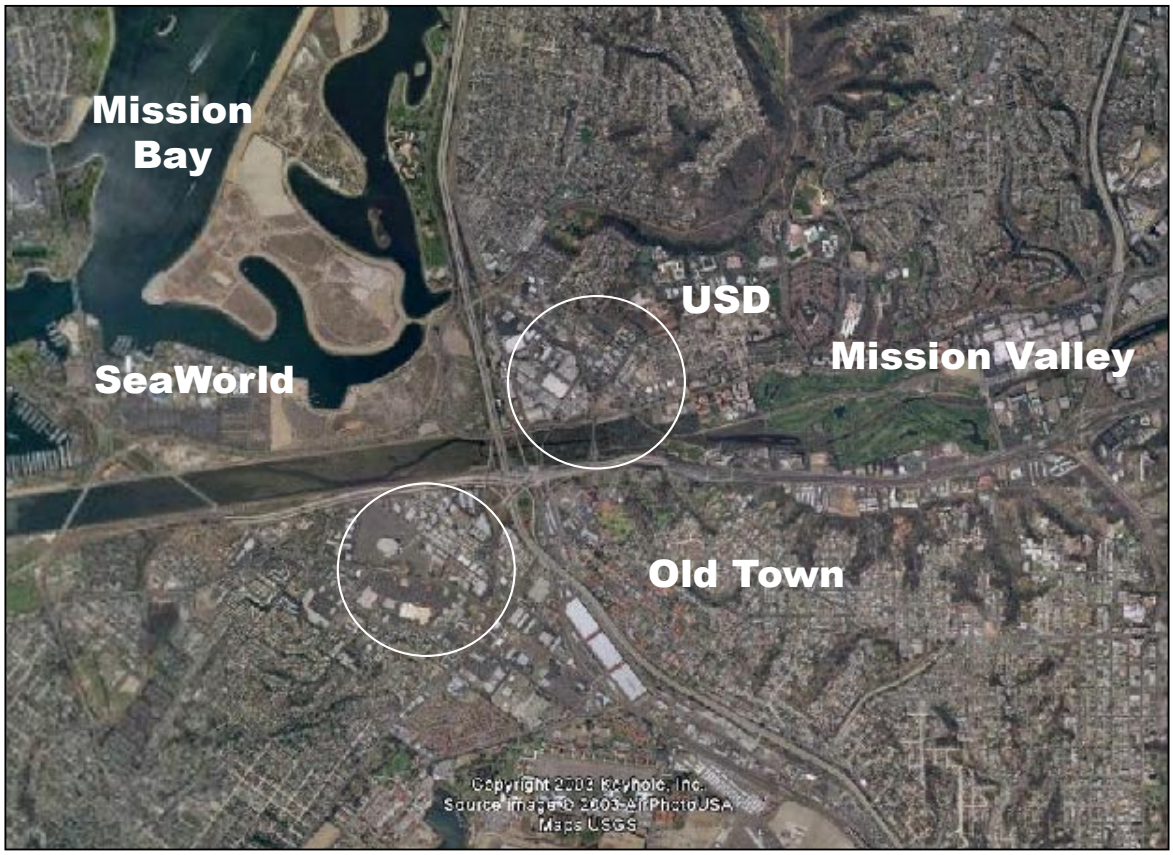
San Diego / North Bay Station Area Planning

Concensus Building Workshops & Conceptual Sketch Plan

San Diego Redevelopment Authority
Calthorpe Associates
September 3, 2004

Introduction

This report summarizes a community process that was used to develop a vision for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) in the Midway District.Midway has a strategic location with great potential: The area is bound roughly by Interstate 8, Interstate 5, Pacific Highway, Lindbergh Field, the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, and the Point Loma residential neighborhood. Most of Midway falls within 10 minutes walking distance to the Old Town Transit Center, which includes the San Diego Trolley, Amtrak, Coaster, and transfers to more than 20 bus lines. Because of its direct access to transit, direct freeway access, and central location (minutes from Downtown San Diego and the airport), Midway has the potential to become an important center for mixed-use, transit-oriented development.



Midway has several barriers that have thus far prevented transit-oriented development. Currently, Midway is dominated by older light industrial, strip retail, government, and institutional uses – with virtually no pedestrian amenities. As a result, Midway has a chaotic, blighted, dysfunctional character that has discouraged pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented development.

In 1998, the City established the North Bay Redevelopment Project Area, which encompassed most of Midway. At the same time, several planning efforts were initiated to explore the creation of a “Bay-to-Bay Link,” a light rail extension, and other concepts for the area. Unfortunately, many of the concepts put forth (including Bay-to-Bay and the light rail) proved to be infeasible and/or cost prohibitive. These planning efforts failed to establish a clear vision for the area. In addition, many local residents and business owners felt that greater community involvement was needed before the City could develop a clear plan for Midway.

In October 2003, the Redevelopment Agency retained Calthorpe Associates to hold a series of community workshops, and out of these meetings to develop a vision for Midway. Three workshops were held on January 13, March 11, and April 27, 2004. This report summarizes the results of these workshops, and the conclusions reached by the participants.

