

November 6, 2019

William Gilchrist  
Director, Planning and Building Department  
City of Oakland  
250 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, Suite 3315  
Oakland, CA 94612

**RE: Draft Downtown Oakland Specific Plan**

Dear Director Gilchrist:

Thank you for your ongoing receptivity to SPUR's input on the Downtown Oakland Specific Plan. This is the fourth such letter that SPUR has submitted and we are very appreciative of the willingness of you and your staff to incorporate suggestions that we have made in the previous letters.

Through the hard work of you and your staff, we feel that this Specific Plan has progressed well. In general, it is well organized, covers a wide-range of issues and is generally well communicated. We are very pleased that the plan acknowledges both the regional significance of Oakland's downtown while also laying out a robust plan to support equity goals so that downtown can maintain and build upon what makes this place so special in the first place: the people that live, work and visit this important area.

While we feel that this is a significant improvement on the preliminary draft, we still have significant concerns and we recommend that the final version of the plan address them in the following manner.

**Vision**

State more strongly a vision of Downtown Oakland as the place the knits the Bay Area together. The plan should clearly state that Downtown Oakland should be the vibrant, dense, urban core with diverse and complementary development that creates the focal point for development in the greater East Bay region. Specific things to mention could include the following:

- An explicit embrace of the fact that downtown Oakland is a critical regional center and that it will need to make space to accommodate a great multimodal station at the Oakland end of the second Transbay Tube and a thriving surrounding area.
- An outline of potential sites for the second Transbay Tube to serve downtown, the parts of Oakland that are currently underserved by transit, and that connects to regional transportation networks.
- A comprehensive vision for reconnecting Downtown Oakland to West Oakland and the Jack London Square and reconnecting Jack London to the waterfront. This could involve putting Interstate I-880 underground, capping I-980 and burying the train tracks along the Oakland

waterfront. These transformative moves would also open up new possibilities for a city that has borne the negative impacts of freeway building, urban renewal and other planning policies in the 20th century.

### **Go Big on Broadway.**

Broadway is Downtown Oakland's main street. It has BART, so many bus lines, and it will soon have Bus Rapid Transit. This is the center of it all, yet we note that the priority office area map does not include Broadway. This is a major oversight as Broadway should be the great commercial hub of downtown and uptown Oakland. The Plan should go big on Broadway.

We remain concerned that the current draft of the plan does not reserve enough sites for office development and as a result may not realize its job goals over time. Though the Plan now calls for over 20 million square feet of office space, little of that space is actually reserved for office uses. The remaining space is slated to be built in areas zoned for mixed use, which could lead to a slate of buildings that are predominantly residential, foreclosing the opportunity to develop a sufficient amount of office in one of the most transit rich locations in the entire region.

We recommend that the city work with consultants to determine how many sites should be reserved for office to meet a necessary minimum target for office development (such as 10 million square feet). In particular, the staff should identify and reserve for office the parcels that can accommodate larger floorplates (at least 20,000 square feet). The staff should specifically locate large floorplate sites on Broadway closest to the BART stations.

### **Get the Density bonus scheme, if there is one, correct**

Ensure that any potential density bonus scheme does not choke off development. We still haven't seen the math on this so our concern remains. In our prior letters SPUR recommended that the Downtown Specific Plan should take care to strike the correct formula, one which incentivizes growth, rather than punishing it. Getting the formula right is important both for incentivizing specific projects and for sending a broader signal about Oakland's receptivity to dense development downtown.

While SPUR supports a robust community benefits package as part of this Plan, we fear that a density bonus scheme has the potential to deliver the worst of all possible worlds – development that is not of sufficient intensity in the downtown core with no community benefits. This “worst of all possible worlds” could happen in situations where developers chose to not take advantage of the density bonus (because it is financially disadvantageous to do so and/or because it is more financially feasible to build at lower densities than what is allowed in the Plan). The long-term impact of this on the future of Downtown Oakland would be disastrous.

We recommend that the city work with a real estate economist to carefully calibrate the density bonus scheme to ensure that it is financially advantageous to take advantage of the increased height and bulk offered. The financial feasibility of the community benefit requirements is critical because development of sufficient intensity should be encouraged in the downtown core. The economist should analyze the entire “stack” of community benefits being contemplated, including any affordability requirements, to ensure that the community benefits do not encourage developers to not utilize the bonus (or not build at

all). The city should also look at other potential incentives to make the density bonus financially feasible, including the use of an EIFD or other mechanisms.

