

February 2, 2004

MEMORANDUM

To : Town Council
From : Ted Driscoll and Steve Toben, Town Councilmembers
Subject : Summary of Town Center Planning Efforts

This memo will try to give an overview of the considerations and efforts applied to our Town Center over the years. Particular attention will be paid to the most recent Town Center Citizens Advisory Committee meetings held last year, but these meetings should be viewed in the context of deliberations and analyses by earlier committees, other representative Town organizations, expert consultants and the Town Council.

Introduction

The current Town Center buildings were built during a span from roughly the late 1940's to mid 1950's (excepting the School House which is obviously much older). They were constructed to building codes and engineering standards of that era using reinforced concrete block walls on concrete slabs with wood framing. The Portola Valley School District occupied these buildings for over 20 years, as well as the two other school sites at Corte Madera and Ormondale.

The Town was incorporated in 1964 after an interested group of local community leaders gathered together to seek local control over critical proposed land use decisions. The Town government operated for its first decade in limited space obtained from other institutions in the area, notably the old adobe structure at Alpine Hills Tennis Club, more recently occupied by the Windmill Preschool.

In 1975, partly in response to State Law changes and partly in reaction to citizen urgings, the school district decided to abandon the school site now called Town Center. At that time it was well known that the San Andreas fault passed through the site, but the actual fault locations were inferred, not determined with precise specificity. Since enrollments were declining at that time, the school district apparently concluded that they could respond to state law changes best by consolidating at Ormondale and Corte Madera with any overflow handled by modular structures at the other two sites.

In the Town Council minutes of 4/9/75, the School Superintendent reported that the State "mandates evacuation" of the site within the following three months (!) unless the School District enacted a plan to move out within two years. The School District expressed a willingness to sell the property to the Town "for public recreational use". The Town Council set up subcommittees to negotiate with the School District and to investigate uses of the site.

On 5/14/75, a Town Council subcommittee reported on the results of negotiations with the School District establishing a price of \$120K subject to findings about the site. It is clear that the Town had been looking for a site for a Town Center. Some of the findings include statements that this site is found to be the best site in Town for a Town Center; that a commitment to use the site shall be in strict conformance with the Town's General Plan; and that use of the site for playing fields is especially advantageous. The council also created another subcommittee to investigate uses and the geologic situation. Later in 1975, after review by various committees, planning officials, and the Planning Commission, the Town Council committed to buy the property from the School District.

Limited trenching at this time by Woodward-Clyde found the fault in the baseball field but not elsewhere on the site. At a subsequent meeting on 5/12/76, subcommittees reported on geologic investigations, suggested rules on the occupancy of buildings near the inferred fault locations, and proposed the following limited use plan for buildings with 50 to 125 feet of inferred faults:

- a) Not to exceed 5 years – Town Hall and Town Meeting Room – Library
- b) Not to exceed 10 years – Cultural Center – Recreation Activities Building
- c) Unlimited - Outdoor uses and accessory uses

In late 1976, the Town moved into the school site, locating the Town Administration in the former school administration building. Some minor alterations were performed to upgrade the engineering of the buildings, notably removing a breezeway. Over the following years, classroom space was converted into a library, meeting rooms, artist studios and after-school classrooms. In spite of the 5 and 10 year time limits on occupancy of the buildings recommended at the time of the Town's purchase of the property, use of the school buildings gradually increased over the next two decades, ultimately reaching levels equal to or exceeding the original school use.

Elsewhere in town, development proposals mandated substantial geologic investigations on other locations of the fault, with some on parcels nearly adjacent to Town Center. These investigations and the advance of science lead to a stronger understanding over time of our underlying geology. In response to advances in engineering and geology, building codes are upgraded every few years, each time becoming stiffer and more demanding. Also, the State mandates public institutions to provide access to facilities for the disabled, and to develop emergency action plans and facilities. Finally, in the two intervening decades a number of earthquakes occurred in both California (Loma Prieta, Coalinga, Northridge) and elsewhere in the world (Kobe, Anatolia, others) that served to remind us of the dangers inherent in living in earthquake-prone areas.

The 1995-96 Town Center Facilities Committee

During the nearly four decades since the Town's incorporation, our needs for administration and maintenance space had slowly grown. We had also seen an increase in the demand for cultural and recreational uses at the Town Center. This had been one impetus for our creeping increase in the utilization of the school buildings. In 1995, the Town Council formed an ad hoc

Town Center Facilities Committee of council members, individuals from relevant committees, town staff and interested tenants to evaluate current and desired uses for the Town Center site, as a precursor to evaluating what course we should take. Roughly a dozen participants conducted 5-10 meetings, and concluded that we needed more space for town administration, a corporation yard, and that we wanted to try and retain all of the current uses of Town Center including the library, cultural, artistic and athletic programs, after school uses and, if possible, the large MUR facility.