Community Participation

Calthorpe Associates hosted three separate neighborhood workshops at the Peninsula Community Service Center on the following dates: January 13th, March 11th, and April 27th, 2004. Community members were invited from the Midway Community Planning Board, North Bay Association, North Bay Project Area Committee, Old Town Business Association, Peninsula Community Planning Board, the Orchard Apartments, and other business and community organizations. Each workshop was attended by about 25 people.

The workshops focused on the area within a 0.5-mile radius from the Old Town Transit Center, which included the western portion of the Old Town Business District and the entire Midway District. Since Midway was deemed to have greater possibilities for future redevelopment, the public debate emphasized Midway to a great extent.

The workshop participants – residents, business-owners, workers, and anyone else who was interested – were invited to sit down and discuss the future of Midway. Using aerial maps, markers, and game chips that represent the relative sizes of different land uses, participants were able to effectively cast a vote on what shape Midway will take.

Participants gathered in workshops (above) to discuss the future of the area immediately surrounding the Old Town TransitTransit Center (top) and the entire Midway District.

Community Workshops

Public participation is crucial to the success of planning efforts at the regional and local levels. Only by stressing community involvement and ownership can a plan satisfy the needs its stakeholders. Over the past several years, Calthorpe Associates has developed a successful technique for citizen participation in the design process, and it was this process that was used during the Old Town Transit Station workshops. The Calthorpe workshop process actively involves local citizens at the design table, through all stages of a project, so that the community becomes 'problem solvers' in a collaborative process.

We see public involvement as a means to several ends, and in this case, we took pains to engage everyone involved. First, the public was informed about a broad range of options, including urban design, land use, and transportation issues. Neighbors, property owners, and others were invited to be part of the design process and informed of the trade-offs of site-specific planning issues and the scale of what is possible.

Second, since community input is irreplaceable from a designer's point of view, both for consensus building and local knowledge, all interested parties were warmly welcomed into the meetings.

Public involvement in the Old Town Transit Station workshop process began with introductory meetings with stakeholders to clarify project objectives, define likely issues and set the direction of needed analysis.

An initial public workshop provided a forum for citizens to better understand the existing setting and planning process, to communicate concerns, to discuss their likes and dislikes about existing conditions at the project area, and to brainstorm their visions for Old Town's future.

Participants work at small tables to discuss their concerns and visions.

Base maps illustrating existing features help workshop participants to understand the issues facing the area.

Concurrent to these meetings, Calthorpe Associates compiled and analyzed data about the Old Town area, evaluating existing land use, vacant and underutilized parcels, building footprints & orientation, nodes of activity, transit accessibility, circulation issues, and environmental constraints. Using GIS, this information was compiled into base maps for subsequent public workshops. Various graphic layers representing different opportunities and constraints were then overlaid on an aerial photo of Old Town and Midway, allowing citizen participants to have a clear understanding of the issues that effect the site and a foundation for their visions.

A site tour helped familiarize Calthorpe Associates with the issues, constraints, and context of the site.

Community Workshops

After identifying important citizen and stakeholder issues related to Old Town and Midway and compiling physical data about the site, Calthorpe Associates hosted "hands-on" workshops that help determine land use and circulation alternatives. The purpose of these workshops was to identify a range of options regarding the type and location of land uses and urban design features. This workshop requires active listening, compromise, and creativity, helps to build consensus, and fosters an appreciation of opposing viewpoints.

At the workshops, a presentation by Calthorpe Associates introduced participants to the project area, and to general Smart Growth principles. Following the presentation, participants broke into separate tables and collaborated to develop alternative land use schemes. Each table contained 4-7 persons representing a cross-section of interests, with a neutral facilitator to focus debate and serve as the team's graphic hand.

Each team was provided with a base map showing an aerial view of the site overlaid with important features such as environmental constraints, existing and planned infrastructure, and major civic facilities. Tables were also provided with a set of 'game pieces' representing different land uses and development types. By placing these game pieces on the map, workshop groups evaluated the trade-offs between auto- and pedestrian-oriented, low- and high-density, or single- and mixed-use development, illustrating where and what type of growth they believed should occur in the Old Town area. Group members were also encouraged to write or draw any suggestions they have that the game pieces may not cover.

