

Heather Bischel & Nicolas Fauchier-Magnan
516 G Street
Davis, CA 95616

January 11, 2020

Mr. Eric Lee, Planner
Department of Community Development and Sustainability
City of Davis
23 Russell Boulevard
Davis, CA 95616

Sent via email

Dear Eric,

We submit these comments on the Draft Downtown Davis Specific Plan (Oct. 2019).

As homeowners who live on the East side of the 500 block of G street with our two children, ages 4 and 1, we believe that the Downtown Plan will have a meaningful and overall positive impact on our lives. We chose to purchase our home (in 2017) in a large part for its close proximity to downtown and for its charming character that reflects the greater North Davis neighborhood. As a family, we are committed to building a vibrant community in Davis and to environmental sustainability. Before purchasing our home, we walked through the neighborhood to meet neighbors who share these values and families who we would come to regularly interact with and befriend. We applaud the efforts of the design team to balance varying goals and perspectives received to date. This letter represents our first engagement with the Downtown Plan design process. We have several specific comments that we hope are fully considered in the next draft of the Downtown Plan.

Our first and primary concern relates to the location of our home and the designation of the East side of the 500 block of G street as "Mainstreet Medium" - a strong departure from the "Neighborhood Small" designation from the Admin Draft Plan presented in early 2019 (see Attachment). What was the motivation for this change? While we understand that our block has potential for more intense development, we are concerned that the "Mainstreet Medium" designation would encourage and eventually allow our home to be subsumed by large commercial buildings, blocking natural light to our living spaces and forever altering the character of the neighborhood. We believe that the designation of Mainstreet Medium (4-story block-form buildings with small to no setbacks) is an extreme change from the one-story single-family homes currently on this block and is inconsistent with the incremental changes proposed in most of the rest of the Downtown Plan. Additionally, the "Mainstreet Medium" designation is directly across from a "Neighborhood Small" designation on the West side of 500

block of G street. This stark change from the lowest density category to the second-highest density category is not seen elsewhere in the Downtown Plan, and seems inconsistent with the smoother, more thoughtful transitions proposed in the rest of the Plan. **We request a change in designation of the East side of the 500 block of G street to "Neighborhood Medium (3 stories maximum)", which would allow for a smoother transition of scale.** An example of a similar transition in the Downtown Plan is the West side of B street, which is also designated as "Neighborhood Medium (3-story maximum)" and is adjacent to the single-family parcels in the University / Rice Lane neighborhood. A "Neighborhood Medium (3 stories maximum)" designation on our block would allow for a sensible increase in density and building height over current conditions, but would make for a more gradual transition with the West side of the 500 block of G street. We hope, in any final designation, that future developments would continue to complement the historic character of the neighborhood.

Our second concern relates to the indication of our home (516 G Street) as a potential historic resource. The consequences of listing our home as a potential historical resource have been challenging to interpret and left us with an increased level of uncertainty regarding the future of our home. After a brief discussion with Eric Lee and others, it is our understanding that the listing of our home, and of the Hibbert store, as potential historical resources does not mean that they will necessarily receive such designation. Our comments in the preceding paragraph were thus made with the assumption that our home will not be listed as a historical (merit) resource. Should the official historical resource designation be established, we understand that this would set in place adjacency standards to the North and South of our home, as detailed in Table 40.14.080.C . These adjacency standards have limited effects on adjacent properties on the North and South sides, and no effect on adjacent property behind our home (to the East at the Hibbert lumber yard). Altogether, we don't believe that these adjacency standards would sufficiently protect our home to a liveable status within a block that is otherwise "Mainstreet Medium". The stark contrast between our one-story, single-family home and adjacent 4-story block-form buildings would make our house feel out of place. We are concerned that should the "Mainstreet Medium" designation be retained in the Downtown Plan, and a historical resource designation be established for our house, we would essentially be displaced from our home with limited capacity to realize enhanced property value (due to limitations set on historical resources). We believe a "Neighborhood Medium (3 stories maximum)" designation would be more compatible with the potential historic status of our home (whether officially established or not).

Our third concern relates to safety and noise impact of the freight railroad tracks. The four crossings that are within or on the edge of the Downtown Plan boundaries (3rd, 4th, 5th and 8th street crossings) are protected with automatic gates; however, these gates only block half the width of the crossing and can be circumvented by going into the oncoming traffic lane. Pedestrians walking on the sidewalk against traffic are fully unprotected from crossing the tracks. As part of the general infrastructure upgrades that will be implemented with the Downtown Plan, **we strongly feel that these crossings should all be equipped with four-quadrant gates blocking both directions of vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian traffic on**

both sides of the crossing, to greatly improve their safety. We also feel that commercial properties and streets adjacent to the tracks (Co-op block, 6th street, Sweetbriar) should be equipped with fencing to prevent people (especially children) from wandering on the tracks. Four-quadrant gates are an approved supplemental safety measure per [Appendix A](#) of CFR Title 49 part 222. Implementation of safe crossings in this manner would also allow the half-mile section of railroad from the Davis Depot to 8th street to automatically qualify as a “quiet zone” in which trains are not required to sound their horn (per [this DOT guidance document](#) for establishing quiet zones). Establishing a quiet zone would be a significant benefit to all Downtown residents, employees, and visitors and is even more important as the Downtown area becomes more densely populated.

Our fourth concern relates to the designation of nearby parcels as potential sites for parking lots or structures. Behind the one-story homes on the East side of the 500 block of G street lies the Hibbert property, and to the North of our block is the Davis Food Co-Op. Chapter 6 of the Plan notes both properties as potential locations for future parking lots or structures. We believe that establishing parking structures or parking lots on either of these parcels would make our neighborhood less attractive, less walkable, more congested with vehicle traffic, and would fail to realize the potential for a vibrant, livable neighborhood. We understand how affordability of new Downtown housing will be improved by having no parking minimums for new developments, but we do not want our neighborhood to be a casualty of that otherwise sensible policy by becoming an area for large-scale car parking.

Our last concern relates to the protection and enhancement of the downtown tree canopy. The concepts in Chapter 7.1 on “Low Impact Development - Green Infrastructure” are valuable on the whole, but this section does not make any mention of the extensive tree canopy present in much of the Downtown area. There lacks a coherent vision and policy on managing and enhancing the tree canopy - overlooking the significant value and ecosystem services currently brought by this canopy (e.g., heat island reduction, bird and insect habitat). The only mention of existing trees in the draft Code requires the developer to make “every effort [...] to incorporate mature on-site trees into the required landscaping, subject to approval by the Director.” (40.14.040.D.4) This hints to a piecemeal, discretionary approach and does not constitute a coherent policy for preserving and enhancing our valuable tree canopy. This is especially important to clarify in the Main Street designations, in which block form buildings and limited setbacks offer little space for substantial vegetation other than street trees.

Thank you for your extensive efforts in this undertaking and for taking our comments and concerns into consideration as the Draft Plan is updated. We look forward to further engagement in the planning and implementation of this plan.

Sincerely,

Heather Bischel and Nicolas Fauchier-Magnan

Attached: Admin Draft Downtown Plan, early 2019, showing the East side of the 500 G St block as “Residential Small”

