City of Novato

General Plan 2035 Focus Area

NORTHWEST QUADRANT NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY

May, 2015

Why a Neighborhood Study?

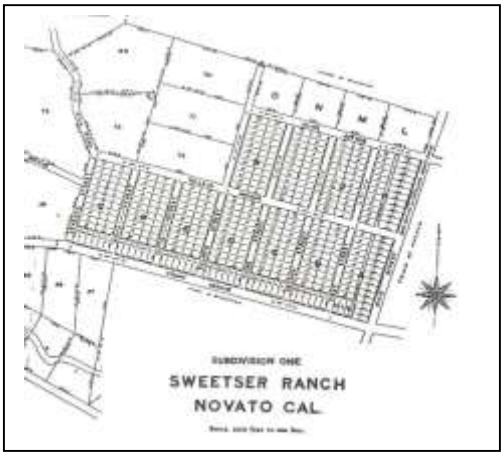
The Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood, north of the Grant Avenue business district, between First and Seventh Streets, has a mix of small, older single-family homes and 1960's-70's two-story apartment buildings. Its location is ideal: close to downtown services, transit and the new SMART station.

In 1977, in response to the rapid development of relatively inexpensive apartment buildings, the City prepared and adopted a Neighborhood Plan (Appendix 1) which precluded new apartment development if a "sound" single-family home existed on the property. The 1996 General Plan called for updating the neighborhood plan, and continued the policy of the 1977 Plan until that occurred.

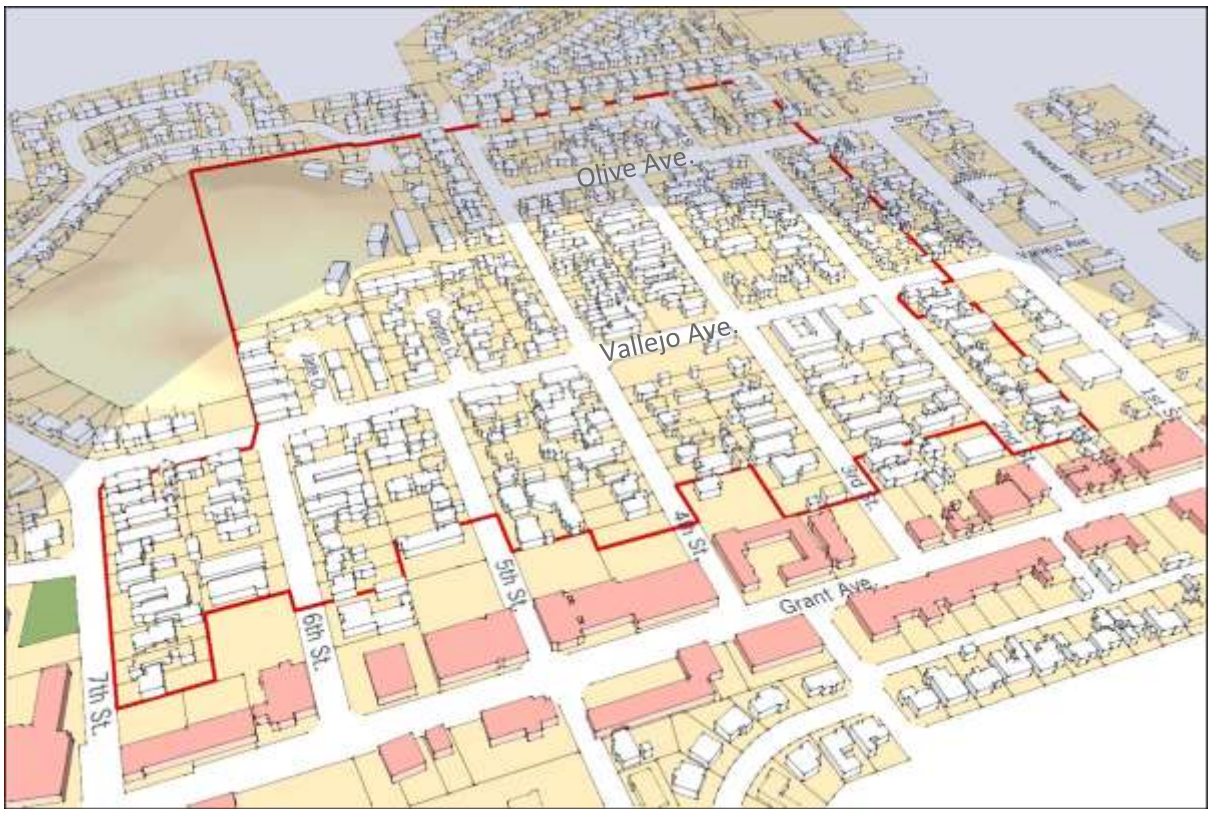
The City is now preparing an update of its General Plan, and has included the Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood as one of its Focus Areas. Similar studies have been done for the Redwood Boulevard Corridor, resulting in updated land use and design criteria for the new General Plan.

Neighborhood Analysis

The Northwest Quadrant neighborhood is an historic Novato neighborhood, originally part of the 15,000-acre Rancho de Novato which was purchased by Joseph Sweetser and Francis DeLong in 1856. In 1918 the Novato Land Company divided a one square mile portion of the Sweetser grain and alfalfa fields into individual parcels that could be purchased for a modest sum. By the early 1920's, the Sweetser subdivision was, according to the Novato Advance, "fast assuming an important residential, chicken and horticultural district" with homeowners who were "happy, hospitable and…satisfied with their lot in life."



The Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood is located north of the Grant Avenue Business District, between First and Seventh Streets, and extending north to Carmel Drive.



STUDY AREA

The area is generally flat and close to Downtown restaurants, services and transit, making it ideal for walking. There are 201 parcels in the study area, with 601 dwelling units. About half of the parcels are developed with single-family homes, and half with apartments. Only 20% of the properties are owner-occupied.

1977 Neighborhood Plan

In response to rapid changes in the neighborhood resulting from apartment construction in the 1960's and early 70's, the City of Novato prepared a Northwest Quadrant Plan in 1977. The Plan called for a "long-range land use policy for the Northwest Quadrant…to maintain a mixed residential area. The City's goal is to allow a relatively high population concentration to support downtown commercial enterprises, and offer less expensive housing in a location which is close to shopping, employment, transit and major collector streets." The Plan's "long-range policy takes into consideration the large number of existing single-family homes in the area…those single-family homes which are in sound condition should not be removed for apartment construction."