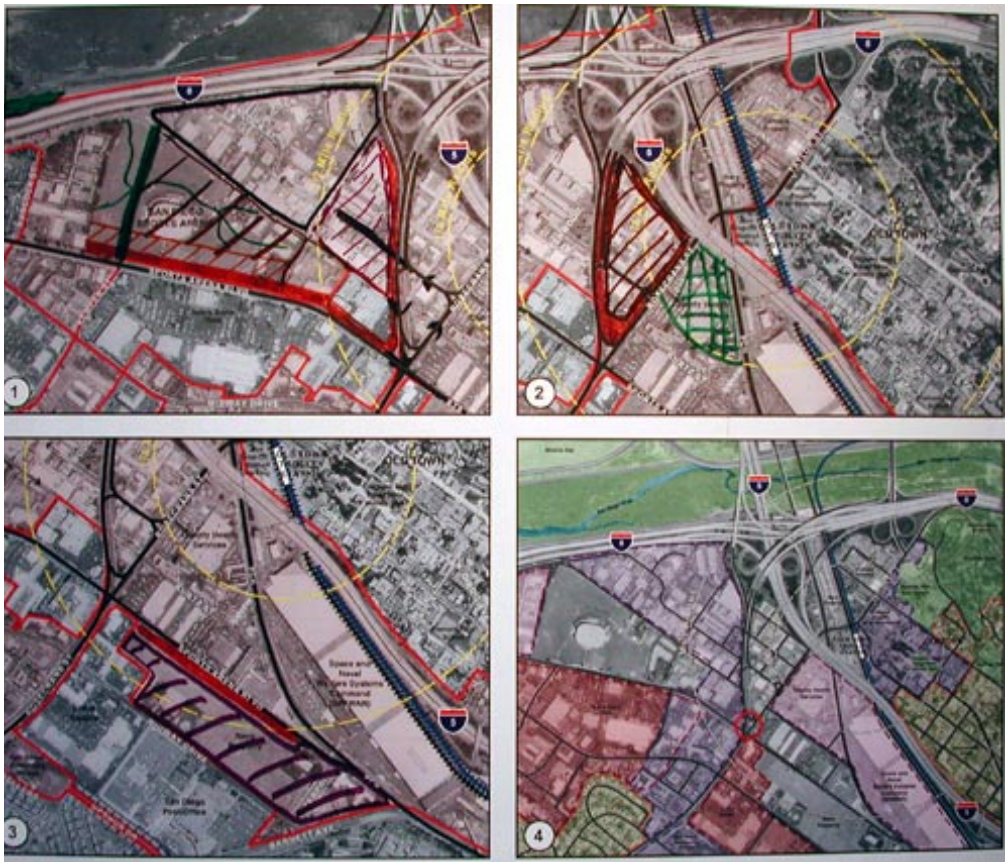
At the conclusion of the working session, a citizen representative from each team presented their design concept to the larger assembly. The ideas presented in these workshops formed the basis for the resulting project alternatives.

A series of land use game pieces are provided at the workshop; each game piece represents a potential new use. The land use game pieces are placed on the map where change is proposed.

Workshop participants break into groups to discuss their land use and transporttion visions for the project area.

The end result of the hands-on workshop is a series of community-created plans, which Calthorpe Associates analyzes for their common elements.

Community Workshops



Common ideas generated at the hands-on workshops feed into a set of alternative development scenarios, which are then presented back to the public in a follow-up workshop.

Using the maps created by the break-out groups in the hands-on workshops, Calthorpe Associates created 'synthesis' maps, illustrating the areas of common agreement among the proposals. While there was broad agreement on some subjects, other issues sparked several visions for the future, and in the subsequent alternatives prepared by Calthorpe Associates, these different visions were all fleshed out.

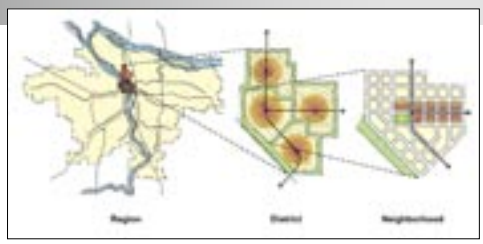
From these synthesis maps, Calthorpe Associates then created alternatives for the project area, depicting commercial, residential and civic uses, along with general locations of buildings, parking and pedestrian improvements. These alternatives were refined in consultation with public agency staff, clients and other stakeholders.

The alternatives were then presented to the public at another workshop and participants were given the opportunity to comment on the plans, to give their ideas for improvements, and to select a preferred alternative. Reflecting the comments at the meeting and from clients, staff and other stakeholders, Calthorpe Associates created a Preferred Alternative in the form of an Illustrative Plan (see p. 14), depicting building footprints, parking configurations, street and pedestrian improvements, and public open spaces.

Workshops help participants understand the options regarding the treatment of existing elements, such as the Sports Arena.

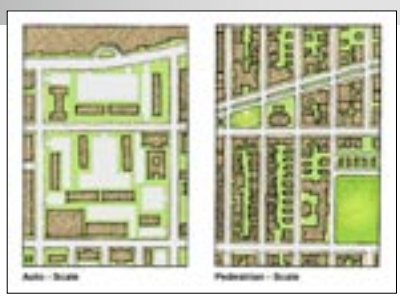
In planning a vision for the Midway District, the community was asked to consider six major concepts that are used in planning: Neighborhood & Region, Human Scale, Diversity & Balance, Sustainability, Civic & Open Space, and Intensity & Density. Following are summaries of these principles.

