



**San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan
May 30, 2025**

Goals and Policies Review Set for the DTAC

Overview

This chapter establishes the goals and policy framework that will guide the evolution of Downtown San Carlos into a vibrant, inclusive, and resilient district over the coming decades. Rooted in community values and informed by technical analysis, these policies are organized into key thematic areas that reflect the multifaceted nature of downtown San Carlos. Together, they provide a comprehensive blueprint for shaping land use, urban design, mobility, economic development, public spaces, sustainability, and infrastructure. Each policy area builds upon the vision established through the planning process and offers direction for decision-making, implementation, and investment. This framework ensures that future growth and change contribute to a cohesive, livable, and economically robust downtown that meets the needs of both current and future San Carlos residents, workers, and visitors. The policy areas discussed in this chapter include:

1. Land Use and Urban Design
2. Prosperity and Economic Development
3. Mobility and Transportation
4. Parking and Transportation Demand Management (TDM)
5. Public Realm
6. Public Art
7. Sustainability & Resiliency
8. Infrastructure

1. Land Use and Urban Design

The land use and urban design policy area provides policies to guide the: mix of permitted uses, intensity and type of future development, function and character of the public realm, and strategies that will result in recognizable, distinguishing features within the downtown plan area.

Goal: *The Downtown Specific Plan aims to create a vital social place for the community, while strengthening a distinctive character and identity for San Carlos, rooted in its culture, history, and context. This identity will be defined by thoughtful land use, the physical form of the built environment, and the overall experience of the downtown area.*

Policies:

- **LU1.** Establish the Plan Area as a pedestrian-oriented, vibrant mixed-use district with a cohesive identity that also honors its historic significance.
- **LU2.** In collaboration with key stakeholders and community members, create a distinct identity for each sub-area within the Plan Area: the Downtown Core, Mid-Laurel, and South Laurel (SoLa), by prioritizing appropriate land uses, development character and intensity, and public realm design.
- **LU3.** Enhance the identity and function of Laurel Street as the “Heart of San Carlos” while prioritizing a unique experience on the 600, 700, and 800 blocks to transform it as the “living room” of the community.
- **LU4.** Support land use and design strategies for the 1100–1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue to establish this street segment as a pedestrian and bicycle friendly gateway and a welcoming entrance to the downtown.
- **LU5.** Promote and support a mix of uses that draw visitors and the local community into the downtown as a place to do business and shop, dine, and gather within the Downtown Core.
- **LU6.** Enhance the experience along El Camino Real, establishing it as the “front door” to downtown and as an active transportation friendly gateway at key intersections such as San Carlos Avenue and El Camino Real, Arroyo Avenue and El Camino Real and Brittan Avenue and El Camino Real, through infill development with active ground-floor uses, high-quality architecture, and extensive greening.
- **LU7.** Maximize development potential within the Plan Area, by encouraging a mix of uses that create vitality and vibrancy by offering diverse employment opportunities,

supporting various businesses, providing community amenities and social gathering spaces, recognizing an increase in residential population, and to support activation throughout the day and night.

- **LU8.** Establish a well-defined streetscape to foster synergy and activation between the Downtown Core and the civic center.
- **LU9.** Coordinate with SamTrans to align the redevelopment of its headquarters parcel to ensure a mix of land uses based on community goals.
- **LU10.** Encourage a mix of uses that promote convenience, economic vitality, fiscal stability, safety, and a high quality of life.
- **LU11.** Promote a balance of resident and worker population in the Plan Area to better support downtown businesses.
- **LU12.** Establish development standards that improve the visual quality of development, creating a unified, distinctive, and attractive character along downtown streets within the Plan Area.
- **LU13.** Prioritize active uses on the ground-floor along the 600, 700, and 800 blocks of Laurel Street and the 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue and at key intersections of El Camino Real with Arroyo Avenue and Brittan Avenue.
- **LU14.** Ensure that all mixed-use buildings with retail and service commercial uses on the ground floor maintain consistent storefront design to enhance the pedestrian experience and create a cohesive public realm.
- **LU15.** Encourage high-performing uses on the ground floor that support successful retail activity and economic stability of the downtown area.
- **LU16.** Ground-floor public spaces along the 600, 700, and 800 blocks of Laurel Street and 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue should incorporate a European model for outdoor dining and retail, including but not limited to bistro seating, awnings, umbrellas, and drop-down panels to create visible, inviting, human-scaled and comfortable spaces.
- **LU17.** Secondary entrances to businesses (including those along alleyways) should be established and required to be clean, maintained, organized, landscaped, well-lit, with enclosed trash receptacles to create a welcoming presence and to allow for pedestrian activity, wayfinding, and ease of access.

