The Greater Downtown

The greater Downtown is located in the northeastern section of the City, separated from the Bay by Highway 101. Redwood Creek enters the DTTP area at Maple Street at El Camino, entering an underground culvert at the Caltrain railroad. At Bradford near Main Street it daylights again and flows under Veterans Boulevard and Highway 101 and out to the Bay.

The Downtown area itself is the City’s most urban district and, at 183 acres, fits roughly into the ¼ mile radius generally prescribed as the ideal size to insure a pedestrian friendly, walkable district and good transit access. This radius defines the maximum comfortable walking distance to and from shops, residents and workplaces, making it about a 10 minute walk from end to end. To the north of Downtown lies conventional suburban commercial development, while low and medium density residential neighborhoods surround Downtown to the west, south, and east.

Access and Visibility

Despite direct auto access to Highway 101 from Veterans Boulevard, and the fact that El Camino Real runs through the district, Downtown Redwood City is difficult for motorists to find. From Veterans Boulevard, the intersections with Middlefield Road, Jefferson Avenue, and Main Street that provide major access to Downtown from Highway 101 are nondescript and indistinguishable from others. Similarly, the Downtown stretch of El Camino Real, more than 500 feet in length, contains only three intersections with access to the Downtown Core. The Jefferson Avenue and Maple Street intersections lack a strong identity, whereas the intersection at Broadway presents a better effect with the presence of a gateway monument. However, when entering Downtown along Broadway from El Camino, traffic is directed along Marshall Street, bypassing the Downtown Core.

Pedestrian access from neighborhoods southwest of the Downtown district is also limited. El Camino Real’s wide, auto-oriented character and high traffic volumes present a substantial deterrent to pedestrians, who are fortunate to have a limited number of safe and legal crossing opportunities. This impediment is exacerbated by the railroad tracks. Very few railroad crossings are present and they are primarily auto-oriented and do have many pedestrian enhancements. It should be noted, however, that several at-grade pedestrian railroad crossings have been recently improved with gates, tactile strips, and better striping.

Development Opportunity Sites

The Downtown presents many infill and redevelopment prospects for new investment to resolve the issues and build upon the strengths in the district. Sites with a high potential for redevelopment surround Sequoia Station Shopping Center and present the opportunity to reclaim and utilize land surrounding the railroad tracks while simultaneously integrating transit services into the street and pedestrian network. This includes the SamTrans bus terminal along James Ave, parking lots at the intersection of Winslow Street and Hamilton Street, The Middlefield Parking Lot, and the Franklin Street quadrant to the northeast, which includes a number of underutilized industrial uses with potential for redevelopment. Additional opportunity sites with high potential for redevelopment can be found east of Main Street between Broadway and on blocks between Marshall Street and Bradford Street.

Many more redevelopment prospects can be found throughout the Plan area. The majority of parcels along the southwest side of El-Camino Real have moderate potential for assembly and re-development. Underutilized parcels between the railroad tracks and El Camino Real north of Broadway have a prime location on the western edge of Downtown with potential for new investment. Most parcels on the blocks surrounding the historic Courthouse and much of the County Government Center are covered by surface parking lots and have a reasonable potential for infill and intensification. These properties and many others present good opportunities to build out the inconsistent building fabric and take advantage of land still available for infill development and redevelopment Downtown.
1.2.2. LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY

General Plan

A new General Plan was adopted by Redwood City shortly before the adoption of the Downtown Precise Plan. Great care was taken to ensure that the two documents were complimentary and consistent. The General Plan lays out a broad, generalized vision for Downtown as a dense, mixed use district which is walkable and well served by transit.

Zoning Ordinance

Prior to the adoption of the Downtown Precise Plan, the plan area consisted of the following district designations: Central Business Retail (CBR), Public Facilities (PF), Central Administrative (CA), Central Business (CB), General Commercial (CG), General Commercial Residential (CG-R), Neighborhood Commercial (CN), and High Density Residential (R-5), as well as two small precise plans. Additionally, much of the Plan area was surrounded by Medium Density Residential (R-4) and High Density Residential (R-5) zoning designations. These district designations governed building heights as well as permitted and conditionally permitted land uses. The arrangement of these districts was complex, without an overall discernable pattern.

Three levels of building heights were permitted in the district. PF and CN designations permitted heights up to 2 or 3 stories and 35 feet. The CA, CG, CG-R, and R-5 designations permitted heights up to 75 feet (6 or 7 stories). Finally, the CB and CBR designations permitted heights up to 100 feet, or about 9 stories. The permitted heights varied without an overall discernable form for the Downtown district. Furthermore, in a few locations the zoning district boundaries created an abrupt difference in permitted building heights between these designations and adjacent R-4 and IP zones that only permitted heights up to 45 and 50 feet respectively, or about 4 stories.