Planning Principles: Neighborhood & Region



Knowledge of where the study site lies within the greater region is critical to designing it's connections - nothing exists in a void. Of particular importance to Old Town are the highway connections. With limited on-ramps between the highways, the neighborhood is often overrun with traffic traveling from the Point Loma peninsula onto the interstate system.

Planning Principles: Human Scale

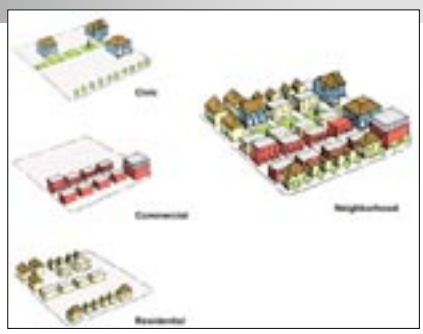


In order for a neighborhood to be a healthy, vibrant community, people must use the street for shopping, walking, and dining. These eyes on the street help decrease crime, increase business, and improve the overall vitality of the area. A key step in accomplishing this is transforming an auto-dominated environment to one that is pedestrian friendly. By introducing a street network that is finer-grained with retail sites that activate the sidewalks, people are encouraged to get out of their cars and walk from destination to destination.

During stakeholder meetings, the community largely felt that the development of the neighborhood should consist of 2-3 stories, emphasize pedestrian amenities and pathways, and should offer neighborhood-serving retail, housing, and office uses.

Major street network (top)
and pedestrian scale streets (bottom)

Planning Principles: Diversity & Balance

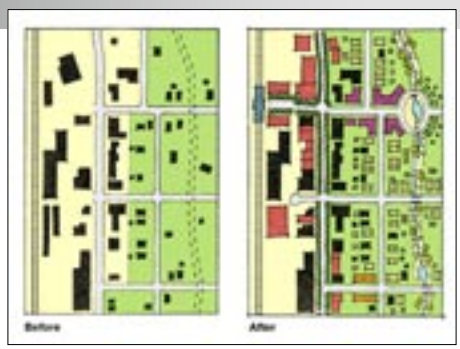


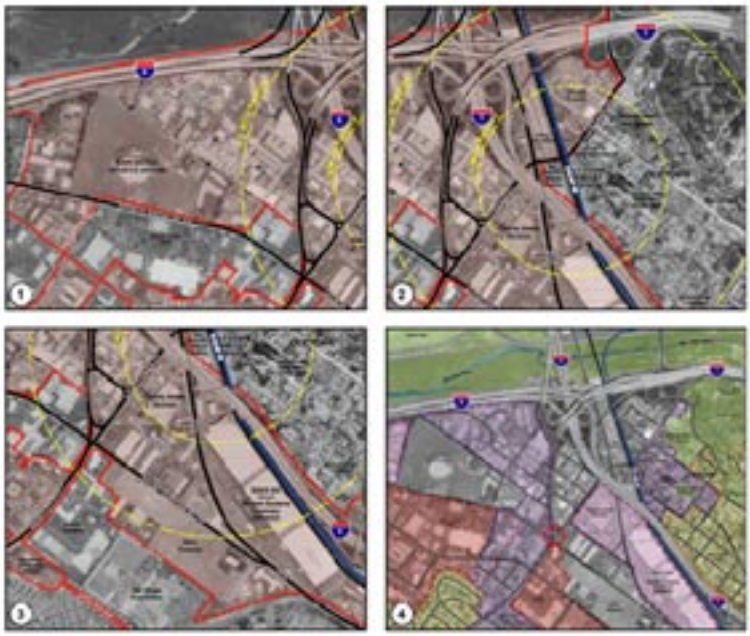
Existing land use map of the Old Town vicinity

During the night, morning, and evening hours, residential properties are active. During business hours, retail and office uses are active. Restaurants are particularly active in the evening. By ensuring that a healthy mix of these uses ocurrs within a given site, we can ensure that the neighborhood is diverse and active. Within Old Town, the constituent uses exist but require fine tuning.

Stakeholders felt strongly that smaller parks should be interspersed throughout the neighborhoods as opposed to consolidated in large areas.

Planning Principles: Sustainability





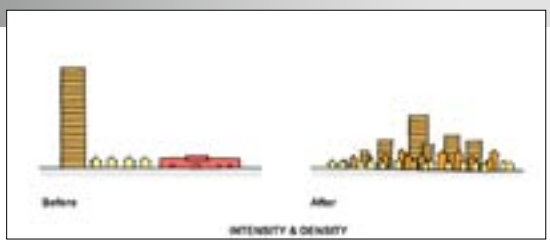
Traffic, land use, pedestrian, and street studies of different sites within Old Town

Cities almost always contain enough space for future growth; the trick is managing development to fill those existing spaces. This is otherwise known as infill development, and it occurs on small sites scattered throughout urban environments. In Old Town, as in many other places, the land is not being used to its maximum potential. By looking at traffic patterns, street networks, and available parcels, we can infuse Old Town with revitalizing growth within the confines of its existing open spaces.

