



**STAFF REPORT**

MEETING

DATE: June 16, 2015

TO: City Council

FROM: Robert Brown, Community Development Director

PRESENTER: Robert Brown

SUBJECT: **Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood Study**

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**REQUESTED ACTION**

Consider providing direction to staff on use and design options for redevelopment of properties and infrastructure upgrades within the Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood for inclusion into the Draft General Plan.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Provide direction to staff on desired land use, design and infrastructure options for inclusion into the Draft General Plan and associated Environmental Impact Report.

**BACKGROUND**

The Northwest Quadrant neighborhood is ideally located immediately north of downtown and west of Redwood Boulevard. The area was subdivided in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and developed with small homes between the 1920's and World War II. In the 1960's and 70's numerous apartment buildings were constructed, resulting in the area being evenly split between single and multi-family housing.

In 1977 the City prepared a neighborhood plan which called for limiting additional apartment construction which would "encourage the demolition of a sound dwelling." Very little new development has occurred in the neighborhood since these policies were implemented.

In 1996 General Plan called for a review of the neighborhood plan, and continued the existing policy which designated the neighborhood for Medium Density Multi-Family in the General Plan, but through policy language precluded multi-family development unless an existing home was unsound.

In preparing a work program for the update of the General Plan the City Council selected the Northwest Quadrant as one of the Focus Areas to examine land use, infrastructure and design issues. Opticos Design, Inc. was hired to assist staff in preparing an analysis of the neighborhood and existing zoning allowances, including visual simulations, and sharing recommendations for alternative zoning regulations that would define acceptable building forms to assure greater compatibility with the neighborhood.

## Study Area

The study area is shown on Page 2 of the attached Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood Study, is generally about a square mile, and comprises 201 parcels and 601 dwelling units. Only 20 percent of the properties are owner occupied.

The average density of the area is 13.5 units per acre, but development ranges from 6 to 39 units per acre. The current R10-4.5 zoning allows up to 10 units per acre, but if a rezoning is sought (and findings can be made that a sound dwelling is not being removed) the General Plan allows density up to 20 units per acre. The only recent example of development in the neighborhood are 10 homes under construction by Habitat for Humanity at 1112 Fourth Street which was approved in 2007. It was approved as a Planned Development rezoning at 14.5 units per acre, and replaced a single family structure that had deteriorated to the point it was declared unsound.

## Public Process

To facilitate informed public input two community workshops were held on March 14 and 25, 2015. Approximately 60 persons attended the first workshop and 40 attended the second. The first workshop included a walking tour of the neighborhood, small group mapping of neighborhood assets, constraints and opportunities and discussion of neighborhood objectives. Attendees also learned about traditional neighborhood housing types (duplexes, fourplexes, bungalow courts) that might be good models for future compatible development. Residents expressed concerns about property maintenance, code compliance, speeding, on-street parking and the “hodge-podge” character of existing development.

At the second workshop staff and the design consultants presented draft proposals for components of a neighborhood plan that included infrastructure improvements (traffic calming, identity elements, pocket park), and a graphic analysis of allowable development under existing zoning and alternative development types. Participant feedback from both workshops is included as Appendix 2 of the attached Neighborhood Plan.

In addition to feedback from the workshop, the three design schemes were posted on Open Novato, requesting that viewers provide input into their preferences. The results can be seen at: [http://novato.org/community/get-involved/open-novato#peak\\_democracy](http://novato.org/community/get-involved/open-novato#peak_democracy).

## Next Steps

The Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood Study is being conducted as part of the larger update of the 1996 General Plan. The Design Review Commission and Planning Commission are being asked to review proposed infrastructure and development policies/design criteria that would ultimately lead to proposed policies and programs in the Draft General Plan. Recommendations from the advisory commissions and from the public process will guide the City Council in providing direction to staff as to desired policies to be included in the new General Plan and analyzed in the environmental impact report (EIR) on the proposed Draft General Plan.