There was also little distinction between permitted uses from district to district. When considered together, these designations spread activity-generating retail entitlements throughout most of the plan area. Exceptions were the City and County-owned properties designated as “Public Facilities,” the two “Central Administrative” districts north of Marshall Street, and the parcels designated for high density residential between Franklin Street and the railroad tracks. Permitted and conditionally permitted Downtown housing was permitted on all parcels except for City owned “Public Facilities” and those designated as CG and CN on the south side of El Camino Real with residential units limited to upper floors in the “Central Business Retail District.” Not limited to the employment center surrounding the County Government Center, office uses, including public facilities, were permitted on all properties not designated as R-5 in the Plan area and limited to upper floors in the “Central Business Retail District.” Mixed Use was permitted on all but the PF and R-5 designated parcels, while corridor commercial and large scale retail uses were specifically targeted in the CG and CG-R designations along El Camino Real, but were generally permitted throughout the CB and CBR districts as well.
1.2.3. **Development Pattern**

**Land Use**

With the exception of the Franklin Street Apartments and the City Center Plaza apartments, there was very little housing in the Downtown Precise Plan area. The few exceptions were limited to mid-density residential and mixed use buildings along Maple Street and Main Street and a handful of low and mid-density residential buildings scattered around the Specific Plan area north of Broadway. In all, existing Downtown housing numbered 810 units.

Development to the north of Broadway consists of a mix of office, medical office, and institutional uses, including the County Government Center. Two parking garages along Veterans Boulevard serving private medical offices can be found in addition to two public parking garages along Walnut Street and Marshall Street. Throughout this employment district, entrances are much less concentrated and in some cases they are oriented towards surface parking lots on a parcel’s interior, such as at the County Government Center.

Mixed use development in the Downtown Plan area is limited to a few locations along Main Street and the Franklin Street Apartments on El Camino Real, where high-density residential development above ground floor retail and ground floor offices can be found.

With the exception of Sequoia High School, typical auto oriented commercial development, centered on the Sequoia Station Shopping Center, lines El Camino Real along the Plan area’s southwest border between Brewster Avenue and Jefferson Avenue.
Introduction

Redwood City Downtown Precise Plan

Building Fabric

The main concentration of contiguous urban development Downtown, characterized by little to no side yards and small or no front setbacks, occurs along Broadway from El Camino Real to Walnut Street. From the Caltrain railroad tracks to Jefferson Avenue and from Main Street to Walnut Street this intact urban fabric is mainly on the south side of the street. The strong urban development pattern extends from Broadway south on Main Street down to Middlefield Road, as well as limited portions of Broadway’s side streets, Winslow Street, Harrison Street, Middlefield Road, and Jefferson Avenue.

With the exception of these areas, the building coverage in the Downtown Plan area is inconsistent and lacks definition. Larger scale development with deep side yards and front setbacks are typical along most other Downtown streets. South of Broadway, El Camino Real is particularly spread out with Sequoia High School and Sequoia Station Shopping Center presenting long stretches of undeveloped street frontage. Instead of buildings creating a defined street-wall, setback areas throughout much of the Plan area present surface parking lots. This treatment is noticeable at the County Government Center, Sequoia Station Shopping Center, and along the north side of the railroad tracks from Broadway to Main Street. However, it is especially evident along much of the north side of Broadway, where it contrasts strongly with the consistent pattern on the south side of the street.

Adjacent to the plan area along Brewster Avenue, Maple Street, and south of El Camino Real, is primarily small scale residential development set back from the street and neighboring buildings with front yards and side yards.
Building Heights

Currently, Downtown Redwood City has quite varied building heights. Generally speaking, most buildings are 1 to 2 stories tall. However, there are many exceptions to this. Some historic buildings are three stories tall, notably the Alhambra Theatre, the Odd Fellows Building, the Sequoia Building, and the Sequoia Hotel. In the center of Downtown, the Historic Courthouse, and the Fox Theatre rise to about 50 feet with the Courthouse dome rising to 113 feet.

Several multifamily housing buildings, scattered throughout the Plan area, are 3 to 5 stories tall. Examples include Franklin Street Apartments and Montgomery Villa on El Camino Real, and City Center Plaza and Redwood Plaza on Main Street. Older examples exist on Perry Street, Bradford Street, and Walnut Street.