Planning Principles: Civic & Open Space

Open and civic spaces are useless if they are inaccessible. Careful placement of human-scaled open spaces throughout Old Town (such as in the picture at left), and connecting them with tree-lined streets to high-activity areas, allows residents and visitors to take full advantage of the benefits of these urban green spaces.

Planning Principles: Intensity & Density



While concetrating development around transit stops encourages San Diegans to take public transit, it does not necessarily fit in with the type of development that already exists in the region surrounding Old Town. It is important to encourage higher density types of development that increase the urban feel of the environment without Manhattanizing the area. To this end, two to four story buildings with retail on the ground floor and residential above can accomplish this, as do townhomes, office centers, and other mixed use development types.

A healthy mix of reasonably high density, mixed use development types are key to creating the right feel and density on site.

Community Input

During the workshops, community members expressed a wide variety of concerns and suggestions for Midway. For example, community members noted several existing conditions that are negative influences on the neighborhood, including:

- Traffic congestion, particularly at the intersection of Rosecrans and Sports Arena Blvd. It was stated that it is important to solve this early in the process.
- Concerns about future increases of traffic congestion.
- Adult entertainment uses.
- Need to improve (and possibly relocate) the San Diego Sports Arena.
- Inadequate transit services for Midway and the Peninsula.
- Lack of connection between eastbound I-8 & northbound I-5 as well as southbound I-5 & westbound I-8
- Homeless people and panhandling.
- Shortage of parking adjacent to the Old Town Transit Center.
- Lack of open space. (although the Bay-to-Bay proposal was not supported)
- Chaotic, tacky-looking signs along Camino del Rio.
- Lack of community identity.
- Underused and blighted properties.
- The importance of the Caltrans property, which should be a mixed-use project that fits better into the adjacent Old Town community.
- Need for streetscape improvements including ong stretches of the street where there are no sidewalks.
- Need for a hospital to serve the Midway and Peninsula areas.
- Environmental contamination from years of industrial use.

Similarly, community members noted several goals that they wanted to see achieved in the redevelopment of Midway, such as:

- Creating a system of neighborhood-serving “pocket” parks spaced throughout Midway, linked together by “a green path or bike path throughout the area.”
- Reducing traffic congestion at Rosecrans and Sports Arena Blvd.
- Strengthening the link between Old Town and Midway.
- Avoiding the demolition of existing, functioning offices and retail.
- Creating more convenient access from Midway to Pacific Coast Highway.
- Considering a new school to support new residents in the area.
- Considering a new hotel for the area.
- Considering a park for dogs and other pets.
- Re-establishing the street grid to give drivers more options of how they can drive around the neighborhood (e.g., extending Kemper all the way to Kurtz).
- Keeping streets from becoming too wide for pedestrians to cross.
- Preserving light industrial uses north of Kurtz.
- Redeveloping the block currently occupied by San Diego County offices and mental health services.
- Working with the Navy (SPAWAR) to improve parking adjacent to the Old Town Transit Center.
- Attracting high tech offices on land adjacent to the Navy’s SPAWAR facility.
- Building multi-family residential projects within easy walking distance of the Old Tow Transit Center.
- Having residential uses on the upper floors and neighborhood-serving retail on the ground floor.
- Considering live-work projects in areas near existing industrial uses.
- Consider building mixed-use projects, with office on the upper floors and retail on the ground floor, in Old Town.
- Consider a new theater for the area.
- Consider adding a trolley stop on the west side of I-5 that can serve Midway.
- Retain the Bazaar del Mundo shopping center in Old Town.
- Keeping the existing 30-foot height limit for any new development.
- Supporting smaller, locally-owned businesses.
- Consider an arts center, community center, or recreation center.
- Improving Sports Arena Blvd. so that it can be used to cross Rosecrans and access Pacific Coast Highway.

