



CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

MEETING DATE: November 24, 2025

ITEM TITLE: Consideration of Adopting a Resolution Approving the Addendum to the City of San Carlos 2045 General Plan Reset Environmental Impact Report; Adopting a Resolution Amending the San Carlos General Plan Land Use Map, Land Use Element, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element; Introducing an Ordinance Amending the San Carlos Zoning Map and Municipal Code, Title 18 - Zoning Ordinance, to Codify the Downtown Specific Plan; and Introducing an Ordinance Adopting the San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Planning and Transportation Commission recommends the City Council:

1. Adopt a Resolution approving the addendum to the 2045 General Plan Reset Environmental Impact Report (EIR); and
2. Adopt a Resolution amending the San Carlos General Plan Land Use Map, Land Use Element, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element; and
3. Introduce an Ordinance amending the San Carlos Zoning Map and Municipal Code, Title 18 - Zoning Ordinance, to codify the Downtown Specific Plan; and
4. Introduce an Ordinance adopting the San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan.

FISCAL IMPLICATONS:

There are no fiscal impacts associated with adopting the San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan. Funding to prepare the San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan is set aside in Fund C2105 – Downtown Planning Initiative, which has been previously appropriated by the City Council.

SUMMARY:

The City Council is required by the San Carlos Municipal Code and California Government Code to hold a public hearing for consideration of amendments to the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance (San Carlos Municipal Code Sections 18.34.060 and 18.45.060).

The San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan project includes several interrelated documents:

- The proposed Public Draft Downtown Specific Plan; and
- Associated amendments to the City of San Carlos General Plan Land Use Element, Land Use Map, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element; and

- Associated amendments to San Carlos Municipal Code, Title, 18, Zoning Ordinance, and Zoning Map; and
- Addendum to the 2045 General Plan Environmental Impact Report

The purpose of this regularly scheduled and duly noticed meeting of the City Council, on November 24, 2025, is to conduct a Public Hearing on the Downtown Specific Plan.

On November 3, 2025, the Planning and Transportation Commission, at a regularly scheduled and duly noticed public hearing, adopted four (4) resolutions recommending that the City Council adopt the Downtown Specific Plan and associated amendments to the City of San Carlos General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, Land Use and Zoning Maps, and approve an Addendum to the 2045 General Plan Environmental Impact Report (Attachment 8). At their November 3, 2025 meeting, the Planning and Transportation Commission recommended several modifications to the Draft Downtown Specific Plan; those recommendations are presented in Attachment 9 for the City Council's consideration.

On November 13, 2025, the City Council, at a duly noticed special meeting, received a presentation from the Community Development Director. The study session, held at the Council's request, focused on strategies to support downtown economic prosperity, including the ideal business mix, the role of formula businesses, and opportunities to incentivize ground-floor retail, office, and commercial uses within mixed-use developments.

During the session, the Council reviewed the minor amendments to land use regulations proposed in Chapter 3 of the Draft Downtown Specific Plan and noted Action LU-6A, which calls for further evaluation of the City's Formula Business Ordinance and potential adjustments to reduce constraints. The Council discussed the possibility of amending the ordinance in the future, including a range of possible amendments such as changing the current threshold of 15 or more, to 50 or more.

Following its discussion of strategies to encourage ground-floor commercial activation at its November 13 meeting, the Council directed staff to develop additional policy options and action items for consideration at the November 24, 2025 public hearing on the Downtown Specific Plan. These potential amendments are included in Attachment 10 and include adding an action item to create regulatory incentives to encourage ground floor commercial uses and modifications to land use regulations that signal to the marketplace the City's strong desire for ground floor commercial uses along El Camino Real.

BACKGROUND:

Approximately four years ago in 2021, the City Council advanced the idea of creating a new plan for downtown San Carlos. It had been 12 years since a vision statement and accompanying policies for the downtown were established in the 2009 General Plan. In addition, the 2020 pandemic gave rise to new expectations for downtown, including its management and operations. Around the same time, other efforts were at play, including creation of a brand-new Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan (approved in 2020) and a new Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plan (adopted in 2021). Together, with the closure of the 700 block of Laurel Street to pedestrian-only access, new ideas and a robust discussion about Laurel Street began to emerge. Thus, it became the ideal time to address the future downtown Laurel Street and its surroundings. For these

reasons, in 2021 the City Council established the following goal in its 2021 Strategic Plan, which has since been reaffirmed every year since:

“The City of San Carlos will work with residents, property owners, business owners, committees, commissions, the Chamber of Commerce, and all other interested members of the community to develop a plan to understand and ensure that the downtown meets the needs of the community and businesses now and into the future.”

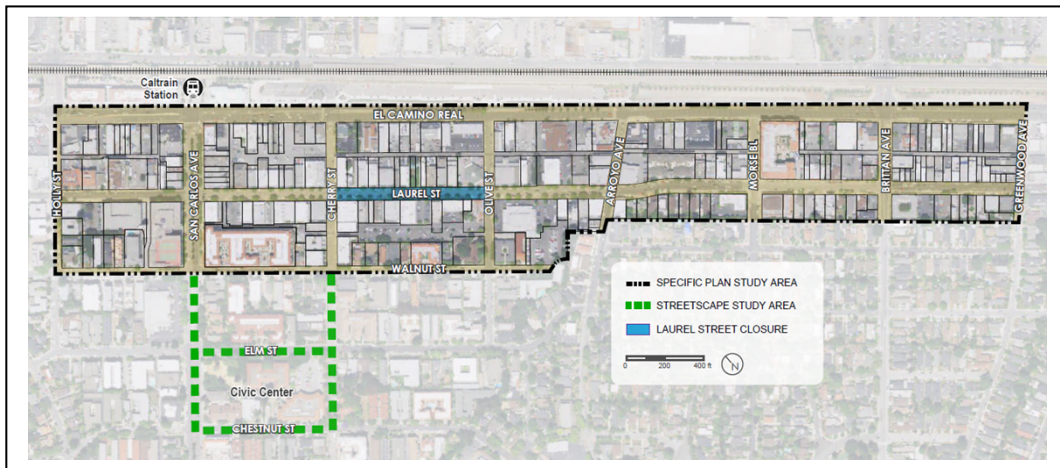
The Downtown Specific Plan project was initiated in March 2022.

In the summer of 2023, just over a year later, the project scope was expanded to include preparation of a Downtown Streetscape Master Plan in response to City Council’s desire to accelerate the transformation of downtown streets. While community engagement for the Downtown Specific Plan continued, the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan was fast-tracked and ultimately adopted by the City Council on April 28, 2025.

