Important Questions To Discuss Now . . .

. . . About the Future of Our Community

◆ Important Decisions Will Soon Be Made About the Future of Our Communities
Important decisions that will affect our communities for years to come are about to be made in each of our cities. It is critical that these decisions follow widespread and thoughtful dialogues, be made wisely and based on thoughtful consideration of both current and future community needs.

A wide range of issues from aging seniors to shifting energy sources to our mobility options demand that we pay attention to the way our communities are built.

◆ Cities are Updating the Housing Elements of Their General Plans
Within the next six months, all cities in the Bay Area are required by state law to update the housing elements of their general plans. Some cities will also be updating their entire general plans and/or preparing specific plans for particular areas, such as their downtowns.

The decisions made during each of these planning processes will have major, long term consequences because they will be determining where most of the new homes in our communities will be located, and what kinds of homes will be built.

These decisions are likely to impact our social, economic, and environmental well-being for years to come.

◆ Some Questions We Should Be Discussing
As we make these decisions, here are some basic questions we should be discussing, to ensure that these plans responsibly balance current concerns and longer term needs, and take into account major changes that are occurring in the world around us.

These questions relate to:

• Meeting the needs of an aging population
• Maintaining the health of our local economy
• Addressing our environmental challenges
• Making public transit more convenient and cost-effective
• Fulfilling our obligations to others

◆ How You Can Get Involved
Given the importance and long term consequences of these upcoming land use planning decisions, we need to take them very seriously and be certain that we understand what is at stake. At the end of this document are suggestions for how you can make these important questions part of the dialogue and decision making process in your community.
Meeting The Needs of An Aging Population

Question
How can we plan our city to better meet the needs and preferences of our aging population?

Background
Over the next twenty years, our population will age dramatically as the Baby Boomers reach their senior years. In fact, it is estimated that by 2030, one out of every four residents of San Mateo County will be over age 65.

Our current, relatively low density, automobile-dependent land use patterns will not adequately meet the needs and lifestyle preferences of our aging population.

Many seniors will become unable or unwilling to drive due to health conditions or other physical limitations. Others may be physically able to drive but unable to afford to drive as rising costs of car maintenance, insurance, and health care squeeze their limited budgets.

As a consequence, many seniors may find themselves living in suburban, single-family homes that met their needs when they were younger and raising children, but may not meet their needs as they age and do not drive. For some, this will greatly reduce their ability to remain independent, active, and engaged with their family, friends, and community – and dramatically reduce their quality of life.

At the same time, we will have a growing population of seniors who are seeking more active lifestyles in their retirement years, free of the responsibilities of house and yard maintenance. Many of them are expressing preferences to enjoy their retirement years within their existing communities, but in maintenance-free housing located in more vibrant, diverse, urban neighborhoods. This will enable them to live fulfilling lives, have access to many different destinations without having to drive, and maintain contact and involvement with their family, friends, and community.

The planning we do today will determine to a very large extent whether our communities will meet the basic needs of these two, diverse segments of our growing senior population.
Questions
How can we plan our city to help ensure that our local businesses will be able to attract the workers they need, at all income levels?
Who will fill the jobs as Baby Boomers retire?

Background
The health of our local economy is important not only for the employment and income it provides for residents but also for the substantial tax revenues it provides to local governments. In fact, in San Mateo County, most of our cities receive more of their revenues from sales and businesses taxes than from property taxes. So, maintaining a healthy local economy contributes not only to our individual economic wellbeing, but is also a major source of revenues supporting the important local government services and facilities that we rely on.

In San Mateo County, due to a shortage of housing relative to the number of local jobs (a “jobs/housing imbalance”), many of the workers our local businesses depend on must commute here from the South Bay, the East Bay, and beyond. The vast majority of these workers commute via individual automobiles. As gasoline prices rise, more of our workers are financially squeezed by the rising costs of commuting to work. As a result, many workers are likely to seek housing closer to where they work, or jobs closer to where they currently live. Since the high price of housing here on the Peninsula prevents many of them from moving closer to their work, they are likely to pursue employment opportunities closer to home. Over time, this may make it more difficult for our local businesses to attract the workers they need. This problem may become worse over time, as more workers retire and our local businesses need to find replacements. This may cause some of them to relocate to communities closer to where the needed workers reside, and some may even go out of business altogether.

Our current reliance on workers who commute from elsewhere to their jobs in San Mateo County and our shortage of housing for additional workers puts our local businesses and economy in jeopardy. That, in turn, may impact the ability of our governments to provide the services and facilities we need.

This is a possibility we cannot afford to ignore.
Question
How can we plan our city so that we reduce the potential consequences of climate change by reducing our dependency on automobiles to meet our mobility needs?

Background
We are about to face the most serious environmental challenges of our lifetimes as we experience and seek to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

In California, climate change may:

• Inundate low-lying coastal and bayfront areas as sea level rises
• Increase public health problems related to extreme weather events, air pollution, and insect-borne diseases (all of which may disproportionately impact our senior population)
• Increase the frequency and severity of wildfires, which will increase air pollution
• Make our water supplies less reliable
• Impact agriculture and our food supply
• Endanger many animal and plant species

While there are many avenues for reducing the consequences of climate change, we must realize that our current land use patterns and how we plan for our cities’ future growth can play a significant role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

It is estimated that about almost half (43%) of the greenhouse gas emissions in the Bay Area come from on-road transportation. That is, in large part, a result of the driving that is made necessary by our sprawling, inefficient and automobile-dependent land use patterns, and the distances between our jobs and our homes.

