**Communities By Design**, a nonprofit 501c(3) training and education organization, in cooperation with the **City of Redwood City**, is pleased to present:

# The Forum at Redwood City

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN

## Is Smart Growth Possible in California? One Small City's Herculean Tale of Transformation

2006-07 SEASON: FORUM #5
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2007
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On February 7, 2007, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted its fifth presentation of the 2006-2007 Forum season. The presentation was given by planner and innovator Stephen Lawton, Community Development Director of Hercules, CA. Mr. Lawton related his success in transforming the City of Hercules from a stagnant former explosives industry hub into a vibrant community, using Smart Growth principles. Interweaving his story with the context of California's development history, Mr. Lawton introduced the many factors that aligned to make Smart Growth a success in Hercules. He then extended his experience to speculate on whether Smart Growth is realistic for the rest of California, restating the titular question as, "Is California *ready* for Smart Growth?"

Mr. Lawton began with a brief introduction regarding the current state of place in California, expressing the need to address issues that arise from disinvestment in central cities and the spread of placeless sprawl. We are seeing increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and a notable erosion of society's built heritage. In response to these realities, Mr. Lawton pointed to the importance of restoring urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, reconfiguring sprawling suburbs into communities with real neighborhoods and diverse districts, conserving natural environments, and preserving our built legacy.

**The Hercules Story**
Hercules' eight square miles – located 25 miles northeast of San Francisco – are home to 23,000 people. The city's incorporation in 1900 was tied to the history of the dynamite industry, which had established a factory there. Explosives manufacturing ended in 1964, leaving 450 acres of undeveloped land in the middle of town. As was typical of the era, other development in Hercules had centered around the automobile, and the City was left with a challenged economic base, and empty storefront islands amidst oceans of unused parking.

Given this challenge, the planners of Hercules undertook the intensive and ambitious process of transforming their community. They held multiple stakeholder meetings and conducted a design charrette. Developers got the go-ahead from the City on the condition that they would create honest, good space.

> "Developers got the go-ahead on the condition that they would create honest, good space."
> -*Stephen Lawton*

The City of Hercules adopted the very first form-based code in the State, which specified street configuration, lot configuration, building placement, and building volume. They paid careful consideration to street types and connectivity. The General Plan identified four new districts with legible centers and edges: the Waterfront District, Central District, Hilltown, and New Town Center.

Mr. Lawton went into detail using the example of the Waterfront District. The City of Hercules benefited from a cooperative relationship with a single, long-tenure landowner with a long history of planning collaboration with the City. The resulting Master Development Value Model was a progressive one, recognizing in its text that, "value accumulates by placemaking." The Value Model also stated "reliance on City for compliance," and "assume[d] persistence of vision by City," and placed a value on "public/private shared uses."

The first phase of Waterfront development resulted in successful high-density housing (up to 27-30 dwelling units per acre). Reluctant to take full credit for the success of the development, Mr. Lawton offered "it couldn't hurt that we were selling new houses in the core Bay Area during the 2002-04 housing boom, but we'll take all the credit we can get." Form-based code and architectural controls established by the town architect ensured cohesiveness in the design-build process, and easy actualization by production builders.

The second phase of development in Hercules introduced more live-work complexes. Later, the third phase took a transit-oriented-development focus with multifamily attached housing centered on a commercial street. Public spaces were also very important, including parks, community centers, libraries, and transit centers. On transit, Mr. Lawton noted, "transit works best when people can just walk on instead of driving to the station." Invisible transit is the ideal, as opposed to the large parking lots we see around BART stations.

Hercules' success is perhaps most aptly noted by the observation that people actually *want* the City Council to allow development. There is solidarity around the plan and understanding of the intention behind it. This stands in stark contrast to many other parts of California, where potential development can often lead to protests and lawsuits.

**Lessons Learned**

Following the Hercules story, Mr. Lawton offered an analysis of what worked and what didn't, and what factors may apply to redevelopment efforts elsewhere.

Using the analogy "the music is not in the piano," Mr. Lawton stressed the importance of the people involved, their ability to communicate and cooperate, and the greater process for planning.

> "It's not the code [that matters], it's the people that operate the code."
> -*Stephen Lawton*

Mr. Lawton noted that having a town architect is essential. A town architect is in touch with the City's objectives, invested in the quality of design, and can help to ensure town-wide consistency of vision. He

can “talk the talk” with all the professionals involved, minding the details and overseeing projects through construction.

In the way of harder lessons learned, Mr. Lawton cautioned, “Know the fire department!” Planning must always account for building code, fire code, and the public works process.