The purpose of this meeting is to consider adoption of the Draft Downtown Specific Plan (Exhibit A to Ordinance 2) as well as other associated amendments and addenda as described above.

The Downtown Specific Plan area (Figure 1) is framed by Holly Street to the north and Greenwood Avenue to the south, with El Camino Real to the east and Walnut Street to the west.

Figure 1. Downtown Specific Plan Area



ANALYSIS AND PROJECT DESCRIPTION – DRAFT DOWNTOWN SPECIFIC PLAN:

The proposed Downtown Specific Plan is organized into eleven chapters, which are preceded by an Executive Summary and introductory sections explaining the document’s organization and use. Brief descriptions of each chapter are provided below, along with key highlights and notable features.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Downtown Specific Plan begins with the purpose and objective of the Plan, its authority and scope, its relationship to the San Carlos General Plan and to San Carlos’ Zoning Ordinance. It also shares how the Plan was prepared, how it complies with the California Environmental Quality

Act, and its relationship to other City of San Carlos plans and regulatory documents. The chapter concludes with an overview of the Plan's location, demographic profile, and broader context, followed by a detailed account of the community engagement efforts.

Chapter 2 – Vision, Principles, and Framework for Urban Design and Policy

Through a multi-pronged civic engagement strategy, including input from the City Council appointed Downtown Advisory Committee (DTAC), a strong and shared vision for San Carlos' downtown emerged. This chapter presents this vision and introduces four guiding principles that shaped and support the goals, policies, actions and development standards contained in the Downtown Specific Plan. These guiding principles are embodied in an overall urban design framework for the Downtown Specific Plan.

These principles include:

- **Equity and Resilience** – ensures that downtown continues to serve the diverse needs of the community through its offerings, as well as equitable mobility for all users, all while preparing for the realities of a changing climate.
- **Placemaking and Identity** – recognizes and celebrates the Downtown Core as the “living room” of San Carlos and prioritizes this area as a Pedestrian Priority Zone. In addition, three other sub-districts include the San Carlos Civic Center (though not in the Plan area, its proximity to downtown influenced the Plan), Mid-Laurel, and SoLa (South Laurel). Each district, the Downtown Core, Civic Center, Mid-Laurel, and SoLa, offers unique placemaking opportunities that help establish a distinct identity for each area.
- **Downtown Vibrancy** – This framework establishes priorities for fostering urban vitality, designating the Downtown Core as the focal point of economic activity with the highest levels of pedestrian movement, public life, and community interaction. Such vibrancy is achieved through programmable public spaces and active ground-floor uses.
- **Mobility and Connectivity** – A fully developed network of downtown streets that balance all the various modes of mobility (pedestrian, bicycle, transit, vehicle, etc.). Each street is rebalanced with its appropriate emphasis.

Chapter 3 – Land Use and Urban Design

To guide future development, this chapter provides direction on land use and the character of development by establishing policies, actions, and standards for new construction. This chapter includes the Downtown Specific Plan's Land Use and Zoning Maps. Land use designations and zoning districts are drawn from the City's current distribution of land use designations and zoning districts and their respective intensities. In addition, the Plan's development projections to the year 2045 (which were included in the 2045 General Plan Reset project) include new office and commercial square footage, increases in restaurant square footage, hotel space, and just over 1,500 new residential uses.

Policies have been developed to guide decision making and action over the next 20 years and call for a land use framework to create the pedestrian-oriented and vibrant mixed-use district that is envisioned for the downtown. Policies further encourage the City to review and adapt its zoning ordinance over time to reflect changing market conditions, ensuring that downtown San Carlos remains economically vibrant and fiscally stable.

The downtown character, underscored by the unique experience of each subdistrict, from the downtown core to SoLa (Laurel Street, south of Arroyo Ave.) are also celebrated through policy to guide future change over the coming years.

Land Use Regulations have been carried over from San Carlos Municipal Code Section 18.05.020 but have been slightly modified to ensure land uses respond to the desired mix-of-uses to serve both current and future residents, workers, and visitors. Attachments 5 and 6 present a detailed list of minor amendments to land use regulations.

Development standards for new construction are consistent with the existing standards set for the in San Carlos Municipal Code Section 18.05.030, and consistent with the recently adopted San Carlos Objective Design Standards for Mixed-Use zoning districts.

Chapter 4 – Prosperity and Economic Development

Implementing the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, with its placemaking initiatives, will cultivate a vibrant and attractive environment for businesses, community members, and visitors making it one of the city's most significant economic development strategies. This chapter describes downtown as a key asset to attract and retain talent for major employers. With increased foot traffic and patronage in the downtown, this will drive higher restaurant and retail sales, strengthening city revenues and supporting long-term fiscal health.

This chapter includes policies that aim to ensure that zoning allows for a mix of uses and is in alignment with retail tenant demand and space requirements. In addition, policies and actions direct San Carlos to take a business-friendly approach and help businesses start, operate, and grow. This includes providing space for pop-ups to encourage small business start-ups. Policies also point to coordinated wayfinding, branding and marketing strategies, and supporting community events and activities to attract residents, visitors and businesses.

A key initiative is to explore the formation of a Business Improvement District (BID) for downtown to engage business owners to establish a governance and funding structure that supports operations, programming, and long-term vitality of the downtown. Regular retail-audits and checklists that promote active street level uses are also emphasized. Finally, the plan explores the creation of a vibrant entertainment zone in downtown, designed to bring energy, nightlife, and new experiences to the heart of the San Carlos.

Chapter 5 – Mobility and Connectivity

Mobility improvements are essential to achieving a walkable, connected downtown. To carry out the guiding principle related to mobility and connectivity, this chapter presents an overall goal to establish a multimodal transportation framework that emphasizes safety, accessibility, and connectivity to create a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, and equitable downtown consistent with the adopted Downtown Streetscape Master Plan.

The primary focus is the enhancement of walking, bicycling, and transit infrastructure for a more balanced street network in the downtown informed by traffic data, community input, and direction from the Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plan and Pedestrian and Bicycle Master Plan.

Key policies furthering this framework include:

- Prioritize the pedestrian experience through the development of the 700 block of Laurel Street as a pedestrian-only plaza as well as the corresponding street character of other streets in the Downtown core including significant pedestrian improvements to the 600 and 800 blocks of Laurel Street and the 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue.
- Incorporate protected bicycle lanes with vertical buffers and green striping along primary corridors including San Carlos Avenue, El Camino Real, Brittan Avenue, Arroyo Avenue, and Laurel Street.
- Incorporate infrastructure compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensuring equitable access.
- Improve street designs with wider sidewalks, high visibility crosswalks, and narrow lanes consistent with the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan.
- Enhance the function of alleys within the overall Downtown circulation network.