## **ANALYSIS**

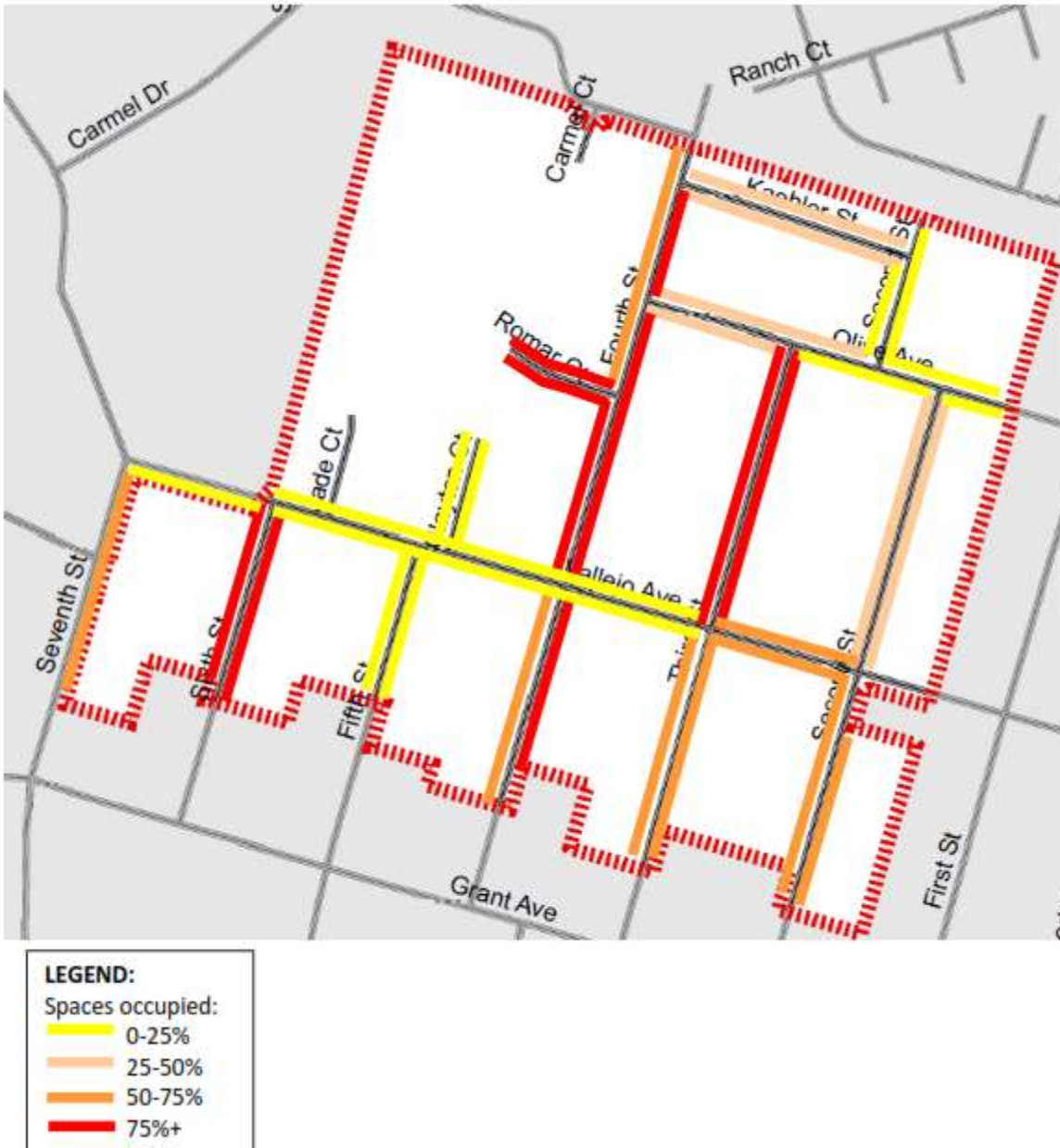
### Infrastructure

At the community workshops, residents raised concerns with several aspects of existing infrastructure in the neighborhood.