Medical offices and their adjacent parking garage rise to 4 and 5 stories at the northeast corner of the Plan area near Kaiser Hospital. A few mid to late 20th Century office buildings (specifically those at Arguello and Bradford, Marshall and Jefferson, and Veterans and Jefferson) punctuate the skyline at 5 to 6 stories. Finally, the County Government Center contains 4 to 10 story buildings in the north-central portion of Downtown, particularly along Winslow Street.

While buildings up to 100 feet in height (about 9 stories) have been allowed for several decades, inefficiencies in the zoning codes, as well as market factors, have prevented most new development from rising to these heights. Furthermore, when taller buildings have been built they have been spread throughout the Downtown area, preventing a cohesive physical form from developing, leaving the area rather shapeless and undistinguished.
Activity-Generating Frontages

Private Frontage refers to the ground floor of buildings. This is the portion of the building with which people interact as they travel from the sidewalk, public open space, or a parking lot and enter the interior of the building. The design of the private frontage, and the arrangement of the associated uses within the buildings, determines many of the most important aspects of the urbanism of a place, particularly whether a street is lively or dull.

Inactive frontages are those through which few people, or no people, pass. Examples include blank walls, secondary entrances, service entrances, garage entrances, and fire exits. Active frontages are those through which many people pass, such as storefronts, stoop entrances, and common entrances to upstairs residential, office, or hotel uses.

The Activity Generating Frontage map illustrates the current pattern of active frontages in Downtown. Red triangles represent the most active frontages, such as restaurants, theaters, retail shops, and salons. Yellow triangles represent frontages that produce slightly less activity, such as residential units and office space. Distinct patterns are clearly visible.

El Camino Real, while considered an automobile dominated street, has in some locations a fairly high concentration of sidewalk-oriented, high activity frontages, particularly from Brewster to Broadway and from Jefferson to Maple. There are, however, in these areas substantial gaps in the activity, and there isn’t any one particular stretch that has the high concentration of active frontages necessary to foster high levels of pedestrian activity. The east side of El Camino, between James and Jefferson, follows a conventional automobile-oriented pattern, with active frontages fairly disbursed, and oriented toward parking lots rather than public sidewalks.

Broadway and Main Street are Redwood City’s historic commercial streets, and the pattern of frontages reflects this. The vast majority of these streets have buildings with a dense pattern of highly active frontages oriented to public sidewalks, particularly Broadway from El Camino to Main, and Main from Broadway to Middlefield. Some of the immediate side streets near Broadway also exhibit a similar pattern, such as Winslow, Middlefield, and Jefferson. There are, however, significant gaps in the activity, especially the north side of Broadway from Middlefield to Winslow, which has only three entrances for a 500 foot long stretch.

Elsewhere, particularly north of Marshall Street, the frontage pattern is much more dispersed and less active. Many of the buildings are pedestrian oriented, however, with active frontages lining the public sidewalks, but they are spaced farther apart and generate less activity. For the most part, this is an acceptable pattern which places the Downtown core in its role as the heart of Downtown. However, there are some buildings which are oriented toward parking lots and which do not contribute the pedestrian convenience or sidewalk activity in a significant way. Most of these buildings were constructed after the 1950s, when the automobile became the central focus of development, but prior to the City’s renewed commitment in the 1990s to making Downtown a walkable, compact place.
1.2.4. Architectural Context

The architecture of Downtown Redwood City is made up of buildings from different periods and of different architectural styles that add up to an eclectic mix. Within this context, several concentrations of particular architectural expressions and significant buildings exist that are recognized by the community as representative of Downtown Redwood City character.

This is most clearly expressed by the architectural character and styles of significant buildings in the Downtown core such as the historic Courthouse, the Fox Theatre, the Public Library, and Sequoia Hotel. There is a corresponding community preference for buildings that reflect the context of this historic architecture throughout the surrounding areas. This character can be seen in many of the storefronts along Broadway and Main Street.

To the north, dominated by the County Government Center, many larger scale office, medical office, and institutional buildings incorporate materials and imagery of more contemporary design. While to the south along El Camino Real, the more generic architecture and auto dominated development typical of commercial corridors can be found.
Public open spaces are very important to the life of a community. They provide places for people to gather, relax, retreat from the excitement of the city, and to enjoy recreational activities. There are many forms of public open spaces. In traditional urban districts, such as Downtown Redwood City, public open spaces take the form of off-street facilities, such as parks and plazas, as well as the streets themselves. While streets are a critically important form of public open space—and their improvement through the calming of traffic and provision of adequate pedestrian amenities is of utmost priority—this document will use the term public open space to refer to off-street facilities only. It is also important to note that the term public open space is used in the DTPP to refer to facilities owned and operated by the City or another public agency, and are open to the general public at all hours or most hours. It does not refer to privately owned and operated spaces.

