



# City of Alameda

## Staff Report

**File Number:**2020-8375

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Planning Board

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General Plan Update - Public Forum #2: Preservation and enhancement of Alameda's unique historic neighborhood character

To: Honorable President and Members of the Planning Board

From: Andrew Thomas, Planning, Building and Transportation Director

### BACKGROUND

Maintenance of an internally consistent General Plan is a requirement of State Law. The General Plan must be an "integrated, internally consistent and compatible statement of policies for the adopting agency." (Government Code section 65300.5.)

The General Plan establishes the local development and conservation policies necessary to guide physical development and protect the general health, safety and welfare of the community and the environment. The last comprehensive update of the current General Plan occurred almost 30 years ago in 1991. The 1991 Plan was designed to serve the City for 20 years or until 2010.

In August, staff completed a draft General Plan 2040 for public review and comment. The draft General Plan is available on the project website <https://www.alameda2040.org/>. On the General Plan website, the public may:

- Review the Draft General Plan as a single PDF or as individual chapters.
- Review the current General Plan for comparative purposes.
- Complete one or more of four surveys about key General Plan policies related to the four main themes that run through the General Plan.
- Participate in four scheduled virtual public forums on each of the four main themes.
- Submit comments and suggested revisions to the General Plan.
- Join the General Plan update email list for notifications on the process and updates.

As described on the website and in a postcard delivered to every Alameda household in August, the City of Alameda is encouraging all Alameda residents and businesses to participate in the General Plan update process. From August through December, the Planning Board and staff will be inviting public comment on the first Draft General Plan. The public is invited to review and comment on the General Plan through on-line surveys, submitting written comments via email from the website, and participating in the Planning Board forums. The comments and direction received over the course of the fall will inform the preparation of the 2nd Draft General Plan to be published in January or February of 2021.

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In November, the voters in Alameda will decide whether to retain a citywide prohibition on multifamily housing and residential densities over 21 units per acre in the City Charter. The Planning Board's review of the General Plan will be further informed by the voter's November decision regarding Measure Z.

The Planning Board's final recommendations to the City Council on the draft General Plan will likely occur in the spring of 2021 after conclusion of the forums and consideration of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) that will be published this fall.

Four Main Themes: Similar to the 1991 General Plan, Chapter 1 of the draft General Plan describes the four major themes that run throughout the entire General Plan. The four themes are:

- **Developing a healthy, equitable and inclusive city.** This is a new theme for the General Plan. The 1991 General Plan themes did not address health, equity or inclusivity as an overarching goal of the General Plan. This theme is implemented in policies in each element addressing the need to provide for housing, service, open space, safety, and transportation needs of all segments of the community, irrespective of income, race, cultural background, or physical ability. The associated survey related to this theme on the website focuses on a sampling of seven (7) policies in the General Plan that address the implementation of this theme.
- **Preservation and enhancement of Alameda's unique historic neighborhood character.** The draft General Plan continues the 1991 General Plan theme regarding the importance of embracing and supporting Alameda's island environment and preserving Alameda's unique architectural and historic neighborhood character. The updated theme acknowledges that these goals must be achieved in a manner that is consistent with the goal of meeting regional and local housing and climate change objectives. The associated survey provides a sample of key policies related to this theme.
- **Protecting the environment, responding to the climate crisis & meeting regional responsibilities.** This theme is also new to the Alameda General Plan. The 1991 General Plan themes did not include protection of the environment as an overarching goal and it did not consider the impacts of global climate change as an issue that needed to be addressed. The General Plan policies recognize that to protect the environment, Alameda must not only reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and transform its transportation system (which produces over 70% of the community's greenhouse gas emissions), but also must do its part to help the region meet its sustainability goals, including providing for the housing, economic, and service needs of all segments of society and future generations. The associated survey provides a sample of the key policies related to this theme.
- **Enhancing mobility, accessibility and life on an island.** This theme builds on the 1991 General Plan theme calling for the "*de-emphasis on the automobile*" as the primary strategy to improve transportation and mobility in Alameda. The General Plan includes the need to address making streets safer, protecting the environment, providing enhanced access to the waterfront and open spaces, and embracing the island setting as essential to improving life on our island. The associated survey provides a sample of the key policies related to this theme.