In addition, this chapter includes standards aligned with policies summarized above for specific elements such as crosswalks, bicycle lanes, intersection treatments, traffic calming measures, and pick-up/drop-off zones to direct future development projects and capital projects as funding allows.

Chapter 6 – Parking and Transportation Demand Management

Recognizing that a well-managed parking system supports Downtown vitality by promoting access for all while complementing walkability, transit access, and public space, this chapter establishes a goal to implement parking management strategies that adapt to evolving state and federal laws and reduce car dependency through complementary transportation demand management (TDM) strategies. The recommended parking management strategies were shaped by a comprehensive parking study that clarified parking supply and usage patterns. While the parking study concludes the on-street parking supply appears sufficient to meet future demands, this chapter introduces strategies that aim to optimize parking use, encourage turnover, and improve availability for all users recognizing that minimum parking requirements are removed consistent with Assembly Bill 2097. Key strategies include:

- Require unbundled parking for market-rate residential and commercial development leases to enhance affordability and provide tenants an option to avoid unnecessary parking costs.
- New non-residential developments are required to share private parking during non-business hours to maximize off-peak usage.
- New developments shall comply with TDM requirements in the Municipal Code, which is in the process of being refined through the ongoing Citywide TDM and Parking Reform project.
- Include the Downtown in any future Transportation Management Association (TMA), supporting coordinated mobility strategies and shared transportation services.

- Allow flexible use of curb space to accommodate a variety of future needs including time-limited parking, bicycle parking, temporary event space, etc.
- Improve alley parking and access by organizing loading and parking functions that would reduce street congestion and improve pedestrian safety.

In addition, this chapter identifies opportunities to collaborate with other agencies to optimize or possibly expand parking supply. If the SamTrans site is redeveloped, the existing parking garage could provide additional public parking, while a new bicycle parking facility at the San Carlos Caltrain Station would strengthen first- and last-mile connectivity and reduce vehicle reliance.

Chapter 7 – Public Realm

This chapter describes how public sidewalks and plazas will be better designed and utilized to strengthen Downtown as the community's central gathering place. As the heart of (and gateway to) Downtown, public realm improvements are primarily focused on the pedestrian-only plaza along the 700 block of Laurel Street (designated by City Council as Centennial Plaza) as well as the 600 and 800 blocks of Laurel Street and the 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue. Throughout these core areas of downtown, street trees will provide a green canopy of shade, benches, seatwalls, and moveable tables and chairs will encourage visitors to stop and relax, and wider sidewalks will provide more space for social interaction and special events. New public realm amenities will include bicycle racks, drinking fountains, and "smart" light poles integrated with charging outlets, Wi-Fi, and ambient music speakers. Two pavilion structures with permanent performance stages will be constructed within the Downtown core--one near the center of Centennial Plaza and the other in the future plaza at the 600 block of Laurel Street.

One of the most significant changes will be the widening of the sidewalks along the first few blocks of San Carlos Avenue and the 600, 700, and 800 blocks of Laurel Street from the current 9.5 feet to a future 20 feet. Beyond adding space for pedestrians, these sidewalk enhancements will nearly double the permitted outdoor dining and retail display zone in front of Downtown businesses. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants and retail businesses were able to apply for encroachment permits to place tables, chairs, or retail displays within the area between the building face and the first red brick line running the length of Laurel Street. Outside of Laurel Street, outdoor dining and retail display need to maintain a clearance of at least four feet for sidewalk traffic. Downtown streetscape enhancements will expand the outdoor dining and retail display zone to nine feet along the 700 block of Laurel, eight feet along the 600 and 800 blocks of Laurel and the 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue, and at least five feet along El Camino Real. Outdoor dining and retail display areas outside the Downtown core will still need to provide the minimum four-foot-wide sidewalk clearance.

Chapter 7 describes existing design standards, operational requirements, and permitting procedures for outdoor dining and retail display within the public right-of-way. These existing provisions will remain in effect until Downtown streetscape enhancements are completed. The chapter also outlines the design standards, operational requirements, and permitting procedures that will go into effect for outdoor dining and retail display areas within the public right-of-way after the Downtown streetscape enhancements (and related sidewalk expansions) are complete. The intent for the future standards is to provide for a safe, cohesive, and high-quality public realm. Consistent with existing practice, no permanent attachments will be allowed in the public right-of-way and enclosed structures will continue to be prohibited. By the time the Downtown streetscape enhancements are completed, the COVID-19-era "parklets" will also have been retired.

Notable modifications to the standards for outdoor dining and retail display include:

- Permitting patterned awnings (currently, awnings may only be a solid color),
- Limiting umbrellas to the City of San Carlos color palette,
- Limiting the height of barrier elements to four feet,
- Prohibiting wrought iron, rope, jersey, or crowd barriers as well as platforms and floor coverings,
- Allowing transparent retractable windscreens during inclement weather, and
- Matching the allowable area for retail display to the allowable area for outdoor dining.

Public realm plans also allow for a five-foot-wide "tree strip" zone adjacent to the curb/parallel parking. The standards will require setbacks from certain street features such as fire hydrants and manholes, meaning not every business may be able to utilize the tree strip to the same degree as an adjacent business.

Chapter 8 – Public Art

This chapter highlights the tremendous opportunity for public art to shape a welcoming and vibrant downtown. Artistic expressions may appear on walls, crosswalks, entry plazas, and other urban surfaces, or as individual sculptures that together create a cohesive and meaningful streetscape experience.

The Plan introduces a thematic approach to public art that draws inspiration from San Carlos' cultural and ecological identity. Policies encourage the integration of public art throughout downtown, the preservation of existing works (such as the Balancing Act sculpture in Harrington Park), the promotion of rotating installations, and collaboration with local artists while also welcoming contributions from national and international talent.

The process for selecting public art aligns with the City's existing Public Arts Master Plan, and a key policy calls for developing sustainable funding mechanisms to support future installations. The chapter concludes with recommended locations for public art throughout the downtown area.

Chapter 9 – Sustainability and Resiliency

Promoting green infrastructure, sustainable mobility, clean energy, energy efficiency, and climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies can prepare San Carlos' downtown for future challenges. This chapter presents policy that calls for integration of resilient infrastructure and climate-responsive strategies. In addition, sustainable mobility and clean energy are also elevated as policy with actions that call for electric charging facilities and active transportation infrastructure. The Plan also recognizes the City's existing Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plan and its call for sustainable practices, incentive programs, and education campaigns.

A significant feature of the Plan calls for street redesigns to incorporate rain gardens, tree pits, and permeable tree strips.