2. Prosperity and Economic Development

The Prosperity and Economic Development policy area outlines strategies to support a thriving downtown economy. The policies discussed here focus on strengthening local businesses, attracting new investment, fostering a diverse mix of commercial uses, and enhancing San Carlos's position as a regional destination and aim to create a supportive environment for innovation, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic growth.

Goal: *Downtown San Carlos will be a dynamic economic hub that fosters entrepreneurship, enhances infrastructure, and promotes arts and culture to create a thriving, inclusive, and prosperous community. Through strategic placemaking, branding, and enriched by a mix of land uses, the downtown core will support both retail and dining destinations, strengthen economic vitality, and provide for everyday needs through a welcoming and engaging public realm that supports residents, visitors, and businesses alike.*

Policies:

- **PED1.** Prioritize Downtown Core activation through placemaking strategies, fostering entrepreneurship, infrastructure improvements, arts and culture initiatives and promoting equity to be inclusive of all members of the community.
- **PED2.** Work to position the Downtown Core as a special destination through a branding and marketing strategy, and programming of community events and activities.
- **PED3.** The Parks and Recreation Department will work with the City's Economic Development Division, stakeholders and local organizations to create and oversee a branding and marketing strategy for the downtown core, including coordinating community events, programming, business promotion, and activities.
- **PED4.** The downtown core – 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue and the 600, 700, and 800 blocks of Laurel Street shall seek to create a mix of uses, including dining, retail, and everyday services and needs (banking, shopping, salon, doctors, etc.), to become a downtown that supports the local workforce and businesses.
- **PED5.** Designs for the public realm of the downtown core shall reinforce economic prosperity by providing an inviting, vibrant, safe and comfortable downtown experience for all users.

- **PED6.** Support and activate the plaza on the 600 block of Laurel Street by enabling program and infrastructure for temporary small business pop-ups to enhance vibrancy and support local entrepreneurs.
- **PED7.** Ensure proactive coordination and outreach with local businesses during public realm and streetscape improvements. The City will develop construction plans that aim to minimize disruption and support business continuity throughout all project phases.

3. Mobility and Transportation

This policy area presents a multimodal transportation approach that prioritizes improvements to walking, biking, and transit infrastructure, and supports a balanced street network while enhancing downtown circulation and accessibility.

Goal: *The Downtown Specific Plan sets forth a comprehensive framework for a multimodal transportation network that prioritizes active transportation, safety, accessibility, and connectivity, while fostering a pedestrian-friendly, vibrant, and equitable downtown that serves the needs of all residents, workers, and visitors in alignment with the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan.*

Policies:

- **M1.** Prioritize development of the 700 block of Laurel Street as a pedestrian-only plaza supporting vitality, vibrancy and equity for all users.
- **M2.** Prioritize the pedestrian experience and corresponding street character for all streets within the downtown core: 1100 and 1200 San Carlos Avenue; 600, 700, 800 blocks of Laurel Street; and the 1100 and 1200 blocks of Cherry St., Olive St.; and the 1100 and 1200 blocks of Arroyo Avenue.
- **M3.** Prioritize pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure by implementing wider sidewalks, protected bike lanes with vertical buffers, bike parking, green striping for visibility, and safe crossings—particularly along key corridors such as San Carlos Avenue, El Camino Real, Brittan Avenue, Arroyo Avenue, and Laurel Street.
- **M4.** Actively pursue public transit connectivity by enhancing bus stops and improving first- and last-mile connections to Caltrain and bus services through implementation of active transportation infrastructure.
- **M5.** Promote safe and visible biking infrastructure by incorporating protected bike lanes with vertical buffers, green striping for high visibility, and ample bike parking along primary corridors including San Carlos Avenue, El Camino Real, Brittan Avenue, Arroyo Avenue, and Laurel Street.