The adopted land use policies for the area limited parcels to two single-family homes per lot or a duplex, but allowed multi-family construction which "would not encourage the demolition of a sound dwelling" and "would not lead to the intrusion of apartments into a predominately single-family area." In cases where apartment construction could occur, the maximum allowable density was 22 units/acre.

The Plan also established a "Buffer Area" one property deep from the commercially-zoned parcels along Grant Avenue. The land uses in the Buffer Area were to include allowances for offices, institutions and "similar nonresidential uses," as well as residential development if not negatively impacted by the adjacent commercial businesses.

Neighborhood Development under the 1977 Plan

As a result of the land use limitations placed on multi-family development in the 1977 Plan, there has been virtually no new development in the past 35 years. In 2007 the property at 1112 Fourth Street was approved for the construction of 10 small two-story homes centered around a parking court and street-side common area. This development was possible due to the very dilapidated condition of an existing single-family home, which was allowed to be demolished and the site rezoned to a Planned Development district at a density of 14.5 units per acre.

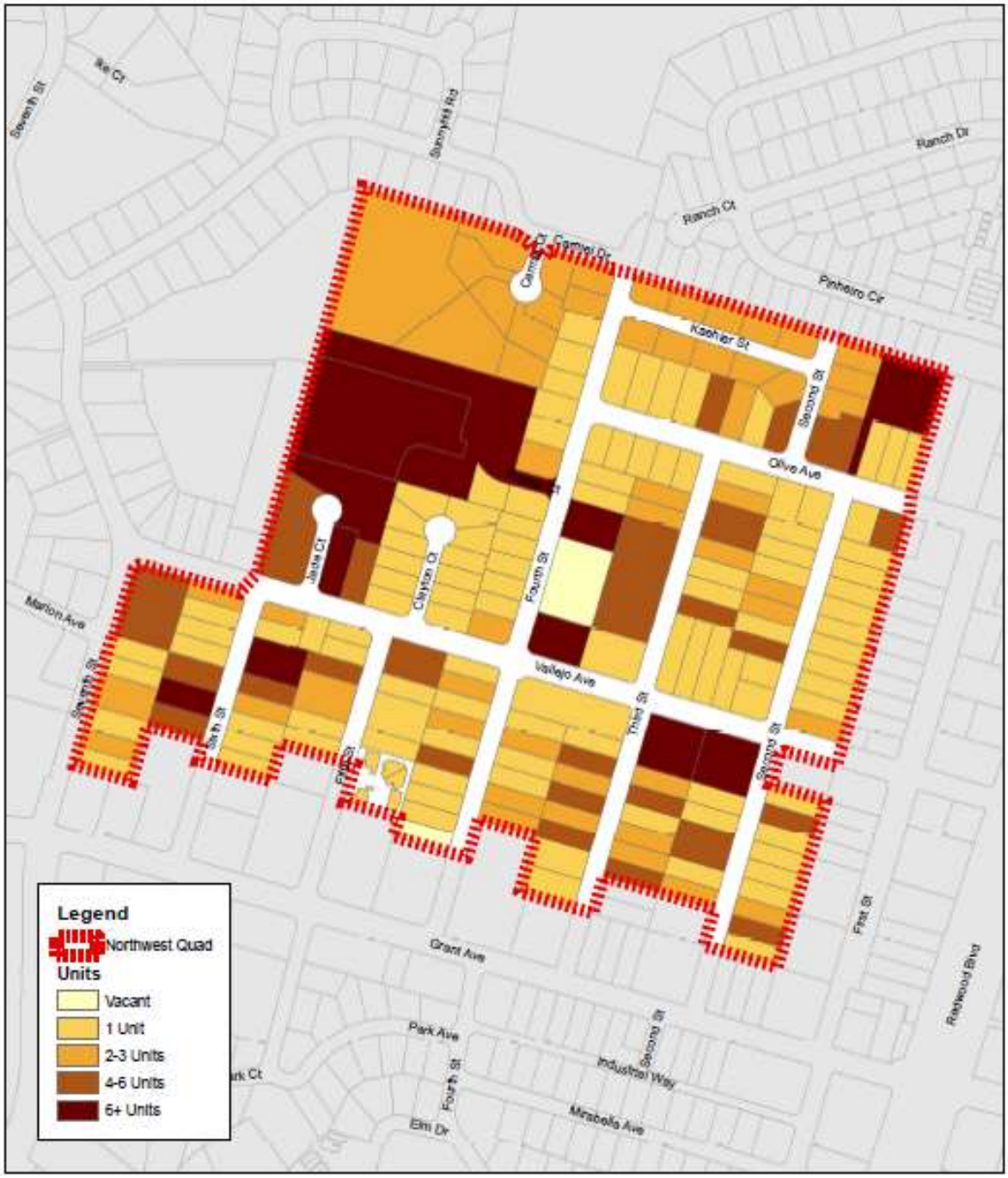
Surrounding Land Use Policies

Since adoption of the 1977 Neighborhood Plan, the City of Novato adopted a Downtown Specific Plan in 1998, calling for low-scale mixed use development, and implemented ground floor use limitations and implemented extensive upgrades to the Grant Avenue streetscape to promote a dynamic and pedestrian-oriented retail and restaurant environment.

More recently the City has conducted public design charrettes for North Redwood Boulevard, setting the stage for redevelopment of the former Shamrock and Dairymen's facilities, and held design workshops for streetscape improvements within this former freeway right-of-way.