Chapter 10 – Infrastructure and Utilities

This chapter outlines necessary infrastructure and utility improvements in the Plan area. Key policies call for investing in modern infrastructure and innovative technologies, with call to action

for upgrading water and sewer systems to meet growing demands. Policies also support smart technology for street lighting, electric vehicle charging stations, public Wi-Fi connectivity, and smart waste management. Policies were developed to ensure coordinating and partnering with utility providers, such as CalWater, to align and implement infrastructure upgrades.

Chapter 11 – Administration and Implementation

Turning vision into reality requires the resources and structures to make them happen. This chapter outlines the administrative framework and funding strategies necessary to implement the Downtown Specific Plan's goals and public improvements.

The chapter opens with an overview of the regulatory framework for permits and entitlements, referencing the City's Design Review, Compliance Review, Planning Authorities, and Common Procedures provisions within Title 18 (Zoning Ordinance) of the San Carlos Municipal Code.

To implement the public realm improvements, a strategic phasing plan is presented in the Plan. A total of 13 different segments were identified and designed to minimize disruptions while ensuring continuous community access. The Plan clarifies that the precise sequencing of the streetscape improvements will ultimately be decided by the San Carlos City Council and based upon funding availability.

A major focus of this chapter is how to fund the downtown transformation. Achieving the downtown vision will take time and teamwork from the City, property owners, businesses, community members, and developers. While financing and maintaining improvements can be challenging, the results will create lasting value for the entire community.

This section presents policies to guide decision making to support a diversified funding approach, one that includes public-private partnerships, developer impact fees, grants, and other financing strategies. The shared principles affirm that costs should be distributed equitably, City resources should be maximized, and investments should yield lasting community value. Although funding strategies center on one-time capital improvements, the City retains responsibility for ongoing operations and maintenance expenses. This chapter concludes with a summary of funding sources and twelve (12) actions the City can take to execute the financing strategy.

Downtown Specific Plan Appendices

Seven (7) appendices were developed to support preparation of the Downtown Specific Plan. These appendices provide additional detail, research on best practices and recommended strategies, existing and future conditions, and technical analyses.

1. Downtown Streetscape Master Plan (Appendix A to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)
2. Downtown Parking Management Plan (Appendix B to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)
3. Draft Prosperity Plan (Appendix C to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)
4. Traffic Operations Study (Appendix D to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)
5. Infrastructure Memo (Appendix E to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)
6. Draft Fiscal Impact Analysis (Appendix F to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)
7. Civic Engagement (Appendix G to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2)

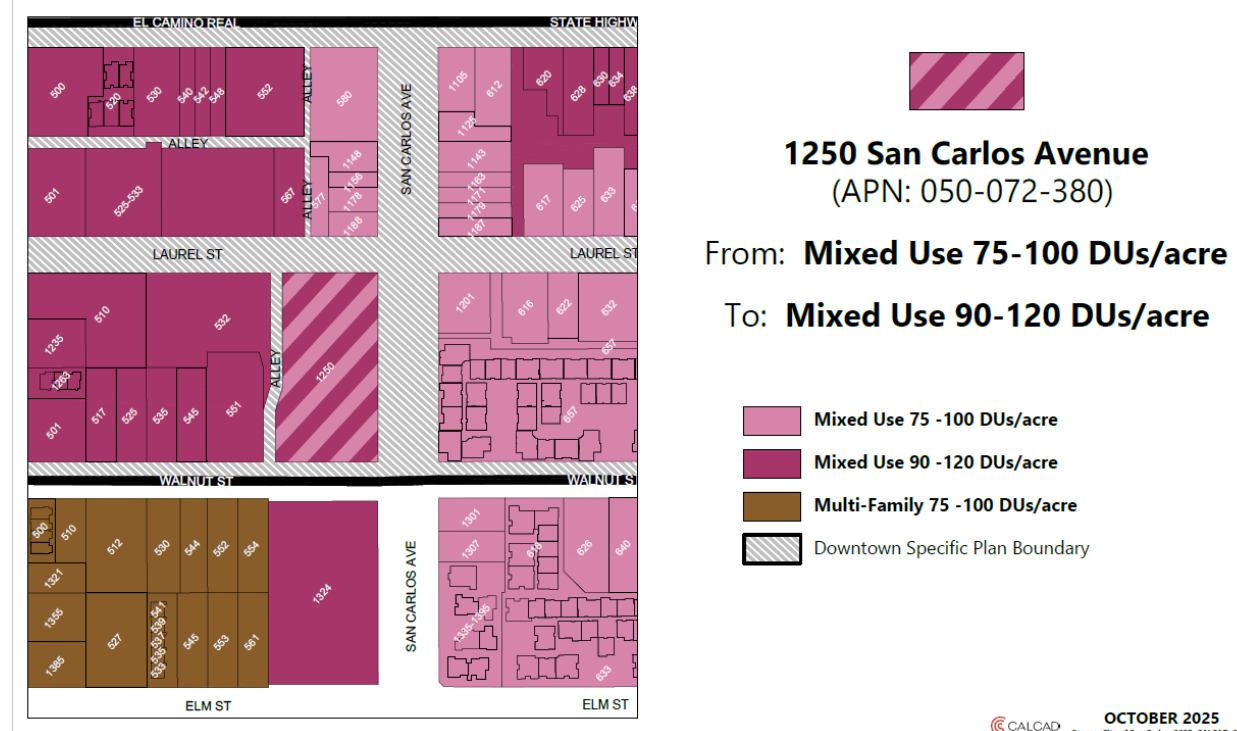
RELATED GENERAL PLAN AMENDMENTS

The City of San Carlos' General Plan Land Use Map, Land Use Element, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element are proposed for amendments to achieve consistency with the proposed Downtown Specific Plan.

Land Use Map (Exhibit A to Resolution 2 – Land Use Map)

Land uses within the proposed Downtown Specific Plan remain consistent with the General Plan Land Use Map, except for the SamTrans site at 1250 San Carlos Avenue (APN 050-072-380), which is proposed to change from Mixed-Use, 75-100 DUs/Acre to Mixed-Use, 90-120 DUs/Acre.

Figure 2. 1250 San Carlos Avenue, Proposed General Plan Land Use Map Amendment



OCTOBER 2025
Source: City of San Carlos, 2025; CALCAD, 2025

Land Use Element

Amendments primarily address the redefinition of the “Downtown Area.” The updated boundaries established by the proposed Downtown Specific Plan are incorporated into the General Plan, accompanied by policy revisions to ensure consistency with the Plan’s new vision and goals. The amendments also reference and emphasize the Downtown Specific Plan and the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan. For a detailed list of amendments, refer to Exhibit B to Resolution 2.