- **M6.** Develop one bicycle hub at each entry point to the 700 block of Laurel Street that includes secure bicycle stands and supportive amenities to encourage active transportation and support the 700 block of Laurel Street as a wheel-free zone.
- **M7.** Design bus stops to safely interface with bike lanes by using features like boarding islands, curb extensions, and clear signage, as specified in the SamTrans Bus Stop Design Guidance, 2024.
- **M8.** Ensure equitable access to transportation by incorporating ADA-compliant infrastructure throughout downtown.
- **M9.** Ensure the downtown alleys have designated locations or managed times for delivery services to park and access businesses.
- **M10.** Enhance the alleys and extend their function to incorporate secondary access to the businesses as well as loading and unloading services, while strengthening and highlighting the role of alleys in the overall mobility network.
- **M11.** To improve safety for active transportation, promote traffic calming measures and reduced speed limits through improved street design and other measures for streets within the Plan Area.
- **M12.** Ensure accessibility to the 700 block of Laurel Street pedestrian plaza by establishing designated pick-up/drop-off points for seniors, children, and people with health conditions or mobility challenges.
- **M13.** Provide clear, consistent, and accessible wayfinding for all mobility users, including pedestrians, cyclists, transit riders, and drivers—through signage, maps, and markers that guide people safely and efficiently to key destinations.
- **M14.** Evaluate long-term vehicular traffic modifications, including Holly Street swing lanes, emerging transportation technologies, and congestion mitigation strategies to further support the goal and policies for a vibrant and safe pedestrian-oriented downtown.
- **M15.** Collaborate with SamTrans, Caltrans, and the Grand Boulevard Initiative to plan and implement coordinated improvements along El Camino Real that enhance safety, mobility, and streetscape quality, consistent with the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan.

4. Parking & Transportation Demand Management (TDM)

The policy area of Parking and TDM addresses downtown parking needs while promoting more sustainable travel behavior. It introduces strategies to optimize existing parking resources, reduce demand through TDM programs, and support a mode shift toward transit, walking, and biking—all while maintaining convenient access for visitors and businesses.

Goal:

The Downtown Specific Plan sets forth parking management strategies that efficiently address parking needs, responds to changing state and federal laws, and reduces car dependency through innovative Transportation Demand Management strategies.

Policies:

- **PTDM1.** Manage parking resources as a coordinated, shared system to efficiently and flexibly serve the needs of residents, businesses, and visitors.
- **PTDM2.** Reduce the reliance on single-occupant vehicle (SOV) travel by requiring the use of cost-effective Transportation Demand Management programs, including transit subsidies, carpool incentives, and unbundled parking for new developments.
- **PTDM3.** Establish parking maximums to promote land efficiency and reduce vehicle dependence for encouraging alternative modes of travel, reduce reliance on single-occupancy vehicles, and limit land devoted to private parking.
- **PTDM4.** Eliminate parking minimums to align with AB 2097 and MTC TOC Policy and encourage development without unnecessary parking requirements.
- **PTDM5.** Require shared parking for new developments to maximize use of underutilized private parking, reduce land use inefficiencies, and support mixed-use and off-peak occupancy patterns.
- **PTDM6.** Unbundle parking from residential and commercial leases to increase housing affordability and give tenants the choice to opt out of paying for unused parking.
- **PTDM7.** Limit the total downtown parking supply through district-wide caps by land use to support long-term climate and livability goals; Require new developments to rely on shared or public parking once caps are met.
- **PTDM8.** Include downtown San Carlos in any future Transportation Management Authority (TMA) to support coordinated mobility strategies, reduce vehicle trips, and enhance access through shared transportation services and programs.

- **PTDM9.** Encourage adaptive reuse of parking areas for temporary public space or commercial activation during annual events such as the Art and Wine Faire.
- **PTDM10.** Prioritize pedestrian-friendly design by limiting excessive parking requirements and encouraging the use of existing parking garages and public parking lots as parking solutions.
- **PTDM11.** Allow for the flexible use of curb space to accommodate a variety of potential needs including vehicle parking (time limited, loading, accessible, etc.), bicycle parking, street trees, temporary event space, etc.
- **PTDM12.** Develop clear way-finding signage for parking facilities and consider using smart technology that identifies parking availability to reduce congestion from vehicles searching for parking.
- **PTDM13.** Provide bike parking in downtown alleys and at entrances to the pedestrian plaza, especially near the dismounting zone. Facilities should be easy to find, safe, and convenient for both short- and long-term use.
- **PTDM14.** Improve alley parking and access by organizing loading, service, and parking functions to reduce street congestion and enhance pedestrian safety, using successful alley layouts as models for future improvements.

5. Public Realm

The Public Realm policy area prioritizes a strong, well-designed public realm to create a socially vibrant and economically thriving downtown with multi-functional streets, generous sidewalks, inviting plazas, and accessible green spaces. Together, these elements support community interaction, enhance walkability, and contribute to the overall appeal and success of Downtown San Carlos.

