

December 5, 2022

William Gilchrist
Director, Planning and Building Department
City of Oakland
250 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, Suite 2114
Oakland, CA 94612

RE: Downtown Oakland Specific Plan — Draft Zoning Amendments

Dear Director Gilchrist:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Zoning Amendments for the Downtown Oakland Specific Plan. As you know, SPUR is deeply committed to the success of the Downtown Plan. This is the [fifth letter](#) SPUR has submitted regarding the Specific Plan and we appreciate your team's continued efforts to keep us informed as the project progresses.

As stated in our previous comments, we feel that the Specific Plan is well-organized and covers a broad range of topics important to Oakland. In particular, we value the Specific Plan's dedication to bolstering downtown's regional significance and commitment to forming a long-term plan that allows all Oaklanders to equitably access opportunities provided by the downtown area.

The Specific Plan's Draft Zoning Amendments will shape development in downtown Oakland for years to come. They are a crucial step in ensuring that the Specific Plan's goals are implemented and that future development fits within downtown's social and economic aspirations. In order to ensure that the final Zoning Amendments achieve these goals, we offer the following recommendations:

- a) The Zoning Improvement Plan (ZIP) is an ambitious merging of the city's desire for more density downtown and increased community benefits, such as affordable housing. Because this is an optional program, its success is not guaranteed and will be based on whether developers choose to participate or not. In addition, until this program is implemented, we are

unable to know which benefits developers will most commonly opt into. The feasibility of the ZIP will also not be known until it is implemented. As of right now, development economics in Oakland and elsewhere are extremely challenging due to rising construction costs and interest rate hikes, amongst other factors. SPUR recommends that this program be reevaluated every 3 - 5 years in order to reassess feasibility and evaluate how it can be changed to attract more developers and bring optimal community benefits to downtown Oakland. For example, the ZIP may need to be redesigned periodically to attract specific community benefits that Oakland may continue to lack after the program's implementation.

- b) Given current supply chain issues and the high cost of construction materials that support tall building heights, it is important that the ZIP does not disincentivize using other materials that are more affordable but have height limitations, such as timber. These new, more affordable building types should be taken into account in the design of the ZIP. There should be incentives for developers to partake in the program and provide community benefits, even if they do not intend to take advantage of increased height requirements due to building material costs.
- c) The Economic Analysis for the ZIP has faced skepticism from many sides. To ensure its accuracy, we encourage your team to work with knowledgeable development partners to peer review this analysis and the assumptions it made. For example, the city may wish to assemble a Technical Advisory Committee to review the methodology and findings of the analysis and to give ongoing input into the ZIP as it is evaluated over time.
- d) We have concerns regarding the complexity of the Draft Zoning Amendment's ten zoning districts and four combining zones. We recommend that your team reevaluate whether this many zones are necessary to achieve the plan's intended outcomes. If the plan chooses to move forward with this plan, it is important to ensure that city staff are well resourced and trained to properly interpret the new zoning to relevant parties.
- e) Should the proposed Oakland Waterfront Ballpark at Howard Terminal project move forward, Jack London will become heavily impacted by pedestrian traffic and will likely attract more commercial and residential activity. It is important that zoning for the D-DT-JLI Downtown District Jack London Industrial Zone properly knits together Jack London and Howard Terminal to facilitate circulation between these areas and to properly accommodate future growth.
- f) In order to support new housing and other desired development in the downtown core, the permitting process for zoning-compliant projects should be streamlined so that these projects can move forward.

- g) While not directly within the DOSP's boundaries, it is likely that the DOSP will affect Oakland's Chinatown due to its close proximity. We are of course aware that Chinatown has its own specific plan (the Lake Merritt Station Area Plan). It is important that planning staff considers this adjacent specific plan and that, upon the DOSP's completion, the two plans are complementary to each other.

Lastly, when considering the DOSP as a whole, we would like to stress the urgency of moving this plan forward to adoption. Since the DOSP was initiated in 2015, it has faced numerous setbacks that have caused the project to lose momentum. Most importantly, these delays have caused the city to lose value recapture opportunities from recent developments. We urge your team to bring the plan to the Oakland Planning Commission and City Council as soon as possible.

Oakland's downtown is a special place that serves as a central hub and gathering space for the East Bay. Across the country, conversations are taking place about ensuring the success and longevity of downtowns in the post-COVID era. SPUR asks that even after the DOSP is adopted, the City of Oakland and its Planning Department lead efforts to ensure the downtown continues to evolve to meet the future of work, transit, commercial spaces, and small businesses.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments and efforts to include SPUR in finalizing the DOSP. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Ronak Davé Okoye
SPUR Acting Oakland Director & Chief of Strategic Initiatives

Cc: Joanna Winter, Project Manager, Downtown Oakland Specific Plan, City of Oakland