Four Surveys. The website includes four surveys. The City will keep the surveys open and available to the public throughout the next four months. The information received from the surveys will help inform the

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Planning Board's review of the draft General Plan and inform the content and focus of the four public forums as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Draft General Plan. Since launching the website, over 650 people have taken the first survey, and over 350 people have taken the second survey.

Based upon the early results of the survey, it is apparent that the City needs to work harder to engage specific segments of the community in this process. Based upon the first 6 weeks of the survey results, it appears that:

- Lower income residents are significantly underrepresented in the survey results received to date.
- Youth (under 25) are significantly underrepresented while seniors (over 65) may be slightly underrepresented.
- The Black, Asian, and Hispanic communities are significantly underrepresented.

Since Forum #1, staff has been reaching out to the underrepresented segments of the community to encourage engagement in the General Plan update process. With each monthly public forum, staff will update the participation and demographic survey data in Exhibit 1, which will allow the Planning Board and community to track progress toward achieving a more representative and inclusive public process for the General Plan update.

Four Forums. Each forum is an opportunity for the Planning Board to review and discuss the adequacy and appropriateness of each theme and a sampling of key policies that implement and support that theme. At the end of the public forum, staff would like the Planning Board to address four questions:

1. *Does the Planning Board endorse the inclusion of the theme in the General Plan?*
2. *If yes, does the Planning Board wish to modify or expand the theme in any way?*
3. *Does the Planning Board endorse the policy directions articulated by the draft policies highlighted in the survey and in this staff report?*
4. *Does the Planning Board wish to modify, clarify or revise the policies in any way?*

Based upon the feedback from the community and the Planning Board, staff will be able to revise the draft General Plan to better reflect the policy goals of the Planning Board and community. These revisions will not be limited to the few sample policies highlighted in the survey or at the forum. Instead, staff will use this policy direction to review all of the policies in each element to ensure that all policies reflect the policy direction provided by the Planning Board and that the General Plan is internally consistent, as required by State Law.

### DISCUSSION:

#### **Planning Board Forum #2: Preservation and enhancement of Alameda's unique historic neighborhood character.**

The Neighborhood Character Theme: The Introduction Chapter to the General Plan highlights the four themes that guide and interconnect all of the policies in all seven of the elements of the General Plan. One of the four themes of the General Plan is to ensure the preservation and enhancement of Alameda unique historic neighborhood character. It reads as follows:

**Preservation and enhancement of Alameda's unique historic neighborhood character.** Alameda is a quiet, predominantly residential community, originally developed in an era when transportation was limited to walking, bicycling, horses, trains, and ferries. General Plan policies manage growth to address current challenges and responsibilities while retaining Alameda's unique character. Policies reinforce the enhancement of the historic, neighborhood fabric to support a variety of safe, convenient, and environmentally friendly modes of transportation, the creation of a network of interconnected public parks and open spaces, and the preservation of traditional mixed-use commercial main streets that are essential to Alameda's economic, social and cultural vitality.

Preserving and enhancing Alameda's unique character has been a long standing goal for the Alameda General Plan for almost 50 years. The 2040 General Plan continues this theme with the understanding and acknowledgement that preservation and enhancement of the character of Alameda can be accomplished without compromising the ability to achieve the General Plan's other three goals:

- To ensure the safety, health and high quality of life for all residents irrespective of income, race, cultural background or physical ability (Theme #1),
- To ensure the protection of the natural environment and address climate change, regionally and locally (Theme #3), and
- To improve mobility, accessibility and life on an island (Theme #4).

