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November 25, 2014

Marin County Board of Supervisors
3501 Civic Center Drive
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SUBJECT: Planning Commission request for direction on Community Plan Update Strategy and draft Santa Venetia Community Plan

Dear Board Members,

RECOMMENDATION:

Consider concerns raised by the Planning Commission regarding the Draft Santa Venetia Community Plan and provide direction to staff and the Planning Commission regarding the issues raised in the attached letter written by staff in behalf of the Planning Commission. Because the Planning Commission's concerns relate to the County's previously approved strategy for updating community plans, the Board's direction should also offer guidance in a broader context for future community plan updates.

BACKGROUND:

On October 27, 2014, the Planning Commission considered the draft Santa Venetia Community Plan. Although Commission members found the plan to be attractive and informative, the Commission raised concerns that the plan does not provide adequate guidance on a number of issues. In particular, they agreed that the plan should include specific land use, density, and design policies for key sites in the community. There were also suggestions the plan should provide policy direction on issues such as flood control, sea level rise, traffic capacity and affordable housing. At the Commission's request, staff prepared a letter communicating their concerns in more detail, which is provided as Attachment 1.

In responding to the Commission, staff concurred that land use, density, and design are appropriate topics for a community plan to address. However, given the contentious nature of development in general and the high level of sensitivity surrounding "key sites" in Santa Venetia, preparation of the type of detailed guidance requested by the Commission would extend the plan process well beyond the 12 to 18 month timeline envisioned by the Community Plan Update Strategy (approved by your Board in 2012 and included with Attachment 1). Furthermore, preparation of the type of in-depth technical studies (i.e. traffic impacts, biological resources, geotechnical constraints, etc.) that may be necessary to provide meaningful and legally-defensible direction on issues such as development density and siting would

require more time and funding than has been programmed to date. Site specific development standards or zoning recommendations may also trigger environmental review (CEQA), which could also have significant time and cost implications.

Two issues in particular raised by the Planning Commission – flood control and traffic capacity of local roadways – are primarily within the regulatory purview of the Department of Public Works (by way of example, DPW staffs the flood control district for the Santa Venetia community and is the lead agency for the Gallinas Watershed Program which includes Santa Venetia). The division of labor within the larger County organization and the need to avoid duplication or the possibility of conflicting policies are important factors in deciding if and to what extent certain issues should be included in community plan updates as well as the ability of other County departments to commit resources toward providing their specialized expertise and coordinating separate, but related planning efforts if necessary.

The suggestion of including sea level rise in community plan updates raises the issue of how the County should sequence planning efforts in this area going forward. That is to say should the County: a) pursue a broad countywide sea level rise study prior to possibly addressing community-specific vulnerabilities and adaptation measures in community planning areas; or b) bifurcate the planning process by overlapping countywide and community specific sea level rise studies. Staff recognizes a benefit to focusing first on a countywide sea level rise study to ensure a coherent approach to addressing vulnerabilities and adaptation measures. Under this strategy, however, community plans could still address sea level rise by identifying key sites with development or redevelopment potential where sea level rise should be identified as an important issue to be studied in the future if and when a development proposal comes forward. This approach would not extend to developing specific design alternatives for adaptation strategies in advance of a countywide sea level rise study.

Finally, it was suggested that community plan updates consider potential affordable housing sites within the planning area. The Housing Element is the primary plan for identifying housing need and sites zoned for housing at a range of income levels in the unincorporated county, and community plans must maintain consistency with this element of the Countywide Plan. However, community plan updates present an opportunity to consider how and where additional affordable housing could be located within the planning area and to reflect the community's vision for inclusiveness.

SUMMARY

As noted in the attached letter, Planning Commissioners were in agreement that policies on land use, density, and design are important components of any community plan. Given the commitment of staff and financial resources necessary to work toward meaningful, widely-accepted guidance on such issues, your Board is being requested to provide further direction on the issues raised, and particularly the level of emphasis that should be placed on developing site specific policies for important properties that may exist within respective community planning areas. Central to the Planning Commission’s request is the question of how to respond to the Commissioners’ concerns while maintaining the overall objective of updating community plans through an efficient and cost-effective planning process that acknowledges the extensive planning tools currently available through existing plans.

Because the scope of planning issues may vary among community planning areas, staff is not recommending an across-the-board mandate for site specific development standards in all community plans. Community plans have and should continue to be the product of a collaborative process between the community and the County. In this context and in response to the Planning Commission’s concerns, it may be appropriate to refine the Community Plan Update Strategy to incorporate additional steps early on in the process to ensure more consistent and realistic expectations among the Board, Planning Commission, staff and the community. Such measure could include:

- Initial identification of community trends and issues, including any “key sites” for which site-specific development guidance may be appropriate
- Early consultation with the Planning Commission and Board to prioritize identified issues, review financial and legal considerations, and obtain staffing commitments from other County departments where appropriate
- Development of a realistic community-specific timeline and budget incorporating adequate staff and funding levels to address selected issues

Should your Board support this approach, staff would prepare more detailed amendments to the Community Plan Update Strategy for your consideration at a later date.

SIGNATURE:

Reviewed by:

Christine Gimmler
Senior Planner

Brian C. Crawford
Director

Attachment 1 – Board letter on behalf of Planning Commission, dated November 10, 2014, with attachments (including Community Plan Update Strategy and Draft Santa Venetia Community Plan)