Principal streets in the neighborhood include Vallejo Avenue, which is used as a bypass to Grant

Avenue, and Olive Avenue, which extends to the east, providing access under the freeway and to the Atherton area. Sidewalk “bulb-outs” were installed on Vallejo to slow traffic, but have not had a material effect. As a result, residents asked that traffic calming techniques be included into the objectives of the updated neighborhood study.

Some streets in the area are also impacted by high rates of on-street parking, resulting from a lack of sufficient parking (by today’s standards) for apartments that were constructed at a time when auto ownership levels per household were lower. The following map indicates the results of an on-street parking occupancy survey.



Residents also expressed concerns about the lack of local park space and facilities. A “tot lot” exists at the quarter-acre Stafford Grove Park at the periphery of the neighborhood on Seventh Street and Marion Avenue. Given the higher multi-family densities and the lack of substantial on-

site open space in most apartment developments the neighborhood is underserved with park space. The City currently owns a two-acre parcel atop the hill to the west of the neighborhood which could be developed with a trail and overlook, although access is steep.

### Land Use Policies and Regulations

The current land use policies for the Northwest Quadrant neighborhood were formulated 38 years ago, driven largely by the rapid increase in poorly designed and inexpensively built apartment structures which were displacing the older single-family homes. The adopted policies and implementing zoning regulations achieved their purpose to stop apartment development and has retained the status quo for the area since the late 1970's. There has been very little new development and minimal investment into existing properties, particularly apartment structures, since that time.

Staff and the applicants reached the following conclusions based on the evaluation of existing zoning regulations:

- With current restrictions on preserving sound single-family homes and the fact that most existing apartment sites exceed currently allowed densities of 10 units per acre, little development has or is likely to occur and reinvestment is discouraged.
- The current limitation on multi-family development based on the condition of an existing single-family home may encourage owners to allow homes to deteriorate to the point where demolition is necessary, allowing for rezoning.
- The current zoning regulations establish a development envelope within required setbacks and height limit that is long and narrow on the generally 150-foot deep lots in the neighborhood, limiting design options.
- The code encourages garage doors or parking areas along the streetscape.
- Given the low density limit on larger lots, developers are encouraged to build larger units to make projects profitable.
- The code does not include building form standards, making design results unpredictable.
- 3-story structures could be incompatible with existing development which is one and two-stories, unless designed very well.
- To develop a site at a higher density within the General Plan's Medium Density Multi-Family range requires a zoning change, which is a lengthy and costly process which adds substantially to unit prices and has less predictable results. The Habitat for Humanity project at 1112 Fourth Street approved in 2007 required a Planned Development rezoning

The land use policies contained in the 1977 Neighborhood Plan and 1996 General Plan were not fully implemented in zoning regulations. For example:

- While the 1977 Neighborhood Plan and the 1996 General Plan state that every parcel should be allowed either a duplex or two single-family dwellings, the Zoning Code only allows one single-family dwelling on lots less than 9,000 square feet in size.
- The land use policies called for a buffer area one parcel deep beyond the properties with Grant Avenue frontage that are zoned for commercial use. Parcels in this buffer area were

to be allowed to be redeveloped with office or institutional uses, but the Zoning Code allows only residential use.

- The General Plan Land Use Map designates the study area as Medium Density Multi-Family (10-20 units/acre), but this density can only be achieved through a rezoning if findings are made that there is not a “sound” single-family dwelling on the property and the rezoning would not result in an apartment within a predominately single-family area.

The project design consultants prepared an analysis of the existing zoning allowances, including graphic representations of potential building massing on Pages 7-12 of the attached Study. Workshop participants expressed concerns that the allowable 3-story height limit and potential to locate on-site parking adjacent to the public street/sidewalk were incompatible with existing development and their vision for the neighborhood.

As a result, the design consultants presented a range of potential residential building types (duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes and bungalow/cottage courts) for participant feedback that might result in more compatible redevelopment options. These are shown on Pages 13-17 of the attached Study.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations reflect the recommendations of the Planning Commission from their public workshop held on June 1, 2015.