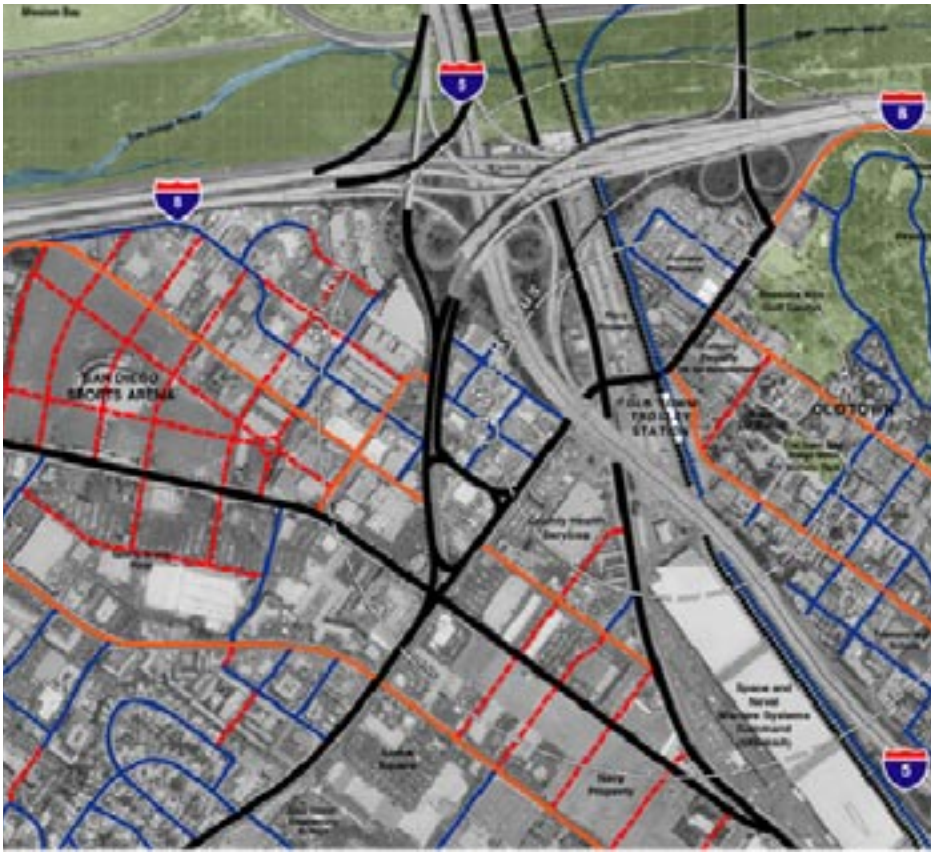
Proposed Conceptual Plan

Throughout the community participation process, five main points were heard repeatedly from stakeholders. These issues were discussed at length by Calthorpe Associates and the San Diego Redevelopment Authority Staff and subsequently integrated into the proposed conceptual plan. Although the plan is not a document that regulates uses and street right-of-ways it is meant to be a tool which translates the concepts that were presented at the workshops and turn them into a plan which will inform the next series of steps to create a regulating map for the area. The workshop process played a critical role in facilitating solid communication and collaboration. When the stakeholders realized that their suggestions were being sincerely integrated into the plan, skepticism waned and contributions increased quickly.

Improving Circulation & the Street Grid

Before any of the major ideas for growth could be implemented, the existing constraints required attention, and traffic was paramount. The collector-connector-arterial system puts a large strain on traffic conditions in this area, combining local, intra-neighborhood traffic with commuters and exacerbating the problem. Additionally, local streets were designed to be long and curvy with few intersections - perfect for semi-tractor trailer trucks, but awful for local traffic and pedestrians. For example, there is no cross street on Sports Arena Boulevard for over half a mile in one stretch. The Proposed Conceptual Plan re-institutes, where possible, a rectilinear street grid that distributes traffic flows across an increased number of streets. By introducing streets that connect more destinations, the plan will ease some of the conflicts between local and regional traffic and also enable the introduction of new land uses, such as mixed use and other more pedestrian-friendly development. By breaking up larger parcels into smaller blocks, the plan also effectively discourages big-box development.

The Proposed Conceptual Plan also takes a serious look at upgrading major streets into possible gateways into the area, specifically Camino del Rio off Interstates 5 and 8, Barnett off the Pacific Highway, and West Point Loma Boulevard off Interstate 8. The Conceptual Plan proposes focusing attention on Rosecrans as a historic linear space. It also looks at extending under utilized streets such as Sherman or Kenyon to take some of the burden of Rosecrans.



Although Calthorpe Associates does not specialize in traffic planning, the plan considers different alternatives for the intersection of Rosecrans and Sports Arena Boulevard. While we do not recommend one specific configuration and we feel that more exploration is necessary, an alternative was selected in an attempt to eliminate the issue as a conceptual stumbling block. Calthorpe Associates referred extensively to the Meyer Mohaddes traffic study in this effort, incorporating their conclusions and recommendations into the Proposed Conceptual Plan.

Proposed Conceptual Plan

Mixed-Use, Livable Neighborhoods

The concept of flexible plans and zoning strategies was new to the community and required some discussion, but once explained, it was well accepted. The traditional pattern of land-uses in the Old Town/Midway area is one of physical separation by wide streets. It became clear that the proposed plan must be more holistic, forgoing the traditional pattern of producing a series of separate projects that agglomerate. To do this, the Conceptual Plan attempted to organize the disparate projects and mix them on the same site to capture automobile and light rail trips. The Old Town Area already has a mixed use pattern and the group had this as a reference for the potential of the rest of the adjacent area.

The potential of this site is enormous. It lies in the center of many different activities and uses, and successfully tapping into this potential is critical. Participants felt that many of the existing uses should remain and the conceptual plan should work around that existing character, suggesting new land uses that would grow around them, especially on the larger, under-utilized sites. Specifically, stakeholders felt that the 30' height limit should be enforced, keeping all new development to a pedestrian-scaled height of 2-3 stories. Additionally, the architecture style is important. Participants emphasized that not only should the buildings be appropriately sized, but they should offer the types of amenities that would make sidewalks and streets welcoming to all users. A book of design guidelines was requested. Most importantly, perhaps, is the inclusion of mixed-use buildings. These buildings, which would include street-level retail with offices or residential above, would draw people to the area at all times of the day, creating a safer, more attractive environment that would serve both workers and residents. The land uses overlaid onto the plan suggest that a mixed use designation be placed on a large portion of the area. This is intended to create flexibility in the future and induce diverse growth. Several sites were identified as compelling opportunities for major mixed-use development. These opportunity sites include: the city-owned 'Sports Arena' parcels, the County's heath services complex, several underused sites along Camino del Rio and Rosecrans, and several lots near to the Navy's SPAWAR facility.