We encourage policymakers to keep an eye on the long run and to understand that the real economic benefit for Oakland lies in ensuring that projects get built so that the increased property tax payments that will come as a result of new development, become reality. It is in the potentially large-scale increase in property tax rolls downtown, rather than in one-time fees and exactions, that the real long-term benefits to Oakland lie.

## **Land Use**

We are pleased that the Plan contemplates an amount of future residential and employment growth that is similar, if not more ambitious, than what we called for in our *Downtown for Everyone* report. Adding a sufficient intensity of housing and jobs in this area is critical to support the city's economic development goals and to address Oakland's structural deficit. We do have a set of suggestions for improvement:

- The current maps are very hard to read and they make it difficult to understand the land use changes that are being proposed. It would be helpful for the maps to be produced at a higher resolution, to identify all street names, to include transit lines and BART stations. It would also be very helpful if before and after maps were published so that changes being proposed, such as where development intensity is proposed to increase and where it is proposed to decrease by the plan, could be easily identified. These maps should also be at the same scale and orientation.
- The current drawings included in the plan don't convey all that is possible nor do they inspire dreaming or action. We encourage staff to work with consultants to develop images that will better show the texture of the places and how people will interact in the place.

## **Urban Design and Public Space**

One of SPUR's big ideas in *A Downtown for Everyone* was that the Downtown Specific Plan should create inviting public spaces and streets as part of an active public realm. To achieve this vision, we recommend that the city strengthen its urban design guidelines for buildings, especially ground floors, and redesign its streets to be more functional and welcoming for pedestrians, cyclists and transit riders. Thus, we are concerned that the Draft Specific Plan does not present a developed urban design vision for the downtown. Such a vision, if present, would include urban design performance standards to ensure that buildings are built with gracious ground floor floor-to-ceiling heights, active uses, and in ways that support walkability.

Additionally, we have the following suggestions for improving the public space components of the Plan:

- The public space ideas should be much more tightly integrated with the land use agenda.
- There should be a more specific description of the Green Loop, what it would be, what it would look like and what would be required in terms of investment.
- Integrate Webster Green into a broader vision for the place.
- Make the street network diagrams in the Mobility & Accessibility and Community Health section uniform and easier to follow.

- Create more connectivity in the pedestrian network and break up the various downtown superblocks (e.g. reconnect Old Oakland to City Hall via Washington Street and redo City Center to reintegrate it into the Downtown fabric).

## **Active Ground Floor and Community Serving Uses**

We are pleased that the plan is supportive of including active uses on the ground floor. However, we think it is important to emphasize that retail may not be successful on every ground floor throughout the plan area and that retail requirements could result in very uniform types of businesses going in on the ground floor in many locations (such as restaurants). What successful local businesses require are: a healthy retail ecosystem (including clean and safe streets, lots of foot traffic, diversity in the local economy, mobility/ access for customers, access to a reliable source of labor pools and local strong branding). New businesses need that, and they need low barriers to entry, particularly for people of color. The Plan proposes a fair amount for mobility and access but is lacking in the other key areas.

We note that the plan includes the idea of restricting retail, office, bar and/or restaurant street frontages to limit the competition for arts and culture space. Restricting uses does not allow for flexibility in market cycles or new types of businesses to grow as the downtown changes. It can also create internal competition and doesn't take into account business synergies or allow for diverse neighborhood needs.

We encourage the city to think about which streets within downtown can function as “main streets” and what types of businesses and uses should be retained/attracted to these main streets. These should include community serving businesses and uses, which could be encouraged as part of the density bonus plan. We also encourage more creative thinking about how the City will support local retail businesses both existing and new. A clear statement that allocating ground floor space for local businesses – community based, non-profits or for profits that meet community needs – as a community benefit – could go a long way.

## **Housing**

As we have noted before, SPUR strongly supports the creation of new housing in Oakland. We note that the housing creation goal in the Downtown Specific Plan is greater than what we called for in our *Downtown for Everyone* report (29,000 units in the Downtown Specific Plan versus housing for 25,000 new people in *A Downtown for Everyone*). We believe great downtowns should accommodate a mixture of uses, including places for living, working, recreation and more. However, the city may need to rethink its housing target for this plan area if more sites are reserved for office (as we recommend above). To that end, it might be useful to consider housing goals just within the downtown boundaries, but also in areas immediately adjacent to downtown that could support greater housing intensity, but are not suitable for office development.