Circulation and Scenic Highways Element

Reference to the Downtown Specific Plan, Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, and San Carlos’ Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan are incorporated into this Element’s section on Streets and Sidewalk Standards and several policies. See Exhibit B to Resolution 2.

Reasons, Findings, and Relationship of the Amendment to the Downtown Specific Plan (SCMC Section 18.34.060, B)

Amendments to the General Plan Land Use Map and Land Use and Circulation Elements are necessary to establish consistency between the proposed Downtown Specific Plan's vision, goals, policies, and actions and the San Carlos General Plan. The Downtown Specific Plan, when adopted, will serve as an extension of the San Carlos General Plan, but provide more localized goals, policies, and actions for the Downtown over the next 20 years. Amendments are minor in nature and apply to existing text and policies within the General Plan Land Use and Circulations Elements. The proposed General Plan Land Use amendment for 1250 San Carlos Avenue, currently home to the SamTrans headquarters, opens the door to additional housing opportunities while honoring the site's existing development footprint. This approach supports the City's commitment to creating more housing and vibrant community spaces in areas close to services and public transit. This modification was presented to the Planning and Transportation Commission and City Council on June 16, 2025, and June 23, 2025, respectively, and was recommended for inclusion in the Downtown Specific Plan.

How the proposed amendment complies with the purposes of this chapter (SCMC Section 18.34.050, A)

San Carlos Municipal Code, Title 18, Zoning Ordinance, Section 18.34.010 (Purpose) establishes procedures for making changes to the General Plan as provided for in State law when there are compelling reasons to do so. These circumstances include, but are not limited to, changes in State or Federal law and problems and opportunities that were unanticipated at the time of plan adoption or the last amendment.

Changes to the General Plan (adopted in 2009 and amendment since) originate from the City Council's call to action in 2021, which set into place a new strategic objective: *"The City of San Carlos will work with residents, property owners, business owners, committees, commissions, the Chamber of Commerce, and all other interested members of the community to develop a plan to understand and ensure that the downtown meets the needs of the community and businesses now and into the future."* This set into motion the creation of a new Downtown Specific Plan and Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, which embody a bold new vision for downtown San Carlos that will be implemented over the next 20 years. Accordingly, minor updates to the General Plan to reflect and respond to this new vision are necessary.

Whether the proposed amendment will require amendment to other plans that the City Council has adopted (SCMC Section 18.34.050, A)

The proposed General Plan amendments do not necessitate amendments to other plans and regulatory documents previously adopted by the City Council. The Plan specifically includes a section that describes its relationship to other plans and documents (see Chapter 1, Introduction, Page 17 of the Downtown Specific Plan). The General Plan, Housing Element, Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plan, East Side Innovation District Vision Plan, San Carlos Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, the recently adopted Objective Design Standards, and the Draft Northeast Area Specific Plan were all considered and served to inform the creation of the Downtown Specific Plan.

The only exception is the San Carlos's Zoning Map and Ordinance, which will require amendments and are further discussed in this report.

Environmental document prepared in compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (SCMC Section 18.34.050, A)

Pursuant to Section 15164 of the CEQA Guidelines, an Addendum to the previously certified EIR was prepared and is discussed in this report.

RELATED ZONING ORDINANCE AMENDMENTS

To adopt the Downtown Specific Plan, two amendments to Zoning are required:

- 1) Zoning Text Amendment
- 2) Zoning Map Amendment

Zoning Text Amendment

To incorporate the proposed *Downtown Specific Plan* into the San Carlos Zoning Ordinance, an amendment to the Ordinance is required, specifically, the creation of a new Chapter 18.14.1 titled “Downtown Specific Plan.”

Exhibit A to Ordinance 1 to this report presents this amendment as they would appear in Title 18, Zoning Ordinance, of the San Carlos Municipal Code (SCMC).

In making a determination, SCMC Section 18.35.080, A requires the following findings:

A. Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment Findings.

1. The ordinance amendment is consistent with the General Plan

The San Carlos General Plan, as amended on May 27, 2025, recognized that the Downtown Specific Plan was underway and accounted for its buildout to the year 2045. Accordingly, with the impending adoption of the Downtown Specific Plan, the General Plan Land Use and Circulation and Scenic Highways Elements are proposed for further amendment to reference and refer to the Downtown Specific Plan and Downtown Streetscape Master Plan, including consistency with the vision, goals, policies, and implementation items within these two Plans. With these concurrent amendments, the intent is to attain policy consistency, which is necessary for implementation through the San Carlos Zoning Ordinance.

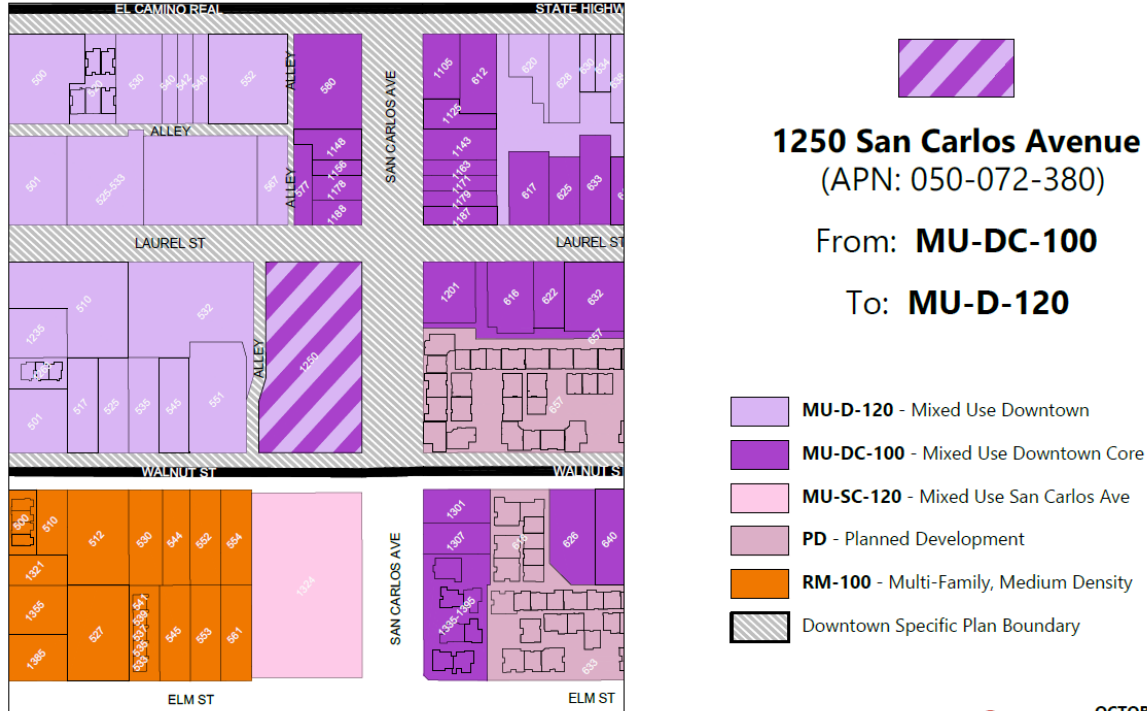
2. The ordinance amendment is consistent with the purpose of this title to promote the growth of the City in an orderly manner and to promote and protect the public health, safety, peace, comfort and general welfare.

