

Davis Downtown Specific Plan
Comments 1/10/20
Sierra Club Yolano Group

The draft Davis Downtown Specific Plan (DDSP), available for public comments through 1/15/20, is a long and complex document that covers a wide range of topics, some of which are of interest or concern to the Yolano Group Sierra Club. These comments are based both on the draft plan itself and the detailed standards and codes proposed as Article 40.13 and 40.14. These comments build upon and supersede preliminary comments that we provided earlier.

The underlying issues that guide our review of the DDSP are climate change, resource conservation, open space, and environmental justice. These issues are relevant to most sections and elements of the DDSP. We applaud some sections and elements and encourage their retention and enhancement. We are concerned about other sections and elements.

We are pleased that the DDSP emphasizes sustainability, specifically including energy, mobility, water, waste, food, and social equity. In emphasizing sustainability the plan seems to be looking to the future, taking into account climate change, and not dwelling on a mythical bucolic past. Despite the emphasis on sustainability, we are disappointed that the DDSP makes no mention of specific targets for reducing carbon emissions or conserving resources. The City of Davis adopted a goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2040. Promoting walking, biking, trees, and compact development will contribute to this goal but quantitative targets would be desirable. The Built Environment element and Article 40.14 describe size, density, and location of buildings extensively but say little about construction design. Brief mention is made of drought tolerant vegetation, passive cooling, energy savings incentives, solar panels, etc. The DDSP should go beyond these vague recommendations and specifically call for new buildings to be net zero energy and designed for net zero carbon emissions. Appendix VIII in Chapter 10 provides appropriate recommendations for specificity and should be incorporated into the plan.

Compact development, listed as one of six goals, is essential to achieving sustainability. The goal of increased housing access and choice and the specification of many additional new housing units in the downtown area are important for reducing emissions from commuting and promoting social equity. While we endorse the goal of compact development, we worry that the plan goes too far. Recommending buildings up to 7 stories high in the core area (specifically at Davis Square) threatens the ambiance and “human scale” of downtown. The height limit downtown should never exceed 5 stories, should aim for mostly 4 stories at most, and should require setbacks for all stories above 3.

Transportation is a major source of carbon emissions in the Davis area and must be addressed aggressively in Davis planning. The emphasis on “complete streets” and priority given to walking, biking, and public transit (and strict limits on motor vehicle speeds and parking) are necessary for reducing carbon emissions and making downtown more “public friendly.” The proposals to discourage use of motor vehicles generally are excellent, e.g. setting very modest maximum limits on parking spaces at residential and commercial establishments and eliminating minimum requirements for parking. We are deeply concerned about social equity and accessibility for everyone, however, and urge that serious attention be given to downtown access

by people with limited incomes or mobility. Public transit to and within downtown must be improved. Perhaps certain categories of people should be exempt from parking and transit fees or eligible for reimbursement of fees. The categories should be broad and inclusive to avoid stigma, e.g. all senior citizens, people with handicap certification, or low income (e.g. eligible for food stamps).

Finally we are concerned about the inadequate attention to timing. If Davis is to become carbon neutral by 2040, enormous progress in this direction must be made by 2030. Buildings and infrastructure, once developed, will endure for at least 50 years. We cannot allow “business as usual” to proceed past 2030 and then begin working toward sustainability. Yet the Implementation element lists capital infrastructure improvements of \$5,090,000 through 2030 and then \$54,430,000 after 2030. Of course it takes time to plan infrastructure projects and building developments but the pace must be greatly accelerated to make meaningful and necessary progress by 2030.