To preserve and enhance Alameda's character, the General Plan must define what features are essential to that character. That definition is provided on page 18 of the Land Use and City Design Element of the General Plan. The General Plan identifies the following features as critical to Alameda's character:

- **Walkability.** Alameda, like all great cities, is walkable. Short blocks connected by a traditional street grid, a network of public parks and open spaces, street trees, and human scaled buildings, make walking in Alameda pleasant and comfortable.
- **Leafy streets.** Mature deciduous and evergreen trees along Alameda's city streets and in its parks are critical to Alameda's character.
- **Human scale.** The majority of buildings (other than large institutional or employment buildings) are oriented towards the public right of way and retain a human scale while accommodating a density and a diversity of building types.
- **Neighborhood centers.** Alameda is a city of neighborhoods and centers that has endured and evolved over time. By maintaining and enhancing mixed-use neighborhoods and nearby commercial main streets, centers and stations, living in Alameda feels more like living in a small town than living in a metropolitan city of 80,000.
- **Connections to the water and open space.** Memorable towns and cities are often surrounded by natural areas or defined by natural features, such as a river or a lake. Alameda's island setting contributes to its distinctive feeling of being connected to the outdoors. Alameda's street grid provides multiple ways to

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explore the outdoors and easily connect to the water's edge.

- **High quality architecture and design.** Although Alameda buildings represent a wide range of Bay Area regional architecture styles, they are well-crafted and comfortable with personality and color.

To ensure the preservation and enhancement of these characteristics, the draft General Plan provides a broad framework of policies in all seven of the elements to ensure that as Alameda is meeting its obligations to provide for the needs of all of its residents including housing (Theme #1), working to address climate change locally and regionally (Theme #3), and working to improve mobility and life on the island (Theme #4), it is doing so in a manner that preserves the key features of its unique character. A sampling of those policies are provided below.

Balancing the need for housing with the need to preserve character. A review of the public comments received from the surveys shows that some Alameda residents feel that to preserve Alameda's character, Alameda must stop building housing. Some describe "overbuilding" and "over population" in Alameda that they feel is "destroying" the city. Some feel that new housing is negatively impacting the physical appearance of Alameda. Others feel that new housing cannot be accommodated without additional traffic congestion and a degradation of their quality of life, because it would limit their ability to travel by automobile as conveniently as they would like. At public meetings, it is not uncommon to hear speakers and community leaders argue that the City Council could and should stop building housing in Alameda or refuse to accept the RHNA.

These comments and points of view reflect a commonly held misconception that Alameda could choose to stop all construction of housing in Alameda to benefit local interests if it so desired. This is not the case. The Alameda General Plan, by State law, must accommodate the RHNA. (Gov. Code §§ 65302(c) [Mandated elements in a general plan], 65583 [Housing element content], 65863 [Regional housing needs: Local share].) To emphasize the importance of the housing issue, the State Legislature states in Government Code sections 65589.5(a):

*"The lack of housing, including emergency shelters, is a critical problem that threatens the economic, environmental, and social quality of life in California.*

*California housing has become the most expensive in the nation. The excessive cost of the state's housing supply is partially caused by activities and policies of many local governments that limit the approval of housing, increase the cost of land for housing, and require that high fees and exactions be paid by producers of housing.*

*Among the consequences of those actions are discrimination against low-income and minority households, lack of housing to support employment growth, imbalance in jobs and housing, reduced mobility, urban sprawl, excessive commuting, and air quality deterioration.*

*Many local governments do not give adequate attention to the economic, environmental, and social costs of decisions that result in disapproval of housing development projects, reduction in density of housing projects, and excessive standards for housing development projects.*

*California has a housing supply and affordability crisis of historic proportions. The consequences of failing to effectively and aggressively confront this crisis are hurting millions of Californians, robbing future generations of the chance to call California home, stifling economic opportunities for workers and businesses, worsening poverty and homelessness, and undermining the state's environmental and climate objectives.*

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*While the causes of this crisis are multiple and complex, the absence of meaningful and effective policy reforms to significantly enhance the approval and supply of housing affordable to Californians of all income levels is a key factor.*

*The crisis has grown so acute in California that supply, demand, and affordability fundamentals are characterized in the negative: underserved demands, constrained supply, and protracted unaffordability.*

*According to reports and data, California has accumulated an unmet housing backlog of nearly 2,000,000 units and must provide for at least 180,000 new units annually to keep pace with growth through 2025.*

*California's overall homeownership rate is at its lowest level since the 1940s. The state ranks 49th out of the 50 states in homeownership rates as well as in the supply of housing per capita. Only one-half of California's households are able to afford the cost of housing in their local regions.*