Hercules initiated “continuous learning” (ongoing visits to other towns) as an adaptive response to some of their difficulties. Mr. Lawton believes that outside ideas and influences are an important element to the health of a city’s development process.

Mr. Lawton also stressed the importance of redevelopment tools, including tax increment financing, affordable housing programs, parking management programs, and regional partnerships with institutions like BART Property Development, CalTrans Project Management, the Capitol Corridor, and the Water Transit Authority.

> “None of this is possible without the tools of redevelopment.”
> *-Stephen Lawton*

Mr. Lawton said it is necessary to pledge the tax increment of development back into infrastructure demands. The ability to combine parcels is also essential. With small parcels, you welcome strip developments and discourage high density. Combined infrastructure can lead to stacked parking and taller buildings. Of course this requires that the City and developers take a leap of faith that there will be a market.

**Process Evaluation**
Mr. Lawton shared a metric for process evaluation, which listed categories including: Initiative Taking, Policy Setting, Coding Adoption, Administration, and Renewal, all considered at scales ranging from single building all the way up to the regional scale.

Applying this metric to the Hercules experience, he identified supportive forces as Hercules’ City Council, Planning Commissioner, and City Manager; charrette governance; the Waterfront developer; and new citizen aspirations. Opposing forces included ‘administrative anorexia,’ or lack of sufficient administrators to properly manage all development to the degree of detail truly necessary; fiscalization of land use, staff processes, CHP shortcomings, the fire district, and business occupancy. While these factors defined Hercules’ operating context, each town will have their own unique set of supporting and opposing forces.

**So is Smart Growth Possible for California?**
Mr. Lawton pointed out that the *real* question is whether California is *ready* for Smart Growth. California needs to change the process before it can change the result.

A first step would be ascribing to the New Urbanist model, one committed to ending the generational challenge of sprawl brought on by auto-centered development. This is a challenge of “national scope and effect, with global pretensions.” New Urbanism influences residential development and thoroughfares. Housing that is affordable by design, and infill developments are also encompassed in the charter. LEED-ND, a new set of LEED standards for Neighborhood Design will follow the principles of New Urbanism.

Mr. Lawton also believes in the Transect Model, a planning paradigm based on natural progressions between uses, habitats, and settlements, as opposed to separate zones for separate uses with the resulting problem of getting from place to place. “Zoning is an artifact

of the financial services industry," says Mr. Lawton. We need to "grow places that have centers and edges, not places that have no place."

Mr. Lawton presented graphic depicting different trends in development along a timeline with marked generations. Children being born today have no exposure to the healthier, walkable cities of the past. The graphic illustrated the potentially permanent disconnect we're establishing between people and real places. The problem is today's generation might look at auto-oriented sprawl and say, "What's the problem? I have a car, so I can get there." The human sense of place is fading, but according to Lawton, it can be revived. "The good news is change can happen very quickly – within a generation."

> "Great places can only be built if they exist in all of our minds."
> *-Stephen Lawton*

California has vast real estate resources, and commendable planning regulations and practices. But it also has liabilities of limited choice of buildings & thoroughfares, housing supply & affordability, mobility problems, global competitiveness, and places not worth caring about. Howard Jarvis's taxpayer initiatives of the 1970s have created an unfavorable financial infrastructure for healthy development.

Place is produced by private interests, affected by consumers, competition, suppliers, technology, and legal regulatory legislative (LRL). LRL is essentially local governments acting on behalf of the participating public, influenced by NIMBY fights between people who consume place, and people who produce place. Local governments are also constrained by regulatory and infrastructure agencies. The difficulty with the Transect Model is that it's really hard to achieve if there isn't one master developer with a broad vision and the control to implement it.

Lawton reminds us that much of the credit for his success with Hercules is owed to preexisting factors such as an unusual public/political consensus, the "greenfill" donut condition, a big palette with few neighbors, the redevelopment tools in place, and the natural geology, hydrology, and topography of the region. There were also "luck" factors that kept developers away from the center of town until the land value went up. But, Mr. Lawton joked, "luck favors the prepared."

While California as a whole may be missing many of the factors that allowed Hercules to affect almost immediate positive change, the way to initiate such change on a statewide level is by taking individual action. Mr. Lawton urged participants to share ideas, make the arguments, take advantage of the institutions we have in place, and assert the place-based economy. We must take a generational view as we create new places and narratives. Mr. Lawton concluded with the final observation that in light of global warming pressures, "I think there's starting to be a push for it."