The proposed amendments to the Zoning Ordinance are designed to guide the downtown’s transformation and growth in a deliberate and coordinated manner. By aligning land use regulations and development standards with the vision and goals of the Downtown Specific Plan, these amendments help ensure that development and capital improvements occur predictably, efficiently, and in harmony with City priorities.

Zoning Map Amendment

To reflect a Zoning District change from MU-DC-100 to MU-D-120 for the property located at 1250 San Carlos Avenue (APN 050-072-380), otherwise known as the San Mateo County Transit District site, a Zoning Map amendment is required.

Figure 2. 1250 San Carlos Avenue, Proposed Zoning Map Amendment



CALCAD **OCTOBER 2025**
Source: City of San Carlos, 2025; CALCAD, 2025

In making a determination, SCMC Section 18.35.080, B requires the following findings:

B. Zoning District Boundary Amendment Findings (Zoning Map Amendments)

1. The change in district boundaries is consistent with the General Plan.

To change the Zoning designation for 1250 San Carlos Avenue (APN 050-072-380) from Mixed-Use Downtown Core, 100 units/acre (MU-DC-100) to Mixed-Use, Downtown, 120 units/acre would be consistent with the concurrent General Plan Land Use amendment for this site. In addition, this change is consistent with the City's commitment to encourage, support, and facilitate the create of safe, inclusive, diverse, and affordable supply of housing for all income levels as set forth in the City's adopted Housing Element, including Housing Element Policy HOU-2.1, which calls for well-designed multi-family housing and mixed-use projects in the downtown area and along San Carlos Avenue and El Camino Real. In addition, Action HOU-3.9 promotes residential development on nonvacant sites by continuing to proactively outreach to property owners and support new housing efforts.

2. The change in district boundaries is consistent with the purpose of this title to promote the growth of the City in an orderly manner and to promote and protect the public health, safety, peace, comfort and general welfare.

The proposed amendments to the Zoning Map would change the property at 1250 San Carlos Avenue (APN 050-072-380) from MU-DC-100 to MU-D-120. The current distribution of MU-D-120 is adjacent to and in proximity to the subject site and would not result in a development type inconsistent with the vision, goals, policies, and standards set forth in the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, and Downtown Specific Plan.

3. The change in district boundaries is necessary to achieve the balance of land uses desired by the City, consistent with the General Plan, and to increase the inventory of land within a given zoning district.

The subject site at 1250 San Carlos Avenue (APN 050-072-380) is just over 1 acre in size (approximately 49,693 square feet). The current Zoning designation is MU-DC-100, which allows for 86 to 114 housing units on the site at a maximum building height of 50 feet (notwithstanding provisions for additional height under SCMC 18.15.060 and through waivers/concessions from State Density Bonus law). If rezoned to MU-D-100, this would allow for an increase to 103 to 137 housing units at a maximum building height of 75 feet (again, notwithstanding provisions for additional height under SCMC 18.15.060 and through waivers/concessions from State Density Bonus law). This represents a 20% increase in the number of potential housing units. This change would be consistent with the City's commitment to encourage, support, and facilitate the creation of safe, inclusive, diverse, and affordable supply of housing for all income levels as set forth in the City's adopted Housing Element, including Housing Element Policy HOU-2.1, which calls for well-designed multi-family housing and mixed-use projects in the downtown area and along San Carlos Avenue and El Camino Real. Through the Downtown Specific Plan process, the site is ripe for redevelopment as a result of SamTrans moving its headquarters to the City of Millbrae. Accordingly, an opportunity to redevelop the site with ground floor commercial uses and housing above, the proposed zone change would allow more housing units in a location that is within San Carlos' priority development area, adjacent to downtown and essential services, and in walking distance of public transit and Caltrain station.

REVIEW AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE ADDENDUM TO THE 2045 GENERAL PLAN RESET ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT (EIR)

Pursuant to Section 15164 of the CEQA Guidelines, an Addendum to the previously certified EIR was prepared (see Exhibit A to Resolution 1 - Addendum to 2045 General Plan Reset EIR).

Implementation of the proposed Downtown Specific Plan requires amendments to the 2045 General Plan Reset (adopted May 27, 2025), which was evaluated in the General Plan Reset EIR, to ensure consistency between the two plans. The anticipated buildout within the Downtown Specific Plan was analyzed under the General Plan Reset EIR. However, specifics of the Downtown Specific Plan, such as refinements to development standards, the proposed goals and policies, and the public realm improvements, were not discussed as they were not developed at the time the 2045 General Plan Reset project was adopted. Therefore, some modifications and

additions were deemed necessary to the General Plan Reset EIR but, no subsequent or supplemental EIR was required.

Impacts of the Downtown Specific Plan

The environmental conditions described in the General Plan Reset EIR (certified on May 27, 2025) are substantially the same as the current conditions in the Plan Area, city, and region. Therefore, the setting in the General Plan Reset EIR has not changed and remains the same for the purposes of analyzing the Downtown Specific Plan project.

As presented in the Addendum, the Downtown Specific Plan would not result in new or more severe significant impacts than those found within the General Plan Reset EIR, including the significant impacts to air quality, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, traffic, and wildfire. Similar to development facilitated by the 2045 General Plan Reset, the Downtown Specific Plan would result in less than significant impacts related to all other impact areas with adherence to State and local regulations as well as the City's General Plan policies and Standard Conditions of Approvals; therefore, the Downtown Specific Plan would not result in a new or more severe significant impact or a new or more severe cumulatively considerable contribution to a cumulative impact.

Effects and Mitigation Measures

No new or substantially more severe significant effects would occur, and no new mitigation measures are required.

Conclusion

Consistent with the findings of the 2045 General Plan Reset EIR, implementation of the DTSP would have significant and unavoidable impacts related to air quality, GHG emissions, traffic, and wildfire, and less than significant impacts with respect to all other impact areas. No substantial changes have occurred that require major revisions to the 2045 General Plan Reset EIR. There is no new information indicating that the Downtown Specific Plan would have new significant impacts or substantially more severe significant impacts than were identified in the General Plan Reset EIR.