Neighborhood Development and Densities

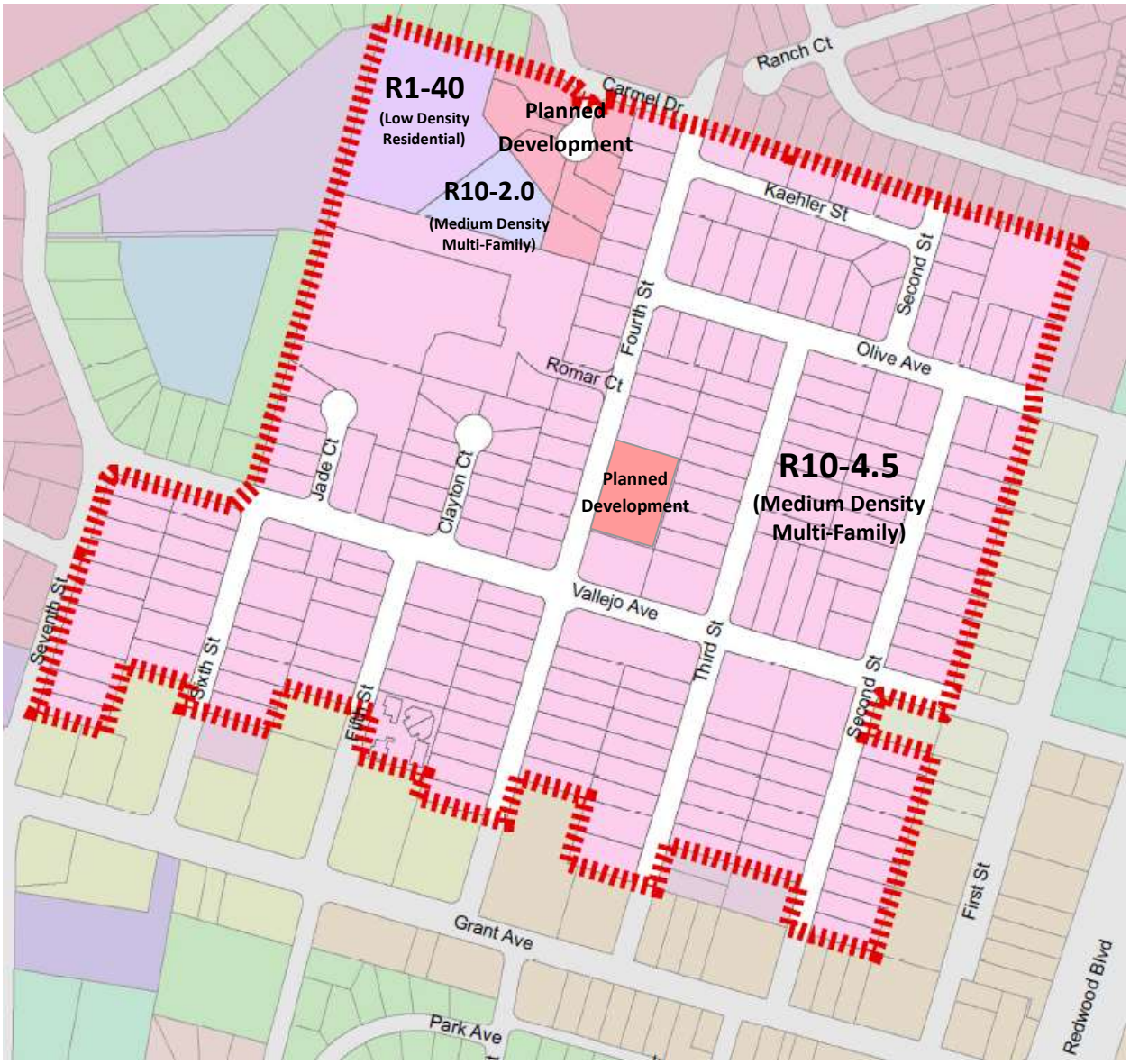
As noted above, the Northwest Quadrant today has a rather random diversity of housing types and densities. Densities on individual parcels range from 6 to 39 units-per-acre, and the average density of the entire neighborhood is 13.5 units per acre. A photo documentary of existing neighborhood character is included as Appendix 2.



EXISTING DENSITY

Zoning

The majority of the study area is currently zoned R10-4.5 (Medium Density Multi-Family), which allows one residential unit per 4,500 square feet of lot area, a density of 10 units per acre. A land-locked 1-acre sloped parcel behind the residences on Carmel Court is zoned R10-2.0 (Medium Density Multi-Family) allowing one unit per 2,000 square feet of lot area, a density of 22 units per acre. And a land-locked 2.5-acre hillside in the northwest corner of the study area is zoned R1-40, a low-density residential district allowing one dwelling per 40,000 square feet of lot size, or about one unit per acre.



