by Alex Achimore – 20-year resident, architect, former Planning Director for a redevelopment authority, 17 years as a building project manager for UC Davis—built the stadium, Schall Pool, ARC, managed design phase for all Student Housing bet. 2010-2017.

Summary:
The Specific Plan does well to present a vision of an optimum small city in the 21st Century. All the key issues of current city planning best practices (“urban design” in today’s lexicon)—a town center, infill development, affordable housing, sustainability, universal design, historic resources, walkability (reducing car use) and economic development—are described and applied to Downtown Davis. I do think it’s unfortunate that they are lumped together as if relatively equal—affordable housing, for instance, is not in the same category of need as “hierarchy of form” – and the Plan greatly exaggerates its ability to address any of them. Other aspects of the Plan, such as the recommendations to reduce parking well before the transportation alternatives are in place, and the fact that this is a new and difficult to comprehend set of regulations, may even be an impediment to achieving the Plan.

Comments:
The Plan document implies that the new code will simply generate the vision. On Page 212, the first Implementation Action listed is “Adopt the form-based Downtown Code ….to generate compact, mixed-use development...” When I went to work for a redevelopment agency, I had similar hopes but soon learned that changing regulations is a very weak tool to spur any action. Ideally, regulations can steer development that is already being driven by economic incentives to include more community benefits along the way, but ill-advised regulations can also stall or prevent development.

Other than some nods to the importance of simplifying regulations, nothing like an incentive jumps out, and the document is anything but simple to wade through. Ideally, there would be some density bonuses to go with increased regulation of the form of bigger buildings, and that has spurred redevelopment in other places. Perhaps a one-page spreadsheet could be prepared to at least compare, block by block, the allowable density under the existing code and the proposed. Hopefully, it would show that there are advantages to redeveloping a large, one-story property into something 3 or 4 stories, but if there aren’t, it’s hard to see why a landowner who has paid off all their loans would be in any hurry to do so. In any case, it’s critical that the new Plan clearly simplifies entitlements or it might simply generate a shrug from the development community.

Despite our hopes for a future of greatly reducing car use, a well-discussed issue for many decades, the Plan’s strategy of eliminating parking lots now sends more negative messages to developers, merchants, and customers. Struggling merchants, and the number of empty storefronts downtown suggests there are many, are rightly concerned about any further obstacles to their customers, whether real or just perceived. I visit downtown several times a week, and have never not found a parking place within a block or two of my destination, so I don’t think additional parking is actually needed, but perception is otherwise, and that’s more than enough to discourage people from patronizing downtown stores.

A related problem in my view are the diagrams of development scenarios the Plan contains showing both removal of parking and new development, some of which might at least add parking demand, on the city-owned downtown parking lots. Regarding the site next to the existing plaza, I don’t sense any
underlying desire to create an even larger one and wonder whether that “need” truly came from the citizenry in the public meetings or from the handbook of good urban design (which I am certainly an adherent). If anything, the city’s placement of the trash and recycling storage shed right on F street was a major blunder and it should be relocated. But I think the existing plaza is an adequate size for a city the size of Davis, especially given that there are several other active public spaces like the train station, the Davis Commons (when it gets a new anchor) and the Farmer’s Market corner at 3rd and C. The existing downtown plaza’s limitation has more to do with the clutter of features, including the clock tower and light stands, that makes it appear already full and block views of the retail storefronts. Much would be accomplished by simplifying and eliminating many of the features and paving the plaza with a more accessible finish—I wonder if the existing pavers meet Universal Design standards.

The document is full of the jargon of the planning profession, which I can understand due to my professional background, but I’ve also learned how it makes little sense to the people supposedly being served. “Form Based Code” is obscure enough to the general public, but words like “place making” “public realm” “civic space” and “hierarchy of form” are anything but clear to non-professionals. Jargon is typically used to identify important issues, perhaps even to elevate their apparent importance, but compared to affordable housing and economic development, a lot of these issues could arguably be labeled trivial. I’ve never heard anyone complain of getting lost in downtown because of inadequate hierarchy of form, but the housing crisis is real, and the Plan doesn’t indicate any connection between its focus on form and the solution to more housing.

The document includes thorough analysis of numerous issues that are already best practices, many even required by law, and much of it feel redundant. Regarding sustainability, the California Green Building Code, the popularity of LEED certification, and UC Davis’ constant construction of “demonstration projects” more than drives a sustainable future for Davis. Universal Design is required by the American Disabilities Act, and the City of Davis is hardly dragging its feet, given all the sidewalk and intersection improvements. It’s not clear what the Downtown Plan has to add to the conversation.

I do think there are several moves the City could make that would push along the generally positive goals in the Plan, but they would require much more active intervention than a regulation-only approach. Despite elimination of the redevelopment agencies in California, the City still has the ability to pursue a public-private development partnership on property it owns, and the parking lot between 3rd, 4th, E and F could have the best potential to spur other development. I find the diagram for that site in the Plan to be unrealistic, but the city could issue an RFP that stipulates a high percentage, if not 100%, affordable housing on top of a 2-story parking garage that contains retail on the ground level facing the streets. The parking ratio for the housing should be far lower than current planning requires, albeit not zero, and the garage should maintain the existing number of spaces so as not to communicate the naivete that the current diagram indicates.

The City might have to accept a minimal return in the short run, but the advantages of adding housing to downtown, increasing the customer base for merchants, and simply creating a new buzz about redevelopment would be a good payoff by itself. In any case, I don’t see much of anything happening by simply adopting the new Downtown Plan, but a more robust intervention by the City could accomplish a lot, and there are numerous examples of how it has elsewhere.