Goal: *The Downtown Specific Plan creates high-quality, multi-functional public spaces and a well-connected street network that fosters social interaction, promotes health and well-being, and enhances downtown's vibrancy. With an expanded tree canopy and sustainable landscaping, the downtown improves ecological resilience, air quality, and pedestrian comfort while addressing climate challenges such as urban heat island effects and stormwater management. Public spaces are designed to be inclusive, ensuring equitable access for all users while contributing to a more sustainable and visually appealing downtown environment.*

Policies:

- **PR1.** Expand and enhance public plazas within the downtown core, including the pedestrian plaza along the full span of the 700 block of Laurel Street (including

Harrington Park) and the new plaza on the 600 block of Laurel Street to create vibrant community gathering spaces.

- **PR2.** Enhance connectivity between public spaces to ensure seamless, accessible movement for pedestrians and cyclists.
- **PR3.** Widen sidewalks in the downtown core in order to accommodate comfortable space for outdoor dining and retail displays and ample space for pedestrian circulation.
- **PR4.** Activate streets by providing public outdoor seating areas that enrich the pedestrian experience and support local businesses.
- **PR5.** Establish high-quality design standards for outdoor dining and outdoor retail displays to ensure they are safe, attractive, and contribute to a vibrant and cohesive public realm.
- **PR6.** Provide the full range of public street amenities and furnishings to support public street life and provide a rich downtown experience. This should include distinctive paving, street furnishings (including benches, drinking fountains, trash & recycling receptacles, bike parking racks), signage, wayfinding, and lighting.
- **PR7.** Provide spaces for pop-ups to encourage small local businesses and to provide affordable food and beverage options to the community. Spaces will include electrical outlets so that gas-powered generators can be prohibited. The City will have mechanisms for reviewing and approving pop-up businesses considering location, business type, and design quality.
- **PR8.** “Smart Poles” will be located throughout the downtown to provide a range of courtesy amenities such as vendor outlets, car charging, courtesy outlets for phone and laptop charging, and Wi-Fi. These will be housed in streetlight poles to the greatest extent possible.
- **PR9.** Provide extensive greening in the downtown by planting uniform street trees on all downtown streets for shade and cooling, and seasonal variation (spring flowering and fall color).
- **PR10.** Without impeding ample pedestrian space, integrate green infrastructure throughout downtown, including rain gardens and permeable surfaces, to enhance sustainability and improve stormwater management.
- **PR11.** Preserve and enhance the urban canopy through the tree preservation ordinance that protects mature trees and encourages long-term maintenance.
- **PR12.** Coordinate early with the City Arborist and tree growers on all downtown improvements to ensure successful cultivation of street trees and long-term enhancement of the urban tree canopy.

- **PR13.** Encourage native and/or drought-tolerant landscaping in all new developments and public realm projects to promote sustainability and reduce water usage.
- **PR14.** Ensure regular maintenance of landscaped areas to sustain their ecological, functional, and aesthetic benefits.
- **PR15.** Encourage and allow for vertical greening, including green walls and rooftop gardens, to improve air quality and mitigate the urban heat island effect. All vertical greening shall have permanent and effective irrigation.
- **PR16.** Create distinctive public spaces by planting accent trees and establishing groves at key nodes along the 600, 700, and 800 blocks of Laurel Street and 1100 and 1200 blocks of San Carlos Avenue to strengthen placemaking and reinforce local identity, as set forth in the Downtown Streetscape Master Plan.
- **PR17.** Incorporate climate-resilient plantings in all rain gardens, prioritizing native, drought-tolerant, and stormwater-friendly species to support biodiversity and manage urban runoff.
- **PR18.** Design public spaces for inclusivity, incorporating features and developing programs that engage and accommodate all users.
- **PR19.** Support the public realm design, particularly along the 700 Block of Laurel and expandable to the 600 & 800 Blocks, to accommodate large community events and gatherings such as farmers markets, art and wine festivals, and other civic celebrations.
- **PR20.** Downtown programmed activities will follow the City’s Noise Ordinance (Municipal Code Chapter 9.30) and specifically shall follow regulations prescribed in Municipal Code Section 9.30.040 *Permit to exceed noise levels* when City-sanctioned or sponsored activities are scheduled. Music stage venues will be situated and equipped to minimize excessive ambient noise.
- **PR21.** Gas-powered generators will be prohibited for downtown events, vendors, performers and pop-ups. Instead, the downtown will be equipped with a network of electrical outlets integrated in “smart poles” to accommodate electrical needs.