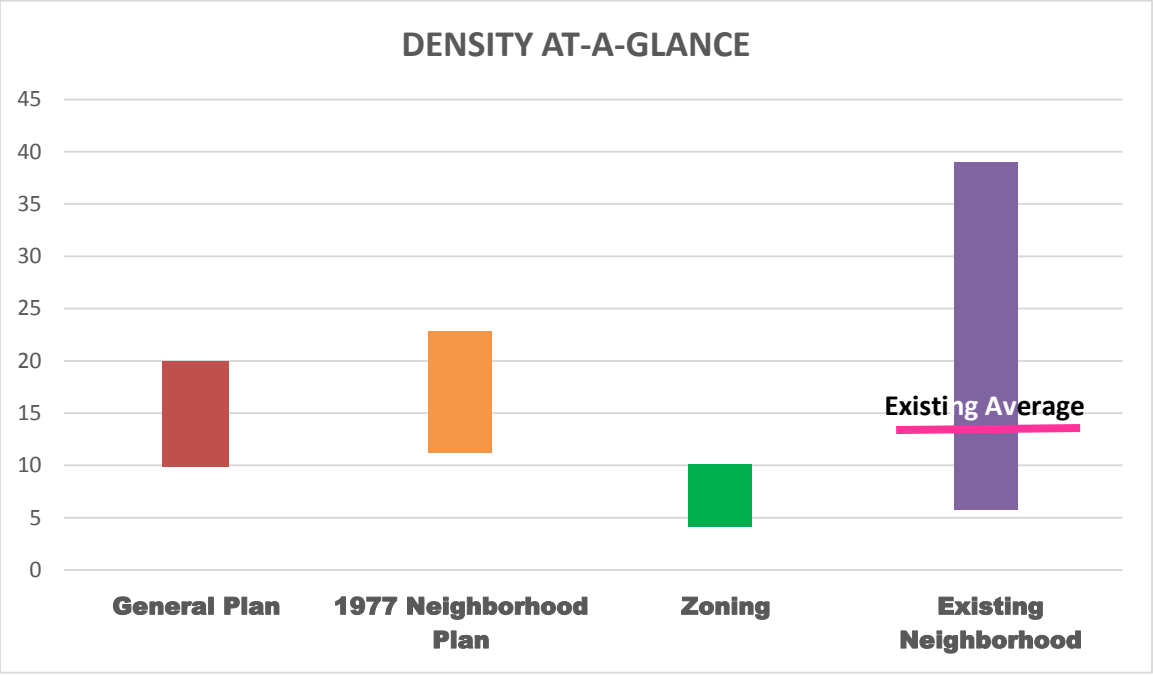
EXISTING ZONING

Most of the lots are small, narrow and deep – about 50 feet wide by 150 feet deep and 7,500 square feet in area. The current zoning permits one unit per 4,500 square feet of land area, so the typical lot only allows a single-family home. Some of the lots have small apartment

buildings, but many of these are “non-conforming,” since they exceed today’s allowable density and could not be rebuilt in the future with the same number of units.

General Plan

The General Plan designates the study area for Medium Density Multi-Family Residential, allowing between 10 and 20 dwelling units per acre. Land Use Policy 6 of the current 1996 General Plan continues the land use policies established in the 1977 Northwest Quadrant Plan, but called for an update of the Plan. Neither the update of the Plan nor the allowance for commercial uses in the Buffer Area immediately adjacent to the Grant Avenue commercial zoning were implemented.



Zoning Analysis

The R10 (Medium Density Multi-Family Residential) Zoning District is "intended for areas appropriate for a variety of medium density dwelling units, including multi-family, two-family and single family residences, either attached or detached." As noted above, the R10-4.5 District allows up to 10 units per acre and building heights up to 35 feet tall (3 stories). A minimum front yard setback of 20 feet is required, as is a 20-foot minimum rear yard and 10-foot side setbacks for two or three story structures. The zoning regulations are summarized below.

Existing Medium Density Multi-Family Residential District Regulations		
Max. Number Dwelling Units	1 du/ 4,500 sf of site area	
Min. Lot Area	6,000 sf	
Min. Lot Dimensions	60' min. width	
	100' min. depth	
Max. Height	35 ft	A
Min. Front Setback	20 ft	B
Min. Side Street Setback	10 ft, or 20 feet (bldg. height >20 ft, or for garage using side street access)	C
Min. Side Setback	6 ft (bldg. height <20 ft), or 10 ft (bldg. height >20 ft)	D
Min. Rear Setback	15 ft, or 20 ft (if rear property line abuts a single family zone)	E
Max. Building Coverage	40%	
Floor Area Ratio	n/a	
Multifamily Parking Count	1.2sp/studio; 1.5sp/1 bdrm; 2 sp/2 bdrm; 2.2 sp/3 bdrm; 1sp/ every 3 units for guests	F
Single-Family Parking Count	2 sp/unit; 1 in garage; 3 max.	F
Min. Open Space/Unit	500 sf (250 sf must be private)	

Notes:

Max. 50% paved surface area in front setback.

Allowable density reduced by 20 percent for lots less than 7,500 square feet or width less than 60 feet.

Typical Assumptions for Build-out Examples on Following Pages:

- *10-ft side setbacks are used to take advantage of 35 ft height limit, which allows for 11-ft tall ground floor and 10-ft tall upper floors.*

According to the General Plan, for the Northwest Quadrant: "... Allow multi-family housing only in cases where the City makes the following findings: (1) That the rezoning would not encourage the demolition of a sound dwelling.... (2) That the rezoning would not lead to the intrusion of apartments into a predominantly single-family area."

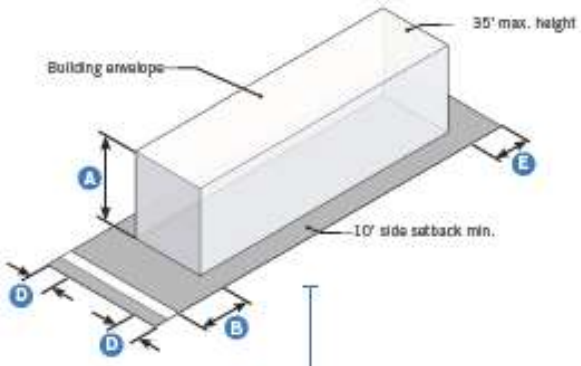
Photo showing neighborhood's existing random pattern of build-out

A large apartment building looming over a single-family home.

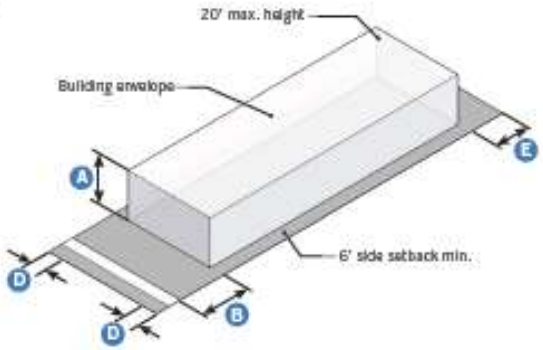
In order to better visualize and understand the existing zoning regulations and how fairly typical design solutions might result from these regulations, Opticos Design, Inc., the design consultants on this project, prepared the following "massing model" simulations of building layout and scale which could be built under the existing zoning regulations on lot sizes of 50'x150', 100'x150' and 150'x150'.