*Lack of supply and rising costs are compounding inequality and limiting advancement opportunities for many Californians.*

*The majority of California renters, more than 3,000,000 households, pay more than 30 percent of their income toward rent and nearly one-third, more than 1,500,000 households, pay more than 50 percent of their income toward rent.*

*When Californians have access to safe and affordable housing, they have more money for food and health care; they are less likely to become homeless and in need of government-subsidized services; their children do better in school; and businesses have an easier time recruiting and retaining employees.*

*An additional consequence of the state's cumulative housing shortage is a significant increase in greenhouse gas emissions caused by the displacement and redirection of populations to states with greater housing opportunities, particularly working- and middle-class households. California's cumulative housing shortfall therefore has not only national but international environmental consequences."*

**Addressing the Role of Planning and Design in Preserving Alameda's Character.** Since the General Plan must accommodate Alameda's fair share of the regional housing need (Gov. Code §§ 65302(c), 65583, 65863), the question for the Alameda community is not whether to accommodate the RHNA, but rather, where and how to accommodate the RHNA. The draft General Plan includes a framework of policies to ensure that growth is accommodated in Alameda in a manner that preserves and enhances the physical character of the community.

Land Use and City Design Element policies LU-14 and LU-17 (presented in Forum #1) directs new housing to the former Naval Air Station lands at Alameda Point, the former industrial lands along the northern waterfront, and to the Park Street and Webster Street commercial transit corridors and to shopping center sites.

Housing Element Policy HE-14 states:

*Maintain the integrity of existing residential neighborhoods by protecting and enhancing the historic architecture and ensuring that new development complements the density, and physical and aesthetic character of the neighborhood and surrounding areas.*

Land Use and City Design Element Policy LU-3 states:

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*Protect and restore Alameda's distinctive architecture and landscapes of all periods and styles.*

*Actions:*

*Architectural and Landscape Design. Require that infill development and alterations to existing buildings respect and enhance the residential character and architectural and landscape design quality of the neighborhood. Require that exterior changes to existing buildings be consistent with the building's existing or original architectural design whenever feasible.*

*Design Standards. Maintain objective design standards and guidelines for high quality architectural and landscape design.*

*Demolition Controls. Maintain strong demolition controls for historic residential architecture.*

*Prohibit Barriers. Prohibit the use of sound walls and physical barriers that physically and visually separate neighbors from the public street.*

Land Use and City Design Element Policy LU-26 states:

*Preserve, protect and restore historic sites, districts, buildings of architectural significance, archaeological resources, and properties and public works.*

*Actions:*

*Leverage Partnerships. Work in partnership with property owners, Alameda Unified School District, and non-profit organizations, such as the Alameda Architectural Preservation Society to ensure that the City's unique and memorable buildings and landscape are preserved.*

*Demolition Controls. Maintain demolition controls for historic properties.*

*Appropriate Alterations. Require that exterior changes to existing buildings be consistent with the building's existing or original architectural design whenever feasible.*

*Preserve Archaeological Resources. Preserve important archaeological resources from loss or destruction and require development to include appropriate mitigation to protect the quality and integrity of these resources.*

*Protect Iconic City-Owned Buildings. Preserve, maintain and invest in all City-owned buildings and facilities of architectural, historical or aesthetic merit.*

Land Use and City Design Element Policy LU-27 states:

*Ensure a built environment that deemphasizes the automobile and enhances Alameda's historic, pedestrian and transit oriented urban fabric and architectural heritage.*

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*Actions:*

*Scale. Harmonize the scale and design of new buildings with the character and scale of the surrounding buildings to the extent practicable and feasible.*

*Pedestrian Orientation. Require that new buildings face the street, provide pedestrian friendly ground floor materials and architectural detailing and pedestrian scale lighting. Provide entrances, fenestration, and storefront windows facing the street.*

*Articulation. Provide varied building facades that are well articulated and visually appealing. Where appropriate, incorporate design themes and features that reflect and complement nearby buildings.*