Downtown is currently served by seven small parks within the borders of the DTPP. Six plazas are also located Downtown, as well as one paseo. In all, there are about 4.12 acres of off-street public open spaces within Downtown. Outside of the DTPP boundary, but within a very easy walk of Downtown properties, are an additional three small parks, as well as the large park at Sequoia High School. These spaces outside of Downtown which contribute to its usable public open space supply total about 8.24 acres.

Currently, almost 61% of all Downtown parcels are within a one minute walk of a public open space. 96% are within a 3 minute walk, and all Downtown parcels are within a 5 minute walk. Proximity, therefore, is very good, although accessibility is problematic in some areas. In an urban context, streets provide the connections to public open spaces, and Downtown’s street network is relatively fine-grained and interconnected, providing short and direct routes from most parcels to most open spaces. Street design, however, often impedes accessibility. The Brewster/Arch Parklet and Sequoia High School Open Space, for example, are both within a comfortable walking distance of most Downtown properties, but are not particularly easy to get to due to El Camino Real. High traffic volumes, high speeds, wide crossing distances, and excessive spacing between crosswalks all contribute to a barrier effect.

Downtown’s public open spaces come in a variety of types. There are plazas, paseos, large greens, and small pocket parks. Some are new and quite well-designed, particularly the Post Office Paseo, Theatre Way, and Courthouse Square. Others have existed for many years and serve their purposes well, such as City Hall Park and the Library Plaza. Others, however, such as Little River Park or Roselli Mini-Park, are poorly situated and lack visibility, and therefore don’t contribute as much to community life as they should. Some simply need seating and lighting to achieve their maximum potential, such as Broadway/Spring Parklet and Brewster/Arch Parklet. Sequoia High School Open Space represents possibly the greatest potential. It is quite large in size, and features a grove of very mature and attractive trees, as well as sculpture, civic art, and a large green with a ballfield. It is, however, difficult to get to and appears to be closed to the public, although it is open for anyone to enjoy at any time.
1.2.6. COMPLETE STREETS

For the past few years, a concept known as “Complete Streets” has begun to gain momentum in the United States. The movement seeks to reverse decades of street design which catered predominantly to the needs of motorists at the expense of other users. A Complete Streets approach to street design ensures that transportation planners and engineers consistently design and operate the entire roadway with all users in mind, including bicyclists, public transportation riders, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities, as well as motorists. This results in streets that are safer, more livable, and welcoming to everyone. Since streets make up about 31% of Downtown’s land area, they have a dramatic impact on its overall environment.

Redwood City is committed to the concept of Complete Streets in the Downtown Precise Plan Area. However, while many improvements have been made, some streets are still uncomfortable, don’t feel safe, or are inconvenient for many users. The following is a brief summary of the conditions in place on Downtown’s streets from a Complete Streets perspective at the time of adoption of the DTPP based on an analysis conducted by Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Staff.

Connectivity

The connectivity of the street network is the foundation upon which mobility, for all modes of transportation, is built. For pedestrians and bicyclists, a highly connected street network allows for short, direct routes to their destination, vastly increasing the feasibility and desirability of these modes. Also, for automobiles, a highly connected street network helps to shorten trips (lowering vehicle miles travelled and the associated pollution) and also helps to disperse trips, lessening the tendency of key streets to experience overwhelming traffic. Less traffic is good not only for motorists, it is good for pedestrians and bicyclists as well. A highly connected network has also been found to increase safety by slowing auto speeds, thus lowering injuries and fatalities from crashes.

A detailed analysis of Redwood City’s street network was conducted to identify opportunities for improvement. Two primary measures are used to analyze street connectivity: intersection density and block length. In a meta-analysis of 50 studies on travel and the built environment, researchers found that intersection density was the physical characteristic that had the greatest positive impact on walking1. Downtown currently has about 238 intersections per square mile, which is considered very good. Cities above 100 are found to have fewer traffic fatalities2, and walkability is generally good over 1503.

Downtown Redwood City’s average block length is currently 329 feet, which is also very good. In general, 200 to 400 feet is the range considered to be optimal4. However, while the average block length is very good, some individual blocks are excessively long, with several exceeding 500 feet in length, and some exceeding 800 feet in length. These blocks present significant barriers to all modes of transportation, but pedestrians are most affected.
Pedestrian Conditions

A walkable urban district should have, at a minimum, 5-foot wide sidewalks on both sides of every street. This allows two people walking in opposite directions to comfortably pass each other, in addition to providing access to wheelchair users. Of its 216 block faces, only 3 currently lack sidewalks (and the lane behind City Hall is missing some parts of its sidewalks), and all sidewalks are at least 5 feet wide. Downtown is nearly perfect in terms of meeting this “bare minimum” walkability standard. Ideal sidewalk conditions, however, are considered to be 12 feet wide for a typical street for the purposes of this Plan, and most sidewalks outside of the Core are narrower than this.