Small Lot Example: 50 ft x 150 ft

Allowable Building Envelope



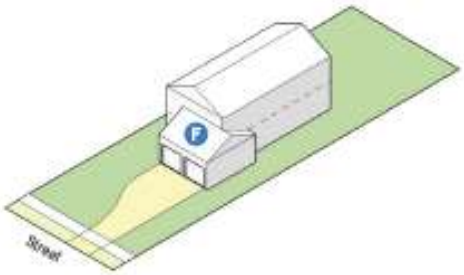
Alternate Allowable Building Envelope



- A Max. Height
- B Front Setback
- C Side St. Setback
- D Side Setback
- E Rear Setback
- F Parking

Limiting Factors
Min. Lot Area / Dwelling Unit

Typical Build-out Encouraged by Zoning



Scenario 1
- 1 large detached house
- 3 off-street parking spaces (all covered)

Scenario 2
- 1 medium detached house
- 3 off-street parking spaces (two covered)

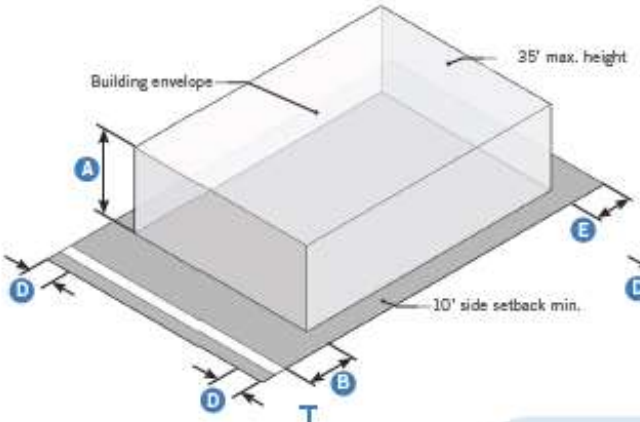
Development Scenario Statistics	
Lot Area	7,500 sq ft
Max. Number of Units	1 unit (Density= 5.88 du/acre)
Square Feet per Units Shown	4,500 sq ft/ 2,500 sq ft
Parking Required (and Shown)	3 spaces max. (1 in garage min.)
Building Height	35 ft/ 28 ft

Conclusions:

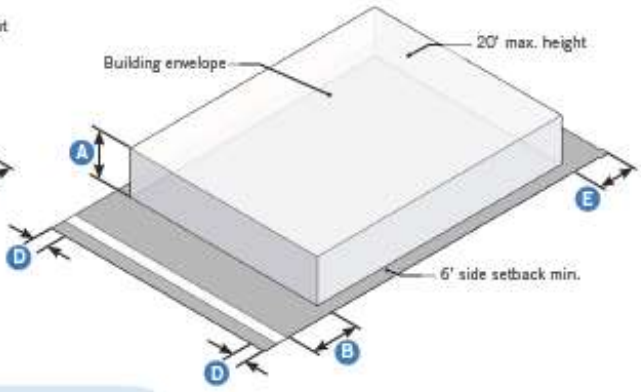
- *Code encourages large homes on small lots. This will become an issue as value continues to grow.*
- *Code encourages large drives and garages along streetscape.*

Medium Lot Example: 100 ft x 150 ft

Allowable Building Envelope



Alternate Allowable Building Envelope

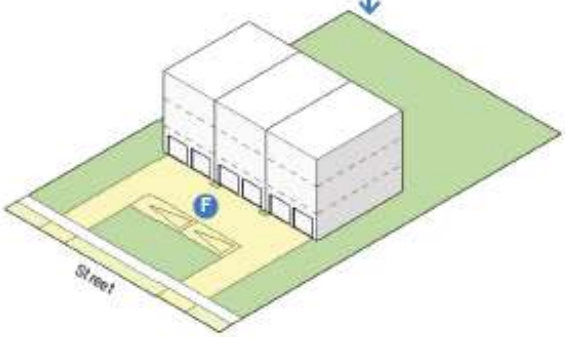


- A Max. Height
- B Front Setback
- C Side St. Setback
- D Side Setback
- E Rear Setback
- F Parking

Limiting Factors

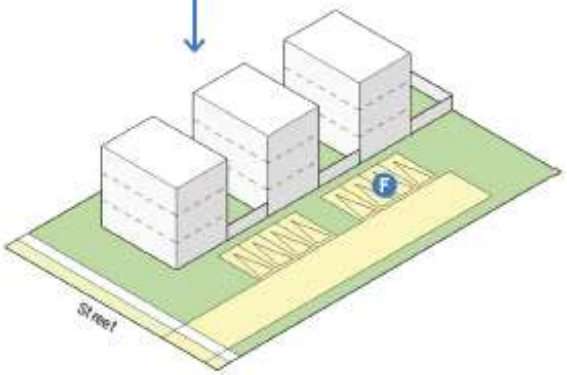
Min. Lot Area / Dwelling Unit

Typical Build-out Encouraged by Zoning



Scenario 1

- 3 attached townhouses
- 8 off-street parking spaces (6 covered)



Scenario 2

- 3 detached townhouses
- 8 off-street parking spaces

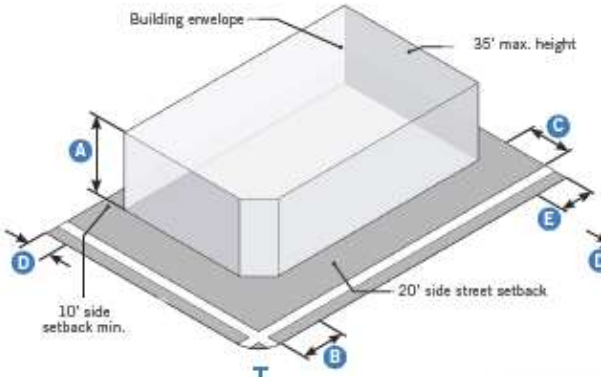
Development Scenario Statistics	
Lot Area	15,000 sq ft
Max. Number of Units	3 units (Density= 8.72 du/acre)
Square Feet per Units Shown	2,500 sq ft
Parking Required (and Shown)	8 spaces (2 guest)
Building Height	35 ft

Conclusions:

- *Most likely build-out scenario is a set of 3-story, flat-roof, detached houses.*
- *Build-out of 3 units is very economically inefficient so not likely viable.*

Medium Corner Lot Example: 100 ft x 150 ft

Allowable Building Envelope



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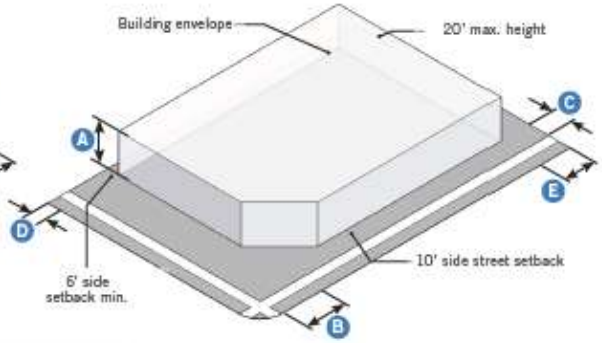