*Style and materials. All exterior walls of a building should display a consistent style and materials. Exterior colors and materials should be compatible with the surrounding buildings.*

*Windows. Provide adequate window insets to create shadow lines and visual interest.*

### Land Use and City Design Element Policy LU-29 states:

*Maintain and enhance the historic urban form and character of Park and Webster Streets of predominantly low rise multi story buildings with ground floor commercial uses punctuated by taller buildings at block corners.*

*Actions:*

*Zero Setbacks. Require developments in the Park Street and Webster Street business districts to preserve and extend the “street wall” by extending new buildings to the front and side property lines.*

*Entrances. Require entrances directly facing the sidewalk.*

*Parking. Require that any off street parking provided be located behind buildings.*

Addressing the Role of the Automobile in Preserving Alameda's Character. Similar to the 1990 General Plan, the draft General Plan recognizes that maintaining a high quality of life in Alameda and preserving its historic character requires policies and actions to “de-emphasize the automobile”. Consistent with State of California Climate Change legislation, Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission policy, the Alameda Climate Action and Resiliency Plan, and the Alameda Transportation Choices Plan, the draft General Plan policies recognize that Alameda cannot continue to facilitate and encourage additional automobiles in Alameda. Alameda's historic grid systems of streets, 100 year old cross estuary bridges and tubes, and historic main streets do not have the physical space to accommodate a significant increase in automobiles. Furthermore, Alameda must reduce automobile use. Over 70% of Alameda's greenhouse gas emissions are generated by automobiles. If Alameda is going to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, it must reduce its automobile use.

For these reasons, the draft General Plan policies continue the policy direction to de-emphasize the



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automobile and recognize that it is essential preserving Alameda's unique neighborhood character for current and future residents. Examples of this policy direction are reflected in the following draft General Plan policies:

Land Use and City Design Policy LU-30 states:

*To maintain the historic character of Alameda and reduce the impact of automobile parking and automobile trips on the environment, design parking facilities in a manner that de-emphasizes the automobile in the urban environment.*

*Actions:*

*Size. Minimize the size and amount of land dedicated to off-street parking. Require shared use and active management of parking areas to minimize the size of parking lots.*

*Location. Place parking inside, below, or behind buildings. Do not place parking between the building and the public right of way or the waterfront.*

*Landscape and Screening. Parking areas should be well landscaped with shade trees to reduce heat island effects from expansive asphalt surfaces and to screen cars from view.*

*Charging Stations and Solar Panels. Require charging stations and encourage solar panels in parking lots.*

Land Use and City Design Policy LU-2, which states:

*Provide safe streets that enhance mobility and accessibility for everyone, support bicycling and walking, reduce vehicle miles traveled and automobile congestion, and support Alameda's goal of becoming a net-zero emissions community.*

*Actions:*

*Maintain Historic Street Grid. Maintain and, where possible, extend Alameda's historic street grid to promote convenient, safe and walkable neighborhoods and districts with inter-connected well-designed streets.*

*Enhance the Pedestrian-Friendly Environment. Provide pedestrian amenities such as wide sidewalks, street shade trees, pedestrian lighting, bus benches and shelters, and other pedestrian amenities to accommodate pedestrians and promote walking, strolling, window-shopping and sidewalk dining. Promote opportunities for community interaction and encourage a sense of collective ownership of common areas.*

*Improve Connectivity. Connect neighborhoods and major destinations such as parks, open spaces, civic facilities, employment centers, retail and recreation areas with pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. Prohibit sound walls, gates and other barriers that separate neighborhoods and decrease physical and visual connectivity.*

*Achieve Vision Zero. Promote street designs and landscape enhancements that help to eliminate traffic related fatalities and severe injuries on Alameda streets.*

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*Provide Well-Designed Pedestrian Crosswalks and Crossings. Provide safe and clearly marked crosswalks. Minimize curb cuts and driveways that cross public sidewalks and bicycle facilities.*

*Enhance Bicycle Safety. Provide protected bicycle lanes wherever feasible.*

*25 Miles per Hour. Increase public safety and reduce fatalities and serious injuries on-streets by reducing automobile travel speeds to 25 miles per hour or less on all City streets and 15 miles an hour in school zones. To reduce travel speeds, minimize travel lane widths to 10 feet, and on truck routes, major transit routes, commercial districts, to 11 feet wherever possible.*