Open Space Improvements

Open Space has the power to define communities and, once traffic considerations were resolved, open space posed the next challenge. Often, stakeholders want to replace all undesirable uses with open space, but over the course of the meetings, the group realized that the study area was bounded on all sides by large open spaces, that large parcels of open space within the site were not as usable and thus undesirable, and that replacing large areas such as the Sport Arena with green space was unreasonable. With these realizations in mind, the exact location of the open spaces was not as important as sticking to a strategy of smaller, diverse spaces scattered throughout the site and strong links to the surrounding, larger open spaces.

Proposed Conceptual Plan

Although the Bay-to-Bay proposal was rejected by almost all in the working group, a comprehensive open space plan and network was selected. It was stated by most of the workshop participants that the Bay-to-Bay idea, while attractive, was a difficult if not impossible solution. The group did feel, however, that working with the existing open space such as the San Diego River and its corridor was important. The proposed plan includes up to 10 new acres of open space split up into 4-6 pocket parks that will successfully serve residents and visitors. These parks will include a diversity of activities, including both programmed areas for sports and playgrounds, and un-programmed uses for picnics and walking paths. Additionally, the plan will include a bicycle and pedestrian link to the San Diego River. Such a link would make an additional 10-15 acres of open space, plus jogging and biking trails, accessible to local residents.

SPAWAR

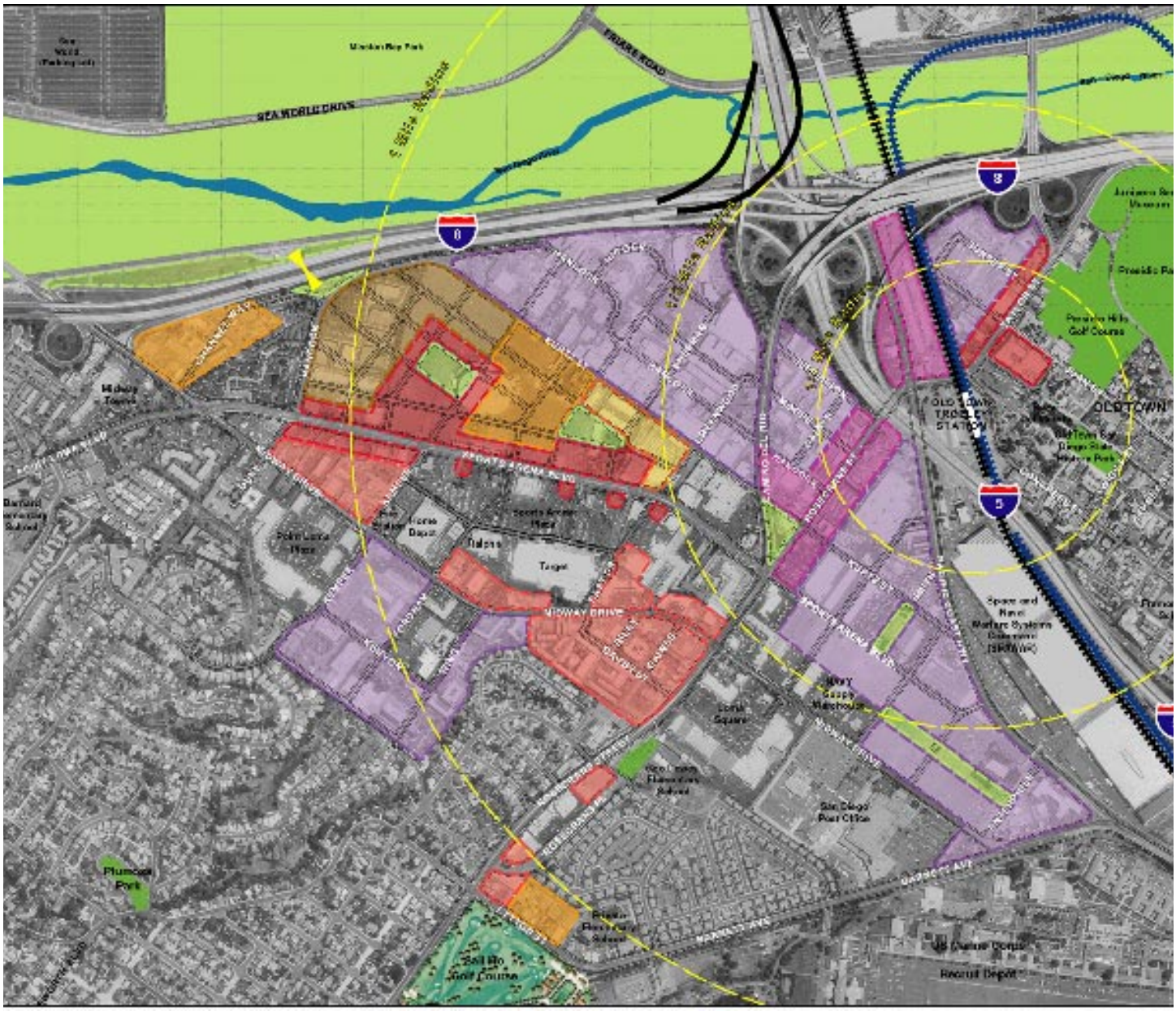
Having SPAWAR (Special Naval Warfare Systems Command) on site is an immense benefit, as it offers the potential in the Proposed Conceptual Plan to act as a catalyst for the creation of a dynamic research and development sector with excellent location and visibility. SPAWAR essentially serves as the information technology headquarters for the US Navy's Pacific Fleet. It plays a central role in the war on terror, managing the real-time, secure communications network over a vast theater of operations that is critical to the Navy's evolving strategy of warfare management today. The command site employs over 4,000 workers and spurs over $1.5 billion in private contracts every year. It is clearly an excellent foundation for the creation of an R&D, high technology, and flex light-industrial area.

