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Update from Kate

Re-engaging Dialogue About the Future of the Seminary Property

I'm writing to let residents of Strawberry, as well as the wider Marin community, know about a series of meetings I have been holding over the past five months to discuss the proposed development at the Golden Gate Baptist Seminary property.

The application for the Seminary property is the largest land use proposal to come along in decades, if not a generation, here in southern Marin. During several Strawberry Design Review Board hearings, I heard strong views from the community about how a commuter high school and a range of rental housing might impact both current and future quality of life for residents, businesses, local schools and a host of community services.

In my experience, the focused study and input that must occur when there is a complex land use application that will shape a community for years to come simply can't be achieved in a gymnasium filled with 300 people and time limits on public comment. It was time to take a pause, restart the dialogue and bring it to a different setting. My idea was to explore the community's strong concerns in a smaller venue where it would be possible to have a more intimate discussion.

I invited a small group of residents from a range of neighborhoods, community groups and backgrounds to meet with me. I was looking for people who were committed to the Strawberry community, thoughtful and helpful, and who would contribute a range of perspectives and ideas. I also asked John Gibbs, a professional landscape architect and Principal of WRT, who had previously assisted with our Strawberry Vision process, to facilitate our meetings. The goal was to engage in a constructive, wide-ranging dialogue about the future of the Seminary property.

The participants in the group were clear that thoughts and opinions offered in these meetings were their own; these discussions, and statements made during these meetings, were in no way to be taken as speaking for the wider community. We all agreed that the community must be engaged in the process and consulted about the future of the Seminary property before any decision is made about what gets developed there.

Starting in mid-December 2016, we met for eight evenings at the Southern Marin Fire Station. The group agreed that keeping our discussions confidential was the best way to encourage a full and honest exchange of views, where all members felt free to brainstorm ideas and speak their minds.

Evenings included all-group conversations as well as small group discussions and exercises on a site map to explore various land uses and their compatibility with adjacent homes and neighborhoods. At one meeting we also had a brief presentation and discussion with a traffic engineer about the traffic generated by various land uses.

The group identified certain common values and core principals as goals of the community planning process. There is a desire to achieve a long term plan for the property, including the preservation of open space. Traffic generated by future uses on the site should not negatively impact existing residential streets near the site and connecting it to schools, shopping and Highway 101. Uses and development on the site should be compatible with existing community character, especially in relation to existing residential make up and adjacent single family homes. Areas of open space and dense trees, many of which are reaching maturity, need to be properly managed and maintained. The high cost of living constrains the ability of Marin's workforce to live in the area, impacting traffic and quality of life. The site provides opportunities for affordable housing, especially for the local workforce. A project of this scale and stature should demonstrate a high degree of sustainability through green building, resource (energy, water) conservation, and ecological protection.

For the final two meetings, we invited the property owner, Bruce Jones, North Coast staff and architect Mark Cavagnero to join the group to explore alternative concepts and ideas for the Seminary property. The dialogue has been positive, constructive and engaging. Potential uses discussed included a mix of housing, including affordable; senior housing from independent to assisted living; live-work arrangements to help reduce trip generation; art studio and café space; and other institutional uses (i.e. other than a commuter high school).

This small group discussion has given us a chance to think more broadly about how development on the Seminary site may be designed to serve legitimate goals of the property owner while maintaining and enhancing the vibrancy, spaciousness and beauty of this very special property.

The next step is to broaden the conversation to include the entire Strawberry community. Specifically, Bruce Jones and North Coast staff are proposing to conduct their own outreach, including hosting an open house at the Seminary property, to explore alternative concepts and ideas for the property with the Strawberry community.

I will continue to do everything I can to encourage a robust and meaningful dialogue that brings everyone together to create a future for the Seminary property that the community can be proud to live alongside in the years ahead.

Stay in touch, share this message with others and let me know your thoughts at ksears@marincounty.org or call me at (415) 473-7331.