6. Public Art

The policies discussed in the Public Art area outline a vision for integrating public art into the fabric of downtown. It encourages collaboration with artists, local organizations, and the community to create engaging, site-specific works that reflect San Carlos’s identity, activate public spaces, and contribute to a vibrant cultural landscape.

Goal: *The Downtown San Carlos Specific Plan aims to create a culturally rich and dynamic downtown through public art that reflects the city’s cultural and ecological heritage. By integrating art into streetscape, alleys, plazas, and civic spaces, community identity is strengthened, local artists are supported, and the public realm is enhanced. This fosters placemaking and inspires both residents and visitors.*

Policies:

- **PA1.** Encourage the integration of public art in streetscapes, plazas, and building facades.
- **PA2.** Express community cultural and ecological heritage through public art.
- **PA3.** Encourage the retention and preservation of existing public art that holds community significance, such as the Balancing Act sculpture in Harrington Park and the mural on the 800 block of Laurel Street, and promote rotating art installations and interactive public art experiences in the form of QR codes that lead visitors online to learn about art in the newly created public plazas and public spaces in the downtown.
- **PA4.** Collaborate with local arts organizations to support the creation of site-specific artworks and temporary exhibits along the 700 block of Laurel Street Pedestrian Plaza, the new public plaza on the 600 block, and the gateway to downtown at San Carlos Avenue and El Camino Real, enriching the downtown core with vibrant cultural expressions.
- **PA5.** Collaborate with community stakeholders to identify key locations for murals, sculptures, and other forms of public art.
- **PA6.** Develop a funding mechanism to support upkeep and maintenance of existing and future public art initiatives.

7. Sustainability and Resiliency

The Sustainability and Resiliency policy area establishes goals and policies to advance environmental sustainability and climate resilience. It promotes green infrastructure, energy efficiency, water conservation, and climate adaptation strategies that reduce environmental impacts while preparing the downtown for future challenges.

Goal: *The Downtown Specific Plan aims to promote environmentally sustainable development and infrastructure that enhances downtown’s long-term resilience to climate change and natural hazards, while fostering a vibrant and adaptable urban environment. This includes integrating resilient infrastructure and climate-responsive strategies to mitigate the impact of environmental challenges and ensure the sustainability of the downtown area for future generations.*

Policies:

- **SR1.** Implement green infrastructure through rain gardens, permeable pavements, green roofs, and low-impact development strategies to reduce runoff and improve water quality.
- **SR2.** Integrate electric vehicle (EV) charging facilities in both on-street and off-street parking spaces to promote sustainable mobility and support the adoption of clean energy transportation options throughout downtown.
- **SR3.** Support local businesses and residents in adopting sustainable practices through incentive programs and education campaigns.
- **SR4.** Require new developments to incorporate green building standards and energy-efficient design.

8. Infrastructure

The infrastructure policy area puts forth infrastructure improvements serving the Plan Area, including wet utilities, and solid waste disposal.

Goal: *The San Carlos Downtown Specific Plan aims to ensure a robust, adaptable, and future-ready infrastructure system that supports growth, enhances the quality of life, and meets the evolving needs of the community. This includes investing in modern infrastructure, embracing innovative technologies, and promoting sustainable practices to create a resilient downtown that can effectively accommodate future development and improve the overall urban experience.*

Policies:

- **I1.** Partner with California Water Service (CalWater) and other utility providers to align infrastructure upgrades with Downtown Streetscape Master Plan projects, ensuring seamless coordination, minimizing disruptions, and optimizing project efficiency.
- **I2.** Upgrade water and sewer systems to meet growing demands and incorporate water-saving technologies in new developments and public infrastructure.
- **I3.** Implement smart technologies such as smart street lighting, EV charging stations, public Wi-Fi connectivity, and smart waste management etc. for improved energy efficiency, waste management, and public services.
- **I4.** Enhance broadband connectivity to support economic growth and innovation.

- **13.** Develop a waste management strategy that prioritizes reduction, recycling, and composting, emphasizing circular economy practices.
- **16.** Ensure equitable access to community services, including emergency services for all downtown residents, workers, and visitors.
- **17.** Secure funding through public-private partnerships and other models to implement sustainable and cost-effective infrastructure improvements.