An additional idea to consider for creating affordable housing within the downtown is to allow for the building of affordable housing at 75' by right, regardless of the underlying height restrictions. This would potentially make it viable for affordable housing to compete for residential sites and also to build at an intensity that would maximize each site's potential for affordable housing. Such a proposal could

also be evaluated for adjacent neighborhoods, using affordable housing impact fees generated in the downtown to support affordable development.

## **Streets & Mobility & Parking**

In our *Downtown for Everyone* report, SPUR advocated that it should be easy to get to and around downtown through an expanded transportation network. Downtown Oakland is one of the most transit-accessible parts of the region, yet only 24 percent of downtown employees take transit to and from work. Over time, downtown should strive to increase the share of commuters who take transit, walk or bike to more than 50 percent. To achieve this, we recommend the creation of a comprehensive Transit Plan for downtown Oakland. This plan will require coordination between the city and transit operators to redesign the local bus system, build out the East Bay bus and bus rapid transit network, create new rail links into and out of the second Transbay Tube, create a world-class biking network, and close or remove some freeway off-ramps to regain land in downtown. It will also be crucial for the city's new Department of Transportation to create a capital plan to prioritize and identify funding for the many infrastructure projects currently under consideration downtown.

Additionally, this plan should more explicitly think about the future of transportation – including autonomous vehicles, the substantially reduced need for parking for personal autos in the future, and potential uses for the land that will become available as the need for parking is reduced.

In our last letter SPUR presented a host of best practices to encourage sustainable, multimodal transportation options, and we outline a set of policies to consider including. A few were included in the August draft, but we would urge the following:

### **1. Transit Service Improvements**

- Include a measurement of travel time on public transit between low-income areas of Oakland and downtown.

### **2. Pedestrian Network Improvements**

- Illustrate how improvements could strengthen pedestrian connections under 880 and across 980. The plan mentions some potential improvements but does not show any renderings.

### **3. Carpooling & Carsharing**

- Designated carpool parking at residential and office developments
- Promotion of carpool programs such as Waze or Scoop
- Include carshare services (e.g. Zipcar) in the city's allocation of parking spaces

### **4. Transportation Demand Management**

The draft plan mentions the need to establish and fund a transportation demand management system, but it doesn't get into specifics. We suggest mentioning the need for employers to encourage

sustainable modes such as transit, biking, walking, carpool, and micro-mobility options for new residents and employees. The plan currently mentions some TDM-related policies. These include:

- Revise city codes to require one long-term bicycle parking space per unit to provide adequate numbers of bicycle parking spaces for new residences (Outcome M-1.4, page 175)
- Include a call to reduce parking maximums from their current 1.25 to 1 to something smaller such as 1:1 or less and to revisit parking maximums over time

The above outcomes should be presented as part of a cohesive TDM policy that applies to both residential and office developments. Additional TDM measures could include:

- transit subsidies
- secure bike parking
- showers and lockers
- guaranteed ride home program
- shuttles to BART (depending on the development location)
- public realm improvements

## **Economy**

SPUR believes that downtown Oakland should function as an economic generator for the whole city and the whole region. We are encouraged that the draft Plan recognizes the regional significance of this area. At the same time, we are also pleased that the Plan aims for Oakland's downtown to be a place that does the following:

- Builds community wealth.
- Provides space to enable job growth for occupations that will employ people across a wide variety of skills.
- Focuses on skills and training for residents so they can participate better in the growing high wage sectors of the economy.

However, we are concerned that some of the proposed actions could have the unintended effect of making job growth and the provision of community benefits more difficult. It is important that the desire for community benefits be balanced with the need for continued economic growth in the downtown.

We would also like to note that the educational gap is one of the main issues exacerbating job and income racial disparities in the plan area and beyond. Reducing the skills gap with the support of programs and non-profit initiatives that are already working well is key, but this should be done in parallel with a long-term city-wide education strategy particularly focused on youth of color.

Finally, multiple objectives in this Plan and Policies will be dependent on partnership and collaborative working, either with potential developers, non-profit organizations, educational institutions and/or employers. The Plan could further emphasize this guiding principle of collaboration and philosophy of 'shared goals' in shaping future decision making, with the objective to maximize partnerships to effectively tackle disparity challenges in ways that are aligned with the community's needs and aspirations.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Robert Ogilvie  
Oakland Director

Cc: Oakland Planning Commission  
Oakland City Council  
SPUR Oakland Board of Directors