To help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the consequences of global warming, we need to adapt our current land use patterns to make walking, bicycling, and public transit more viable alternatives to the automobile in meeting our mobility needs.
Making Public Transit More Convenient and Cost-effective

Question
How can we plan our city so that we increase the convenience and cost-effectiveness of public transit?

Background
The role of public transit in our lives will become increasingly important over the coming years as:

• Our population grows and we try to minimize additional traffic congestion

• Our population ages and a steadily growing number of seniors become unable or unwilling to drive, or cannot afford the rising costs of driving and owning an automobile

• More residents look for ways to reduce the impacts of rising fuel costs on their budgets and their lives

• Our desire to minimize the impacts of climate change cause us to pursue ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions related to on-road travel

Simply asking public transit agencies to increase the number of busses, trains, etc. they run will not work if they do not experience sufficient increases in ridership and farebox revenues to offset the increased costs of providing this additional transit service.

We need to realize that our public transit systems cannot be any more convenient and cost-effective than our land use patterns enable them to be. And our current, predominantly low density, suburban land use patterns are very inefficient for public transit systems to serve.

Making our transit systems more convenient and cost-effective will require development of housing and employment centers along major transit corridors and around transit hubs where transit systems come together.
Fulfilling Our Obligations To Others

**Question**
What obligation do we have to others and to future generations as we plan the future of our community?

**Background**
Should we consider the needs of others as we plan the future of our communities? That question is of great philosophical and practical importance.

This question addresses our core values as parents, as neighbors, as Americans, and as human beings.

Our answer to this question may be influenced by:

- Our families, our teachers, and our religious leaders,
- Our sense of equality, justice or other values our country may represent, or
- Our maternal and paternal instincts to provide a better world for our children, and for future generations.

“What obligations do we have to others?” is also a question of great practical importance as we plan the future of our communities because the land use planning decisions we make today will affect not just us, but also future generations.

The manner in which we plan our communities is one of the most tangible ways we can express our sense of obligation to our children and to future generations.

For whose benefit are we making these plans? Whose needs should we be taking into consideration as we deliberate our city’s future?

Should our revised plans reflect only our own current wants, or should they also consider the future needs of our children and other residents of our community (including ourselves, as we grow older)?

What we may prefer today for our community and what may be needed in the future may sometimes be at odds. How do we balance these potentially competing concerns?

These are things we should think about and discuss as we revise the housing elements of our local general plans.

It has been said that we write our biographies in the cities we create. What will the revised housing elements we will soon be adopting tell the world and future generations about us?
The Need to Discuss These Important Questions Very Soon

The deadline for cities and counties in San Mateo County and the rest of the Bay Area to revise their housing elements and get them certified by the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) is June 30, 2009.

But HCD’s website indicates that it may take as much as five months for HCD to (a) review cities’ initial draft housing elements and (b) certify the final versions. Consequently, cities that wish to have their housing elements certified by HCD prior to the June 30 deadline will need to submit their draft housing element updates to HCD relatively early in 2009. That means local communities will have to complete their draft housing elements within the next 4-5 months.

That leaves relatively little time for communities to discuss the important questions presented in this report and use that dialogue to guide their housing element updates.

Opportunities for Community Discussion

Community discussion of the questions presented in this report can occur in a number of different ways, including the following:

1. Cities can make it part of their housing element update processes by incorporating them into their community outreach and public hearing processes.

2. Organizations such as neighborhood and homeowners associations, seniors and faith-based groups, business, educational, and community service organizations, etc., can discuss these questions at their normal meetings or at special meetings held specifically for this purpose.

3. Individuals can discuss these questions with their friends and neighbors.

4. Local newspapers can (a) publicize the dates, times, and locations of meetings to discuss these questions, and encourage their readers to attend, and (b) invite letters to the editor on these topics.

The more we discuss these questions, the more likely it is that we will make informed, responsible decisions about our community’s future.

Getting Involved in Your City’s Housing Element Update

For the discussion of these questions to make a difference in the planning of our communities’ futures, the outcomes from these dialogues must be communicated effectively to the city and county elected officials, advisory commissions, and staff who will be making or influencing the decisions regarding our housing element updates.

The following organizations and agencies have websites and other activities that can help you learn more about your city’s housing element update process and how to get involved:

1. If you would like to schedule a presentation for your organization about sustainability and these Important Questions, contact Sustainable San Mateo County.
   www.sustainablesanmateo.org

2. If you would like to find out about having a Community Conversation on housing in your community, contact Threshold 2008.
   www.threshold2008.org

3. If you would like to learn more how you can be a voice for change in your community, or to gain more specific information on how the Housing Element update process works, contact the Housing Leadership Council.
   www.hlcsmc.org.

4. If you would like to find out more about your city’s Housing Element update process including contact information for coordinating city staff, contact your city’s website or San Mateo County Department of Housing.
   www.21elements.com

This document is available online at www.sustainablesanmateo.org
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