- A Max. Height
- B Front Setback
- C Side St. Setback
- D Side Setback
- E Rear Setback
- F Parking

Limiting Factors
Min. Lot Area / Dwelling Unit

Typical Build-out Encouraged by Zoning

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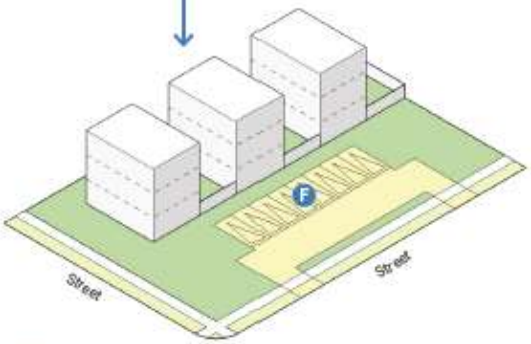


Scenario 2
- 3 detached townhouses
- 8 off-street parking spaces

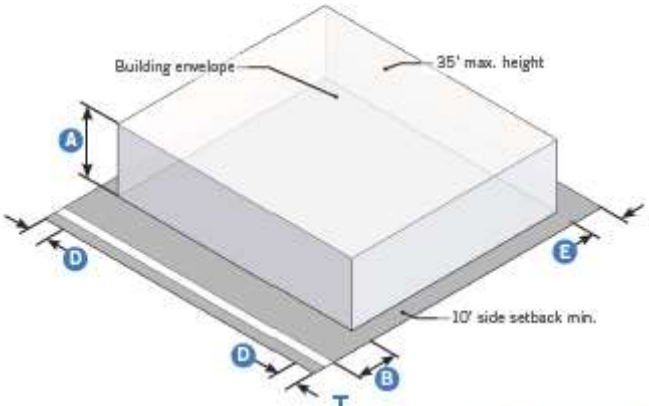
Development Scenario Statistics	
Lot Area	15,000 sq ft
Max. Number of Units	3 units (Density= 8.72 du/acre)
Square Feet per Units Shown	2,500 sq ft
Parking Required (and Shown)	8 spaces (2 guest)
Building Height	35 ft

Conclusions:

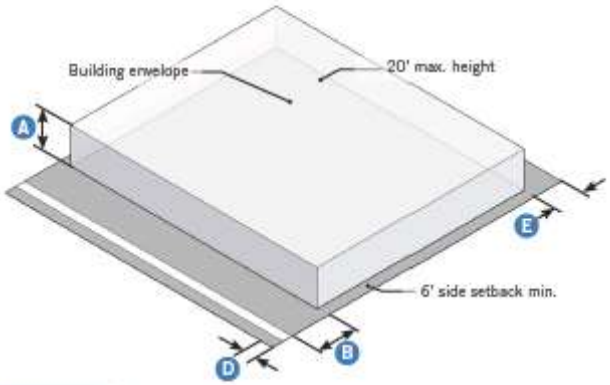
- *Large parking area or garages likely along both streetscapes.*
- *Most likely build-out scenario is a set of 3-story, flat-roof, detached houses.*
- *Build-out of 3 units is very economically inefficient so not likely viable.*

Large Lot Example: 150 ft x 150 ft

Allowable Building Envelope



Alternate Allowable Building Envelope

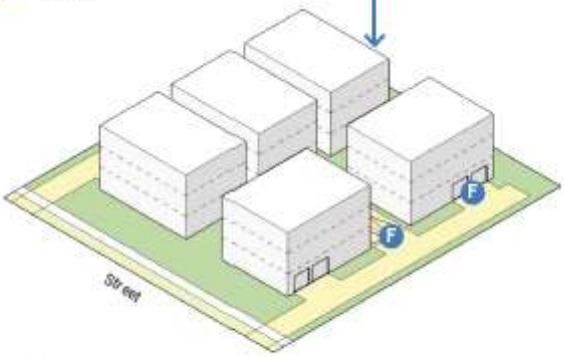


- A Max. Height
- B Front Setback
- C Side St. Setback
- D Side Setback
- E Rear Setback
- F Parking

Limiting Factors

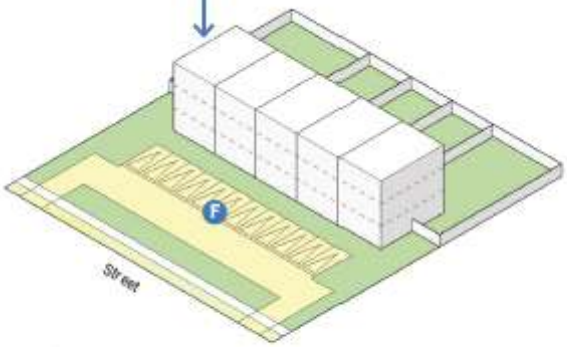
Min. Lot Area / Dwelling Unit

Typical Build-out Encouraged by Zoning



Scenario 1

- 5 large detached houses
- 12 off-street parking spaces (10 covered)



Scenario 2

- 5 attached townhouses
- 12 off-street parking spaces

Development Scenario Statistics	
Lot Area	22,500 sq ft
Max. Number of Units	5 units (Density= 9.67 du/acre)
Square Feet per Units Shown	3,500 sq ft/ 2,500 sq ft
Parking Required (and Shown)	12 spaces (2 guest)
Building Height	35 ft

Conclusions:

- *Most likely build-out would be 5 single-family detached units forced onto the site.*
- *Current regulations are not encouraging creative, well-designed infill solutions.*

Findings from Current 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 (see below) required a Planned Development rezoning.

Zoning Alternatives

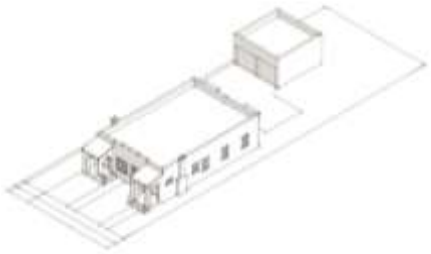
As part of the update of the neighborhood plan, Opticos Design, Inc. was asked to present alternative building forms and types that, based on their evaluation of the existing neighborhood character, might yield more compatible development in the future, particularly given many local examples of poorly design, constructed and regulated multi-family housing built in the past. Opticos specializes in creating form-based zoning codes which are more fine-tuned to local conditions and character, and which dictate acceptable building forms, thereby increasing predictability in the design review process.