Based on the analysis contained in the Addendum, the following determinations are applicable:

- No further evaluation of environmental impacts is required for the Downtown Specific Plan.
- No subsequent EIR is required pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15162.
- The Addendum is the appropriate level of environmental analysis and documentation for the Downtown Specific Plan pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15164.

Pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15164(c), the City Council will consider the Addendum and 2045 General Plan Reset EIR prior to making a decision on the Downtown Specific Plan.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

From page 30 of the proposed Downtown Specific Plan:

“The Downtown Specific Plan, launched by the City of San Carlos in early 2022, has been an inclusive and collaborative effort to shape a vibrant and livable Downtown. Informed by a series of workshops and online surveys, the City worked closely with the community, and the City Council appointed an 18-member Downtown Advisory Committee (DTAC) to develop a shared vision and guiding principles and provide input into the street and public space designs for the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan and the Downtown Specific Plan policies. The DTAC members represented business operators, property owners, older adults, community members with special needs, the City’s Economic Development Advisory Commission, Parks, Recreation and Culture Commission, Youth Advisory Council, the San Mateo County Chamber of Commerce, and the community at-large. The Downtown Streetscape Master Plan and Downtown Specific Plan processes, occurring between June 2022 and November 2025, were grounded in ongoing community engagement that gathered diverse perspectives from residents, business owners, youth, and other stakeholders. This iterative process ensured the proposed streetscape improvements and planning strategies and policies truly reflect the aspirations and needs of the San Carlos community.”

A comprehensive list of community wide and DTAC activities is provided below. For a detailed account of all community and DTAC input received, refer to Appendix G to Exhibit A of Ordinance 2 - Civic Engagement).

Community Wide Input

1. Stakeholders Focus Group Interviews: August 2022
2. Online Survey 1: August 2022 – January 2023
3. Community Workshop: August 2022
4. Community Workshop: February 2023
5. Coffee and Comments Open House: March 2023
6. Online Survey 2: March 2023 – April 2023
7. Downtown Business Stakeholder Meeting: May 2023
8. Ideation Workshops: December 7 and 9, 2023
9. Online Survey 3: December 2023 – January 2024
10. Economic Development Advisory Commission Meeting: January 2024
11. Parks, Recreation, and Culture Commission Meeting: February 2024
12. Youth Advisory Council: March 2024
13. Downtown Business Stakeholder Meeting: August 2024
14. All Commissions Joint Meeting: September 2024
15. Online Survey 4: August 2024
16. Downtown Business Meeting: August 7, 2025

Downtown Advisory Committee (DTAC) Input

To assist with development of the Downtown Specific Plan, a Council-appointed committee representing multiple interests of the study area was formed on May 25, 2022. The DTAC was responsible for reviewing information, providing feedback on topics, soliciting the participation of the community at large, and working to represent specific interests of the community. The DTAC met a total of 11 times.

1. DTAC Meeting 1: June 22, 2022 (Introduction, Orientation, Project Overview)
2. DTAC Meeting 2: July 13, 2022 (Presentation by Al Savay, Social and Meet and Greet)
3. DTAC Meeting 3: September 13, 2022 (Existing Conditions and Market Analysis)
4. DTAC Meeting 4: January 25, 2023 (Urban Design and Placemaking Concepts)

5. DTAC Meeting 5: June 20, 2023 (Project Update, Business Community Feedback, Work in Progress)
6. DTAC Meeting 6: November 14, 2023 (Introduction to Streetscape Master Plan process)
7. DTAC Meeting 7: March 19, 2024 (Vision, Guiding Principles, Design Concepts)
8. DTAC Meeting 8: September 3, 2024 (Refined Street Designs, Traffic, Circulation, and Parking)
9. DTAC Meeting 9: March 26, 2025 (Policy and Standards Discussion)
10. DTAC Meeting 10: April 15, 2025 (Parking and Transportation Demand Management)
11. DTAC Meeting 11: June 3, 2025 (Policies and Standards)

In addition to the above, multiple study sessions were held with the Planning and Transportation Commission and City Council where the public was invited to participate and make comments.

1. Project Updates to Planning and Transportation Commission: April 17, 2024
2. Project Updates to City Council: April 24, 2023
3. Planning and Transportation Commission: May 20, 2024 (DTAC-endorsed street designs)
4. City Council: June 10, 2024 (DTAC-endorsed street designs)
5. City Council Endorsement of Street Redesigns: September 23, 2024
6. Planning and Transportation Commission: April 7, 2025 (Downtown Streetscape Master Plan recommendation)
7. City Council: April 28, 2025 (Downtown Streetscape Master Plan Adoption)
8. Planning and Transportation Commission Study Session: June 16, 2025 (Downtown Specific Plan)
9. City Council Study Session: June 23, 2025 (Downtown Specific Plan)
10. City Council Study Session: August 25, 2025 (Downtown Specific Plan)

The Public Draft Downtown Specific Plan was released on October 14, 2025, and additional opportunity for the public to participate and share comments was provided at the Planning and Transportation Commission public hearing on November 3, 2025, and again, at tonight's City Council public hearing of November 24, 2025.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Since the Public Draft Downtown Specific Plan was released on October 14, 2025, the city received several comments. These comments include:

On Harrington Park

- Opposed to removing mature trees for restroom installation.
- Concern over loss of greenery, shade, and the park's inviting atmosphere.
- Disapproval of proposed "concrete-heavy," "sterile," or "ugly" designs.
- Desire to preserve Harrington Park's character and environmental value.
- Lack of public notice or engagement before finalizing plans.
- Assurance that memorial bricks will remain preserved and in their original layout.

On Laurel Street and Downtown Changes

- Frustration with extended street closures, loss of parking, and lingering COVID-era configurations.
- Skepticism about the necessity of beautification projects (murals, fountains, etc.).
- Fears of overdevelopment and losing "small-town" charm.

- Will there be grass or turf areas for children to play within the downtown plan.

