possible. If there is a long delay the community may be faced with disappointment as applicants come forward wanting to use the existing zoning and development rules.

This Code is different from the existing rules in that:

- 1. It prescribes the physical built results that are intended, instead of just specifying those aspects that are not permitted;*
- 2. It is graphic by nature, with diagrams, photographs and drawings to illustrate the City's intent;*
- 3. It uses Regulating Plans to specify street and lot patterns and is organized by street type, not zone; and*
- 4. It uses Building Placement Standards to specify the basic parameters that govern building location, form, and size.*

The Code is derived directly from the "pre-scrutinized" vision depicted in the Town Center plan. Because the

new Code is more specific about what the built results will be, the approval process can be accelerated to reduce the time required for the applicants with compliant proposals. If an applicant is requesting variances, or proposes something at odds with this plan, of course, the approval process should require more scrutiny.

Confirm physical & regulatory conditions.

This Plan was created with limited information regarding rights-of-way, property lines, existing buildings, easements, utility limitations, and covenants tied to individual properties. As site-specific applications come forward and municipal improvements are undertaken, modifications will be necessary as accurate surveys and site analyses are conducted. This is normal in an ambitious long-term effort like the Town Center.

Promote this plan and the Code.

Secure press coverage for the new vision as well as any new projects completed under the guidance of the Plan. Spread the message that the Plan specifies the desired pattern of development and how these improvements are beneficial to the community. Parade the images of the first successful project in the press, at public meetings, at service clubs, on television, in

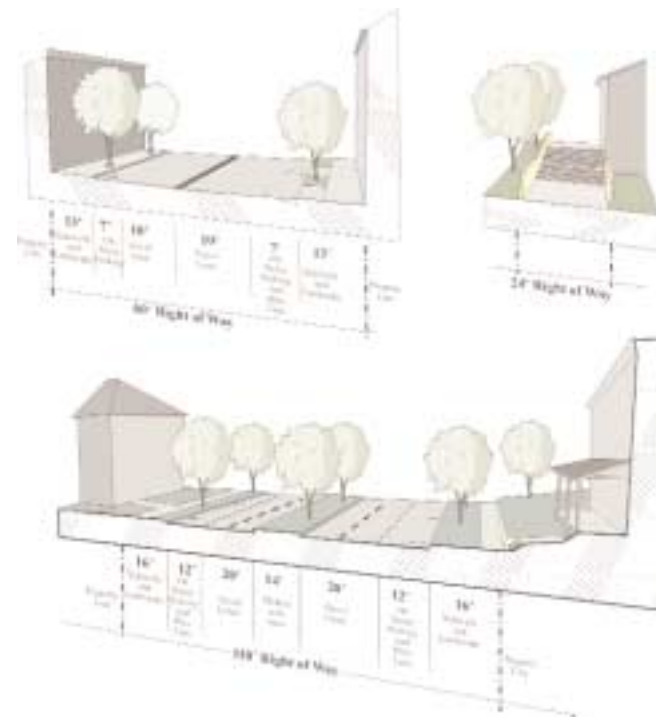
traveling exhibits, and on posters and postcards. Provide realtors with handouts highlighting what's coming soon in Hercules. Promote the Plan so that it will take on a life of its own and continue to influence

outcomes long after turnover occurs in government staff and elected officials.

Continue public & private sector dialogue.

Identify and resolve any concerns local developers may have. Convene regular meetings with property owners. Doing this will keep the regulators aware of current development trends and practices, and will promote cooperation among all the parties.

Hercules is not alone in its efforts to apply the rediscovered principles of traditional neighborhood development. Network with the many other towns doing the same thing. It is worthwhile to seek out relevant information from organizations such as the National Association of Home Builders on the best techniques and the economics of traditional neighborhoods. Take tours; sponsoring visits to peer communities and recent developments in the region can show local developers and elected officials both good and bad examples of growth, helping them make better decisions for Hercules. Share what is learned here with the peer communities, too.



Sections from the Code illustrate the subtleties of street design standards and the relationship of buildings to public spaces.

Offer incentives to follow the Plan.

Encourage private investment with public incentives: utilize the RDA's tax increment financing instruments, create low interest loan pools, waive fees, subsidize loans, offer city-owned or county-owned land, couple public improvements within the rights-of-way with private projects, provide free and pre-approved designs. Above all, cut red tape for developments which follow the plan. On the other hand, do not grant incentives such as these to developers whose proposals fail to follow the plan.

Coordinate public capital improvements with adjoining private property owners.

For example, to open up the San Pablo Bay area, use city funds to create pedestrian access while private developers construct buildings. Also, the City could pay for some of the cost of the shared parking facilities, streets and other infrastructure, cutting down on the overall cost to the developer, increasing predictability and reducing risk.

Create a Central Hercules Capital Improvements Plan & prioritize all of the projects.

A schedule of capital improvements should be made or updated to identify all projects and improvements that are linked to development in the Town Center. These include, but are not limited to, purchase of rights-of-way, upgrading or visually improving utility lines, sewer extensions, water line extensions, road improvements, sidewalk construction, landscape enhancements, parks and open space, stormwater management, etc. Each project should include an estimated funding source (either public or private), a time schedule, and the person or entity responsible for implementation.