### **Vision Statement**

The following language is proposed as a Vision Statement for the Northwest Quadrant neighborhood:

“The Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood is an historic walkable neighborhood that has the potential to see increased reinvestment and revitalization through development of carefully designed housing types that ensure compatibility with the existing scale and diversity of residences while preserving and enhancing the sense of community.”

### **Infrastructure Upgrades**

The Study proposes five draft objectives relating to infrastructure upgrades and code enforcement in response to community and Planning Commission input:

#### **1. Slow Down Traffic through the Neighborhood**

- Evaluate and implement physical modifications and signage to decrease vehicular speeds on Vallejo and Olive Avenues.

#### **2. Improve Pedestrian Safety and Walkability**

- Evaluate specialty paving and raised table crosswalks at key intersections to distinguish entry into the residential neighborhood and to slow traffic.
- Encourage and assist property owners with the planting of street trees in landscape medians where they exist and in front yards where planting strips do not exist, particularly Vallejo and Olive Avenues and Fourth Street. Consider options such as

discounted trees through bulk purchase and assistance with planting in exchange for maintenance of new street trees by property owners.

3. Strengthen Neighborhood Identity

- Explore the creation of gateway entries into the neighborhood with specialty paving, decorative features and/or signage.
- Explore options for unique signage or other amenities to identify the neighborhood.

4. Explore Potential for Additional Park Space

- Explore options to create an additional park/tot lot on existing vacant or underutilized parcels.
- Explore the creation of a path and overlook area utilizing existing City property at the top of the hill northwest of the neighborhood.

5. Prioritize Code Enforcement

- Enforce existing property use and maintenance standards to address vehicle storage, landscape upkeep and illegal commercial uses.

**Land Use Policies and Regulations**

The Study proposes revisions to the 1977 policy that has discouraged renovations to existing apartments and new development in the area:

6. Consider Designating Sub-Areas Differently

- Consider designating Clayton Court as a single-family land use and zoning district in recognition of its current development pattern.
- Consider a land use and zoning redesignation for the westerly side of First Street from Olive to Vallejo from Mixed Use to Medium Density Multi-Family (identical to the rest of the NW Quadrant neighborhood) which would eliminate the requirement for commercial development in recognition of its current development pattern which is almost entirely residential.

7. Refine Zoning Regulations to Ensure Compatible Development

- Consider elimination of the current policy which precludes redevelopment of properties that contain a “sound” single-family dwelling.
- Consider adoption of new form-based zoning regulations and design guidelines to ensure compatible development within the Medium Density Multi-Family density range (10-20 units/acre). These zoning regulations/design guidelines should result in new development which:
  - Is in scale with the existing neighborhood, limiting heights to two stories, calling for “house-form” buildings (duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes and bungalow courts) with maximum width and depth established for each building type to reinforce the small-scale residential character of the neighborhood and incentivizing smaller unit sizes;

- Is varied in physical type and design to provide interest and reinforce the diversity of the neighborhood; and
  - Results in an active street front where residents can meet and interact. Housing should be oriented towards the street with unit entries, porches and patios facing the street, with surface parking and garages towards the rear and not visible from the street and canopy trees planted in front yards and sidewalk planting strips where they exist.
- Consider revision of zoning regulations for non-conforming apartments in the study area to allow replacement of the existing number of units provided they comply with the new form-based criteria.
  - Consider revision of zoning regulations to provide incentives for retention of single-family homes such as allowing one additional dwelling on standard lot sizes.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

No environmental assessment is being prepared on the General Plan Focus Areas, which are intended to provide preliminary policy direction to City staff. However, CEQA analysis will be performed on the Draft General Plan, which will incorporate the preliminary policy direction for this area, as well as on policy alternatives prior to formal adoption of the new General Plan.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

1. Endorse the recommendations from the staff and the Planning Commission;
2. Direct staff to make desired revisions to the proposed recommendations; or
3. Direct staff to provide additional analysis and recommendations.

### **ATTACHMENT**

Draft Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood Study