Business Related Concerns

- Business owners support parklet removal but request city financial support during construction.
- Questions about timeline and farmers market relocation.
- Recommend eliminating the Formula Business Ordinance

San Mateo County Transportation Authority (SamTrans) Site

Through the Downtown Specific Plan process, City staff learned that the San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans) headquarters, located at 1250 San Carlos Avenue, is anticipated to relocate to the City of Millbrae in 2026. The property at 1250 San Carlos Avenue, which is just over one acre in size, represents a prime opportunity for future redevelopment and serves as a prominent gateway site to downtown San Carlos. The SamTrans property consists of two parcels: the office building at 1250 San Carlos Avenue and a parking garage located at 532 Laurel Street. In anticipation of SamTrans’ relocation and the potential for redevelopment, City staff evaluated and proposed a change to the site’s zoning designation from Mixed-Use Downtown Core (MU-DC-100), which allows a maximum of 100 dwelling units per acre and up to four stories or 50 feet in height, to Mixed-Use Downtown (MU-D-120), which permits up to 120 dwelling units per acre and allows six stories or 75 feet in height.

Staff’s recommendation to apply a higher-intensity zoning designation would align the site with the existing zoning of the adjacent SamTrans parking garage (see Table 1 below). Furthermore, this change supports the City’s ongoing commitment to fostering a safe, inclusive, and diverse housing supply across all income levels, as outlined in the adopted Housing Element. Specifically, it advances Policy HOU-2.1, which promotes well-designed multi-family and mixed-use projects in the downtown area and along San Carlos Avenue and El Camino Real.

Table 1. San Mateo County Transit District Site Data

Address/APN/Sq. Ft.	Current Zoning Designation	Recommended Zoning Designation
1250 San Carlos Avenue 050-072-380 49,693 sq. ft.	MU-DC-100 Minimum density: 75 units Maximum density: 100 units Maximum stories: 4 Maximum building height: 50 ft.	MU-D-120
532 Laurel Street APN 050-072-370 29,900	MU-D-120 Minimum density: 90 units Maximum density: 120 units Maximum stories: 6 Maximum building height: 75 ft.	MU-D-120 (no change)

Both the City Council and Planning and Transportation Commission supported staff’s proposal at previous study sessions held on June 16, 2025, and June 23, 2025, respectively.

In August 2025, SamTrans staff met with San Carlos city staff to discuss potential redevelopment of the site. Based on their evaluation, SamTrans indicated that a minimum density of 60 units would be most feasible under current economic conditions.

City staff supports collaborating with SamTrans on a potential shared parking agreement, advancing a transit-oriented development, delivering on-site affordable housing, and activating ground-floor uses at this prominent gateway to downtown San Carlos. However, SamTrans's request for a minimum density below the site's current zoning requirement (MU-DC-100, which requires at least 75 units per acre) is inconsistent with City policies and objectives. Granting an exception would represent a unique consideration and could set an inequitable precedent relative to other development sites.

On November 14, 2025, a letter from SamTrans was received (included in Attachment 7) with a request to maintain the site's current zoning designation of MU-DC-100.

For a detailed account of public comments received since the Public Draft Downtown Specific Plan was released on October 14, 2025, please see Attachment 7 - Public Comments.

PUBLIC NOTICE

A public notice for the City Council public hearing of November 24, 2025, was prepared and mailed on November 13, 2025, to all property owners and sites within the Downtown Specific Plan, and to property owners and sites within 300 feet of the Downtown Specific Plan boundaries. In addition, the public notice was published in the local newspaper on November 13, 2025 (see Attachment 12). Announcement of the City Council hearing of November 24, 2025, was also made using multiple channels, such as direct email, on the project website www.sancarlosedowntownplan.com, through the City's social media platforms, Adult Community Center newsletter, and the San Carlos School District E-newsletter, City Council newsletter, on A-Fame signs in the downtown core and by in-person outreach to downtown business operators.

RECOMMENDATION

The Planning and Transportation Commission recommend the City Council:

1. Adopt a Resolution to approve the Addendum to the 2045 General Plan Reset Environmental Impact Report (EIR); and
2. Adopt a Resolution to amend the San Carlos General Plan Land Use Map, Land Use Element, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element; and
3. Introduce an Ordinance to amend the San Carlos Zoning Map and Municipal Code, Title 18, Zoning Ordinance to codify the Downtown Specific Plan; and
4. Introduce an Ordinance to adopt the Downtown Specific Plan.

NEXT STEPS

If the City Council adopts the two resolutions and introduces the two ordinances as recommended by the Planning and Transportation Commission, staff will return the ordinances to the Council for

a second reading on December 8, 2025. Following the second reading, the San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan will take effect on January 7, 2026.

ALTERNATIVES:

The alternatives available to the City Council include:

1. Adopt a Resolution approving the Addendum to the 2045 General Plan Reset Environmental Impact Report (EIR); adopt a Resolution amending the San Carlos General Plan Land Use Map, Land Use Element, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element; introduce an Ordinance amending the San Carlos Zoning Map and Municipal Code, Title 18-Zoning Ordinance to codify the Downtown Specific Plan; and introduce an Ordinance adopting the Downtown Specific Plan.
2. Do not adopt the two Resolutions and do not introduce the two Ordinances; or
3. Provide staff with alternative direction.

Respectfully submitted by:

Al Savay, Community Development Director

Approved for submission by:



Jeff Maltbie, City Manager

ATTACHMENT(S):

1. Resolution 1 – Approve Addendum to the 2045 General Plan Reset EIR
Exhibit A to Resolution 1 - Addendum to the 2045 General Plan Environmental Impact Report
2. Resolution 2 – Amend the San Carlos General Plan Land Use Map, Land Use Element, and Circulation and Scenic Highways Element
Exhibit A to Resolution 2 – San Carlos General Plan Land Use Map Amendment
Exhibit B to Resolution 2 – San Carlos General Plan Amendments
3. Ordinance 1 - Amend the San Carlos Zoning Map and Municipal Code
Exhibit A to the Ordinance 1 – Title, 18, Zoning Ordinance Amendment
Exhibit B to the Ordinance 1 – Zoning Map Amendments (Site and Citywide)

4. Ordinance 2 - Adopt the Downtown Specific Plan

Exhibit A to the Ordinance 2 – Public Draft Downtown Specific Plan, Oct 14, 2025

Appendix A – Downtown Streetscape Master Plan

Appendix B – Downtown Parking Management Plan

Appendix C – Draft Prosperity Plan

Appendix D – Traffic Operations Study

Appendix E – Infrastructure Memo

Appendix F – Draft Fiscal Impact Analysis

Appendix G – Civic Engagement

5. Amendments to Land Use Regulations – Mixed Use (with Track Changes)

6. Amendments to Land Use Regulations – Parks (with Track Changes)

7. Public Comments Since October 14, 2025

8. Resolutions Passed by the Planning and Transportation Commission, November 3, 2025

9. Planning and Transportation Commission Recommendations, November 3, 2025

10. Recommended Amendments to Downtown Specific Plan

11. Minor Corrections to the Public Draft Downtown Specific Plan

12. Public Hearing Notice Affidavit