

MARIN COUNTY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
PLANNING DIVISION

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Planning Commission

FROM: Alex Hinds, Director
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RE: Workshop on San Quentin Vision Plan

DATE: November 3, 2003

Background:

For the last 20 years the State of California has alternately proposed closing San Quentin and enlarging it. In 2001, the State analyzed the potential for reuse in a study conducted by the State Department of General Services. At the same time, the County had embarked on updating the Countywide Plan and it was recognized that, in the event that the State were to close the prison and surplus the property, the land use designations and associated zoning for San Quentin were out of date and should be updated to reflect current issues.

In 2002 the Board of Supervisors appointed a 14-member committee to evaluate the potential reuse of the San Quentin prison property in the event it was to be closed and craft policy recommendations for inclusion in the Countywide Plan update process. Discussions at a series of 13 monthly meetings and input received from the well-attended San Quentin Vision Workshop held in January, 2003, have resulted in the San Quentin Vision Plan (see attached).

Discussion:

Site Characteristics

The San Quentin property comprises approximately 275 acres and, besides the prison proper, includes the area of the shooting range on the west side of East Sir Francis Drake Blvd. and the northern slope of the peninsula ridge facing San Rafael east of East Sir Francis Drake Blvd. but excludes San Quentin Village.

There are approximately 200 buildings of various ages, construction type, and use. The oldest structures on the site date to the 1850's while the main cell blocks (the most prominent buildings on the site) were constructed in stages between 1913 and 1934. Many structures are of varying degrees of historic value. There are also 86 residences on site for prison staff.

The natural environment of the site has been severely disturbed over the years. The ridge has been quarried to provide stone to construct some of the early structures, and been excavated and topped to provide water storage. The area between the main cell blocks and East Sir Francis Drake Blvd. has been filled, and the shore has been lined with riprap to prevent erosion. While a comprehensive study has not been undertaken, it is assumed that there are several areas that could have substantial environmental contamination including the shooting range with lead and the industry shops with various solvents.

Being a developed site, there are significant resource consumption issues with the current prison operation including traffic generation, and water and energy consumption. With an average of 5,000 residents plus

custody and administrative staff as well as industrial operations through the prison industry authority, the prison is the largest user of water and electricity in Marin. While the mobility of inmates is severely limited, there is significant traffic generation from three shift changes each day for the custody staff along with inmate transportation to court hearings, offsite medical appointments, and other correctional facilities.

Focus of the Plan Recommendations

It was recognized that this site presents substantial opportunity to address many of the challenges facing Marin today including affordable housing, increased transportation choices, and a more sustainable development model. Its location on San Francisco Bay and proximity to major transportation routes deems it an appropriate location for a ferry terminal as well as an extension of the proposed SMART rail line. It was also recognized that the site is well-suited to provide much-needed housing, especially targeting affordable housing with convenient access to transit amenities. However, the site is also constrained by surrounding roadways being congested and a lack of basic services available near the site.

The many historic structures also present interesting challenges given the need to preserve portions of the site in its historic context although some structures may be suitable for adaptive reuse. While not discussed by the committee, the practicality of adaptive reuse and costs of rehabilitation could be substantial.

The Plan strives to avoid conventional suburban development as its model with the attendant traffic typical of an automobile-dependent design. Rather, the idea is to create a compact, mixed-use community where residents can get most of their basic needs taken care of on site as well as have easy access to their jobs by seamless transit connections. The Vision also provides regional benefits by linking Marin transit with other transportation networks in the Bay Area. At the same time, discouraging automobile use within the site is key.

It is also envisioned that the site could provide substantial opportunities for employing green building and renewable energy techniques. In addition, the site provides many options for cultural and educational facilities along with an open waterfront, a satellite college campus, performing arts center, and cultural arts facility could be integral parts of the community.

Key to all of the recommendations is the intent that the ultimate reuse of the site should not result in greater impact than what exists on the site when the State closes the facility. By providing a compact, transit-friendly community that features varied but quality design in its built environment, it is envisioned that a no-additional-impact philosophy can be achieved.

Community Characteristics

Referring to the conceptual site diagram, the Plan envisions a large open plaza as the focal point of the community. To the south is the combined SMART rail station and ferry terminal providing cross-platform transfers. Surrounding the remainder of the plaza are mid-rise, mixed-use buildings providing a mixture of residential units, supporting retail, and office space. Radiating further away from the plaza, building heights decrease and the greater emphasis is on housing with smaller public spaces interspersed throughout.

Along the shoreline is a broad public promenade providing visual and physical connection to the bay. A small marina and haul out space for boats is envisioned. Connections to the ridgeline are provided which has been kept as open space and provides spectacular views in a passive setting. There are trail connections as well to the open space properties above Larkspur Landing.

The historic main cell blocks along with many of the other historically significant buildings have been retained and incorporated into the community design. While some have been maintained to represent their historic use, others have been converted into other uses for community, educational, or cultural uses.

Policy Recommendations:

The policy recommendations contained in the Plan are organized similar to the Countywide Plan update structure. Key objectives to achieve the vision are:

Natural Systems

- Conserve, enhance, and restore appropriate plant and wildlife habitats
- Maximize the benefits of open space areas
- Maintain or improve the water quality of the Bay and Corte Madera Creek
- Reduce potential exposure to environmental hazards

Built Environment

- Create a new, world-class community
- Provide a variety of parks and green space amenities
- Promote an interconnected network of streets and paths to provide for a pleasant walking environment and disperse vehicle traffic
- Promote improvements to nearby roadways to increase ferry terminal convenience
- Respect on-site historical resources that tell the story of the prison's history
- Promote types of housing which support the creation of a pleasant, walkable village
- Exceed adopted requirements for providing affordable housing
- Promote alternative modes of transportation
- Utilize creative approaches and design to minimize the amount of parking necessary and have it blend into the community
- Promote the use of renewable, low-impact building materials
- Minimize resource consumption in the community
- Promote the development of energy-efficient buildings

Socio-Economic

- Provide cultural enrichment opportunities on the site
- Consider the creation of facilities as part of the new community to incorporate inmate rehabilitation programs
- Provide for child care and educational needs of the community and community at large
- Encourage economic diversity

Recommendation And Future Steps:

No action other than discussion and comment is required at this time. The Vision Plan, along with the minutes from this meeting will be presented to the Board of Supervisors in December. Ultimately, the final recommendations will be incorporated into the Countywide Plan as a special policy area and be brought back before your Commission and the Board for public hearings as part of the Countywide Plan hearing process early next year.

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