To this end, the area around SPAWAR received special attention during the workshops and during the creation of the Proposed Conceptual Plan. To facilitate the success of the R&D sector, connections to the Old Town Station will be strengthened, and 40-70 acres of land adjacent to SPAWAR would be set aside for future growth. Major infrastructure improvements include the aforementioned increase in open space and transit accessibility, and could even include the creation of live/work units. A partnership would be created with the University of California at San Diego's Jacob's School of Engineering, much like high-tech sectors spawned off MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts and near Stanford in the Silicon Valley. The resulting network of Navy, academic, and private sector resources would help to foster the development, application, and commercialization of innovative technologies in software, communications, instrumentation, nanotechnology, and other fields. The Proposed Conceptual Plan would keep growth at a pedestrian scale and improve the general livablilty of the area, all while drawing on the vast potential of SPAWAR and UCSD to create a lively, dynamic neighborhood.

Preservation of Light Industrial Uses

Participants felt strongly about the area north of Kurtz and south of Interstate 8, immediately above the Sports Arena complex. The Conceptual Plan thus recommends keeping this area light industrial in the short term and permitting these uses to transform to other activities as years go by. The need for these services, the small lot sizes, and the site's proximity to the highway and the airport all pointed towards keeping light industrial in this area. Additionally, this strategy would allow the area to retain the relatively high paying working class jobs for residents in the area. Although it was agreed that over time these uses may change, for now the plan suggests flexibility and openness to the growth of mixed-uses without recommending an overhaul of the area. Adding new streets to increase accessibility was also deemed important.

Proposed Conceptual Plan



Old Town Conceptual Site Plan. The intent is not to show particular land uses within the site but to demonstrate a flexible pattern of uses that can change according to the needs of the community.

The Ingredients of Succesful Urban Design

Transportation & Circulation

Creative transportation strategies provide safe, attractive, & engaging pedestrian environments with reduced auto use. By encouraging multiple transit options accessibility, they allow shoppers to park once and shop all day.

Land Use & Long Term Planning

A strategy of focused revitalization catalyzes economic growth with a healthy mix of land uses. This convenient clustering of activities creates a hierarchy of centers throughout the city.

Urban Design Concepts

The way the city looks is critical. Designing healthy, vibrant, attractive, & active spaces with carefully designed borders between commercial and residential uses creates safe & user-friendly sidewalks and eliminates monotony.

Open Space & Civic Uses

Open spaces throughout the city function as breathing spaces and community gathering spots, conveniently located, safe, & engaging for all residents and visitors.

Before (inset) and after pictures of proposed development types in Old Town

Next Steps

The North Bay Station Area planning process succeeded in building consensus behind a clear, unified vision for Midway. Considering the diverse groups of individuals who participated, this was a significant step forward. By breaking the policy gridlock that has afflicted Midway, it is now possible for planning and redevelopment efforts to proceed, thus allowing this special neighborhood to achieve its great potential. Calthorpe recommends the following next steps as part of the overall planning process:

1. This report should be circulated and discussed among the North Bay community and key elected officials.

2. The Meyer Mohaddes Traffic Study should be finalized, reflecting the land use, design, and other components of this Proposed Conceptual Plan.

3. The Proposed Conceptual Plan should be used to guide upcoming community discussions regarding the amendment of the Midway Community Plan.

4. In order to become official city policy, key aspects of the Proposed Conceptual Plan should be incorporated into the forthcoming Community Plan Amendment to the Midway/Pacific Highway Community Plan; revisions to the Zoning in Midway; and amendments to the North Bay Redevelopment Plan.