Dan Parolek, founder of Opticos, encourages reconsideration of what he terms "the Missing Middle" housing forms of yesteryears. These are small multi-family dwellings that often have the character of larger single-family homes, but are less dense and monolithic than higher density apartment or condominium complexes. The "Missing Middle" range of housing types which lie between single-family and apartment/condo. Developments, including duplexes (stacked or side-by-side), fourplexes, sixplexes and bungalow courts. These are graphically depicted below:

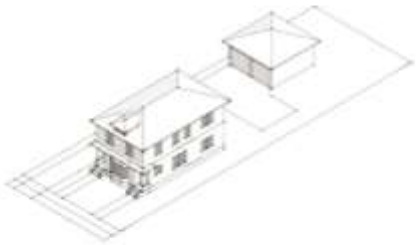
Housing Types

The following are representative images of the housing types which might be appropriate for consideration in the Northwest Quadrant Neighborhood:

DUPLEXES



Duplex - Side by Side	
Lot Width:	50 ft
Lot Depth:	150 ft
# Units:	2
Net Density:	11.6 du/ac
Height:	14 ft
Setbacks:	
Front:	25 ft
Side:	6 ft
Side (driveway):	12 ft
Rear:	27 ft
Parking:	2 spaces



Duplex - Stacked	
Lot Width:	50 ft
Lot Depth:	150 ft
# Units:	2
Net Density:	11.6 du/ac
Height: (to ridge)	14 ft
Setbacks:	
Front:	25 ft
Side:	6 ft
Side (driveway):	12 ft
Rear:	27 ft
Parking:	2 spaces

FOURPLEXES

Fourplex	
Lot Width:	50 ft
Lot Depth:	150 ft
# Units:	4
Net Density:	23.2 du/ac
Height (to ridge)	26 ft
Setbacks:	
Front:	25 ft
Side:	6 ft
Side (driveway):	12 ft
Rear:	0 ft
Parking:	7 spaces

COTTAGE/BUNGALOW COURTS

Cottage Court	
Lot Width:	100 ft
Lot Depth:	150 ft
# Units:	6
Net Density:	17.4 du/ac
Height: (to ridge)	14.5 ft
Setbacks:	
Front:	10 ft
Side:	10 ft
Side (driveway):	12 ft
Rear:	15 ft
Parking:	6 spaces

1100 Olive Avenue: The Olive Avenue Apartments is an example of a Bungalow Court type of development with 16 one-bedroom, 1 and 2-story apartment units clustered around a central open space at 20 units/acre. These affordable units are available to residents with disabilities.

Visual Comparison of Development Alternatives

To provide a visual comparison of potential development massing under existing zoning, General Plan allowances and a possible form-based alternative Opticos Design prepared the following massing models for two lot sizes.

50’ x 100’ Parcel:

Existing vacant parcel

Building massing potential under Current Zoning – 1 single-family home

Current potential under General Plan – 3-unit apartment, parking in front

Alternative housing type: Fourplex with parking behind

100’ x 300’ Parcel:

Existing vacant parcel

Building massing potential under Current Zoning – 5 three-story townhouses

Current potential under General Plan – 12 three-story townhouses

Alternative housing type: 14-unit Bungalow Court

Characteristics of Walkable Neighborhoods

The Northwest Quadrant has some characteristics which define a walkable neighborhood, including its proximity to downtown services and transit and its mix of housing types. However, opportunities exist when development or redevelopment occurs to further encourage walking or biking for improved mobility. The following were presented as physical characteristics of walkable neighborhoods:

Public Process

To facilitate informed public input into the update of the neighborhood plan two community workshops and a walking tour were held on March 14 and 25, 2015. All 600+ property owners were mailed fliers, each dwelling unit received a bilingual door hangar, and bilingual posters were displayed throughout the neighborhood and the downtown.

Approximately 60 persons attended the first workshop and walking tour, and about 40 attended the second. The first workshop entailed small group discussions and mapping of neighborhood assets, constraints and opportunities and a presentation by the consultant Dan Parolek of his analysis of the existing zoning regulations and design alternatives.

Based on the community feedback from the first workshop, the second workshop focused on a presentation of neighborhood objectives and possible solutions for community reaction. The results of the participant feedback is found in Appendix 3. In summary, the majority of attendees seemed very supportive of improvements to slow traffic on Vallejo and Olive Avenues, to improve code enforcement of neglected properties, and to consider zoning changes that would incentivize redevelopment that is in keeping with the lower-scale character of the neighborhood. Some residents, however, expressed concerns over possible redevelopment of existing single-family homes.

Vision Statement

"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 scale and diversity of residences (both single-family and small scale multi-family housing types) while preserving and enhancing the sense of community."

Neighborhood Objectives

1. Slow Down Traffic through the Neighborhood

- Evaluate and implement physical modifications (traffic calming techniques) 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.