While sidewalk conditions are almost always adequate and very often excellent, intersections are also important to consider when evaluating pedestrian conditions. Intersections of streets with light traffic are typically friendly to pedestrians by their nature, but streets with significant volumes of automobile traffic tend to require extra enhancements. Intersections along streets with significant auto traffic (and especially at the intersection of two high-traffic streets), stop signs or traffic signals can be beneficial by giving pedestrians a dedicated opportunity to cross the street. On high-traffic streets, crosswalks are also essential, and high visibility “continental” crosswalks are among the best. Bulbouts, in which the sidewalk area is expanded into the parking lane at an intersection, reducing pedestrian crossing distances, are beneficial as well. By these measurements, several intersections were found to have the potential for additional pedestrian improvements (designated by yellow circles on the map). Thirty one (31) intersections, about 40%, have all or nearly all elements necessary for pedestrian connectivity, safety, and convenience (designated by green circles). It is important to note that while many of the yellow intersections can and should be improved, some of them are impractical to upgrade due to other important considerations. As with other aspects of urbanism, a proper balance must be struck.

Bicycling

Bicycles are a very important form of transportation. Bicycling is good for the environment, and good biking conditions brings additional customers to Downtown businesses. Bicycling is allowed on all Downtown streets, and streets without significant automobile volumes don’t necessarily need extra accommodations for bicyclists. However, on streets with significant volumes of automobile traffic, signage and/or pavement markings such as “sharrows” are a good way to alert motorists to the possible presence of bicyclists. This is known as a Type III bike facility, or a “Bikeway.” On streets with very significant automobile volumes, it is sometimes necessary to designate separate lanes for exclusive use by bicycles when space constraints permit doing so. This approach is known as a Type II bike facility, or a “Bike Lane.” When bike lanes aren’t possible, bikeway design elements should be applied. Currently, some Downtown streets with high levels of traffic lack these types of improvements, although Brewster Avenue and much of Winslow have recently been equipped with bike lanes.

Automobiles

Generally, driving conditions are acceptable in Downtown Redwood City. While some streets, such as Jefferson, experience peak hour congestion, the City Council has determined that “Level of Service” (a qualitative measurement of the quality of road performance based on seconds of delay at intersections) is not an appropriate measure of success for streets in a walkable urban district such as Downtown. However, based on the needs of drivers as they intersect with the needs of other users of Downtown streets, it is possible to discuss roadway conditions in two areas:

Traffic Calming: In recent years, the City of Redwood City has calmed traffic on major Downtown streets by making improvements such as modified lane configurations and narrower lane widths. Sometimes, this comes about as part of a pedestrian-enhanced design, such as with diagonal parking, sidewalk bulb-outs at intersections, midblock crosswalks, and more visible crosswalks, such as the improvements made to the 800 block of Jefferson in 2006. Other times, this has occurred with the addition of bike lanes, such as on Broadway Avenue. Recent traffic calming projects include Brewster from Arguello to Veterans, Winslow from Brewster to Middlefield, Middlefield from Winslow to Main, Jefferson from Middlefield to Marshall, and El Camino from Brewster to Broadway. Main Street from Broadway to Middlefield, and the entirety of Broadway through the DTPP Area have been calmed for many years. The remaining streets with significant auto volumes lack traffic calming features.

Connectivity: Downtown’s street network generally has good connectivity, and specifically has good connectivity for autos. However, a few key obstacles block important routes, lengthening auto trips and adding to congestion on other routes. Specifically, the following road segments create impediments to motorists: Fuller Street at Winslow is currently treated as a cul-de-sac; Walnut between Spring and Broadway allows only northbound traffic; Hilton between Maple and Walnut only allows westbound traffic; and Maple between Middlefield and Main only allows southbound traffic. Middlefield between Broadway and Winslow only allows northbound traffic, but this is not considered a connectivity problem due to this block’s primary function as a plaza and a paseo. Finally, the two ends of Broadway, at Arguello and Spring, channel through traffic up to Marshall Street, causing confusion to people trying to get to the Downtown Core and depriving Broadway businesses of greater visibility.

(Endnotes)


4 Based on staff review of works by walkability experts including Jane Jacobs, Allen Jacobs, Walter Kulash, Andres Duany, and Dan Burden.