*Fire Safety Access. Provide access for fire safety vehicles. When more than 20 feet is necessary for aerial fire apparatus access, provide the additional street width space only where necessary. Minimize unnecessary lane width wherever possible to reduce travel speeds and the severity of traffic related injuries.*

*Provide Traffic Calming. Utilize sidewalk bulb outs, traffic circles, and other physical features to reduce vehicle speed and the frequency of collisions between automobiles, pedestrians, and bicyclists.*

*Prioritize Pedestrian, Bicycle and Transit Improvements. When space is needed for pedestrian, bicycle, or transit improvements, prioritize safety and transit efficiency over the need for on-street parking.*

### Mobility Element Policy ME-13 states:

*Reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reliance on single occupancy vehicles, improve public health and safety, and enhance quality of life by making Alameda a city where people of all ages, abilities, income levels and backgrounds can safely, conveniently, and comfortably walk and bike to their destinations.*

*Actions:*

*Community. Foster a strong culture of walking and bicycling.*

*Connectivity and Comfort. Develop a well-connected network of pedestrian and bicycle facilities that are comfortable and convenient for people of all ages and abilities.*

*Equity. Ensure that comfortable bicycle and pedestrian facilities are implemented equitably throughout the city.*

*Safety. Increase the safety of all people bicycling and walking by improving the design of streets, enforcing traffic laws, and educating the public.*

*Sidewalks. Provide wider sidewalks in areas with higher pedestrian volumes to accommodate persons with disabilities, sidewalk cafes and other pedestrian friendly activities. Discourage the installation of fixed barriers for sidewalk cafes that permanently narrow effective sidewalk width when alternative methods are feasible.*

*Bicycle Lanes. Provide separated bicycle lanes instead of unprotected, standard bicycle lanes, unless not feasible.*

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*Street Trees. Add street trees to provide shade, a more pleasant walking and bicycling environment, and to sequester greenhouse gases. Avoid tree species with aggressive roots that may cause sidewalk damage.*

Mobility Element Policy ME-12 states:

*Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing reliance on the single occupancy vehicle and reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT).*

*Actions:*

*High Occupancy Transit Vehicles. Support and expand transit options by constructing dedicated bus lanes, bus queue jump lanes, and expanding Easy Pass programs. Consider high occupancy vehicle lanes on major commute routes such as Webster Street, Constitution Avenue, Park Street, Tilden Avenue, and High Street, and at the entrances to the bridges and tubes.*

*Water Transit Vehicles. Support and expand ferry and water shuttle services from Alameda to San Francisco, Oakland, and other locations throughout the Bay Area. Consider the use of hydrofoil craft for access to locations along the south shore of Alameda.*

*Active Transportation. Support and expand pedestrian and bicycle facilities such as protected bike lanes, improved estuary crossings, and safety improvements.*

*Transportation Demand Management. Require on- and offsite transportation improvements and transportation demand management programs in all new development to reduce the impact of additional automobile trips, VMT, and greenhouse gas emissions.*

*Shared EV charging stations. Increase availability of shared, publicly accessible EV charging stations citywide, including for bicycles. Ensure that all developments with new parking lots include EV charging stations for residents and/or customers.*

*Permitting EV charging stations. Maintain streamlined permitting processes for existing homeowners and business owners who wish to install charging stations.*

*City fleet. Convert the City's vehicle fleet to zero- or low-emission vehicles, including electric bicycles, as technology becomes available, and right-size the fleet.*

### **Questions for the Planning Board:**

- Does the Planning Board endorse the inclusion of Theme #2 in the General Plan?
- If yes, does the Planning Board wish to modify or expand the theme in any way?
- Does the Planning Board endorse the policy directions articulated by the policies highlighted in the

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survey and in this staff report?

- Does the Planning Board wish to modify or revise policies in any way?

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Thomas, Planning, Building and Transportation Director

Exhibits 1-11: Survey Results Received to date.