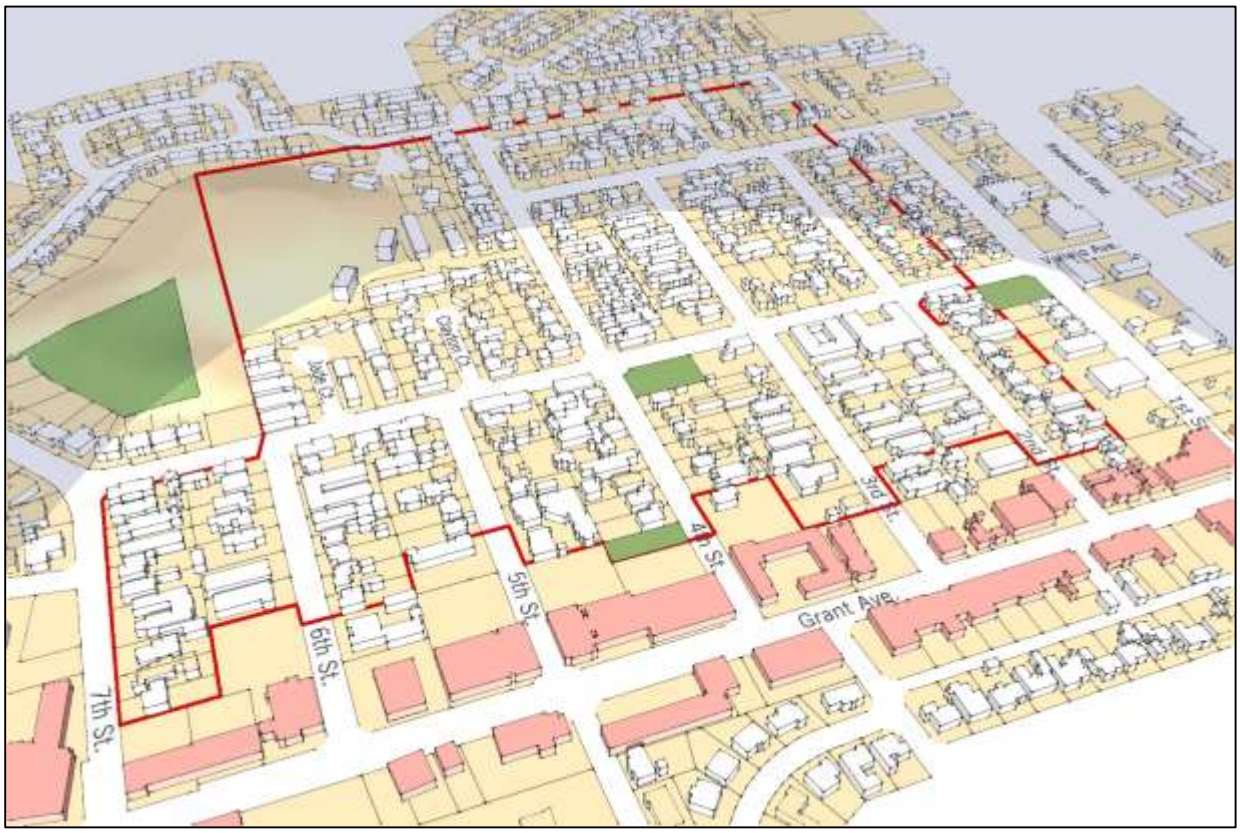
Examples of raised table crosswalks.

3. Strengthen Neighborhood Identity

- Denote gateway entries into the neighborhood with specialty paving, decorative features and/or signage.
- Explore options for unique signage 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.

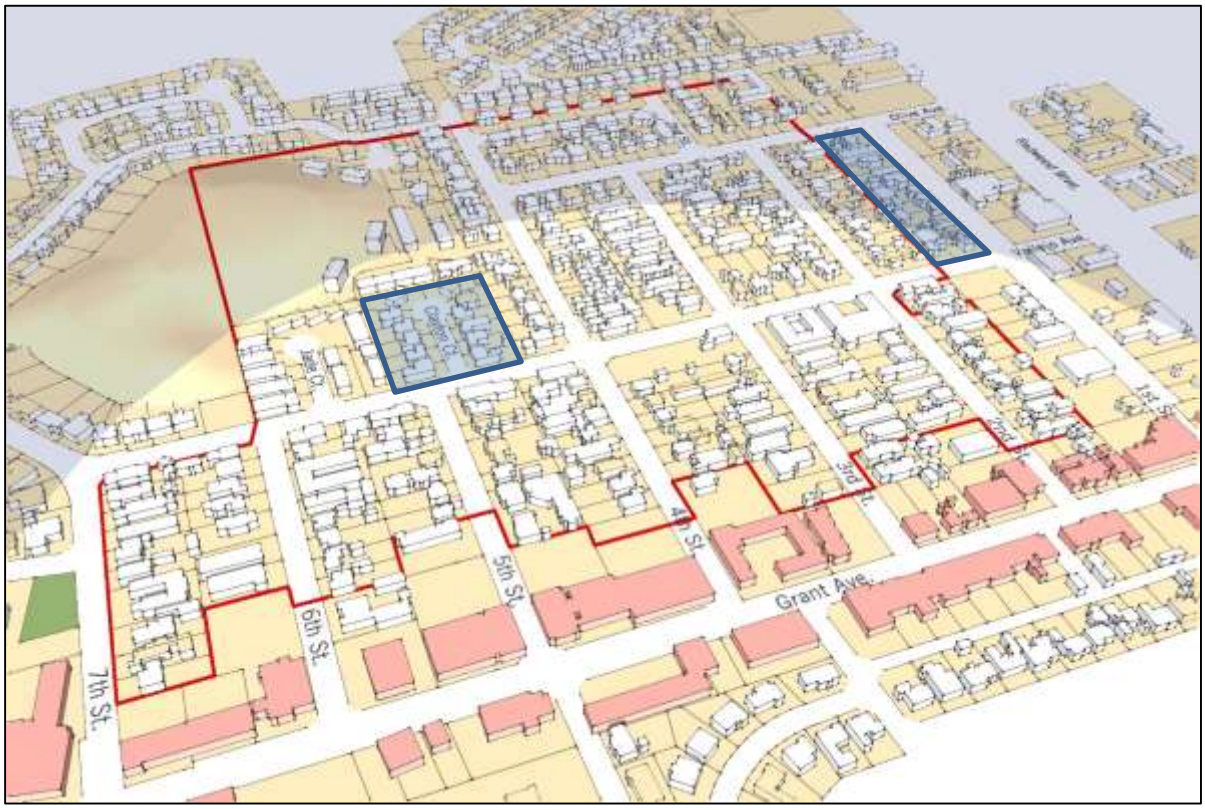


5. Prioritize Code Enforcement

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

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 or revision of the current policy which precludes redevelopment of properties that contain a "sound" single-family dwelling. Also consider incentives for retention of single-family homes, such as allowing one additional dwelling on standard lot sizes.
- Adopt 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 (single-family, 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,
  - 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, and
  - Careful consideration of privacy impacts and on-site parking requirements.
- Revise 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.
- Periodically evaluate new zoning regulations to assure that resulting development is compatible with the existing neighborhood.