The School House Renovation Project

Independently, in 1997-98, after a number of public meetings and wide participation in fundraising, the Town undertook an extensive renovation of the School House building, including a new foundation and significant structural upgrading to current standards, with the intention of using it as a Town Meeting Room. We were fortunate in this case that the necessary renovation left us with an earthquake-safe, up-to-code wood-frame building, and that the current location of the school house is on a narrow strip between the mapped fault traces, and therefore fairly safe geologically.

It should be noted that in 1998 the Town suffered catastrophic damage along Upper Alpine Road due to the El Nino storms. This delayed further consideration of the Town Center issues for 1-2 years.

Seeking an Incremental Solution

Beginning in 1996, and then continuing in 1999 after the Alpine Road problem, the Town Council attempted to meet the requirements of the 1995-96 Town Center Facilities Committee by incremental approaches. The council asked local architects to work together to do some master planning, and Carter Warr and John Richards stepped forward. A sample of preliminary designs was created that explored options such as adding on to the existing Town Administration building in the back, or rebuilding the Town Administration building in a slightly shifted location. Early on in this process it became apparent that the additions to the Town Administration building would necessitate upgrading the entire building to current code, and would therefore cost roughly the same as constructing a new Town Administration building from scratch. When the Town Council reviewed these alternatives it became apparent that we also needed to more accurately pin down the location of the fault(s) so as to fully understand where one could and could not build.

A first round of geologic investigation was undertaken by reviewing past studies and investigations on neighboring properties. The Town Geologist concluded that the Town needed to do additional trenching to fill in gaps in the Town's knowledge of the faulting pattern on the site. A first round of geologic investigation was performed by William Lettis & Associates to more accurately characterize the fault pattern as it passed through the site. This work was conducted in 2001 and report was presented in early 2002.

The conclusion of this study was that the pattern of faulting on the Town Center site was more complicated than previously thought. It was characterized by a sequence of *en echelon* faults,

zipper-like, parallel, diagonal mini-faults marching through the site. The end result of this fault pattern was that a larger area of surface deformation was to be expected in a major earthquake. The geologists concluded that a no-build zone encompassing the area of potential ground deformation was appropriate. However, a side effect of this investigation was the suggestion that the back third of the Town Center site was potentially clear of faulting and might be buildable. The study drove home the point that the dangers of ground rupture within the zone of deformation posed a threat of a different order of magnitude than the shaking that a new building would experience on the back third of the site.

In light of this information, and the minimal difference in cost between seismic renovation and new construction, the Town Council decided to halt incremental efforts and “go back to the drawing board”.

Evaluating Alternative Locations

The Town Council then formed another Ad Hoc Town Center Location Committee to investigate all possible locations within Town. This committee was made up of council members, members of other town committees, local architects and volunteer citizens. This group considered over a dozen possible sites. This list was narrowed down to 11, based principally on first order feasibility. These 11 sites were then narrowed down to 4, based on purchase-ability, size, access to major roads, and centrality. These sites were: 1) the current Town Center, 2) & 3) different configurations of Nathhorst Triangle parcels, and 4) the Stanford Wedge. A simple evaluation matrix with weights and consensus scores was developed. This analysis fairly clearly identified a preference for the current Town Center site. It was the only site we currently owned, was of clearly sufficient size for both recreational facilities and building needs, and maintained proximity to the newly renovated School House/Meeting Hall. It allowed a phased approach and kept all of the desired uses together for the lowest cost.

Confirming Town Center Site Feasibility

A second round of geologic studies was conducted in 2003 to validate the assumption that the back of the current Town Center site was in fact safe from a geologic point of view. This investigation was done in two parts, first investigating the area of the tennis courts, and then investigating the area of the soccer field. In addition, CJW Architecture presented some first draft alternative schemes, mainly to confirm that the uses could be accommodated on the back of the site.

The final geologic results have been received in the past week and they confirm the safety of the back third of the site. In the end the current Town Center site can be seen in three distinct segments from a front section to a middle section to a back section.

- The front section, located along Portola Road, is currently undeveloped and has mature heritage oaks in an open woodland setting. It is currently underlain by a supposedly inactive trace of the San Andreas fault called the Trancos trace. To develop this portion of the site would require further geologic investigation, but given the likely depth of the Trancos trace, there is a high likelihood that the fault investigation would yield inconclusive results, even after great expense.

- The middle section currently contains all of the old school buildings. It is underlain by the main active trace of the San Andreas fault, called the Woodside trace. This is the area that is expected to be significantly deformed when a major earthquake strikes this stretch of the San Andreas. The zone of deformation could be as much as 100-150 feet wide because of the *en echelon* faulting pattern. Therefore this section of the site has been largely mapped as a no build zone. However, it can be used as playing fields and outdoor recreation.
- The back section of the site is currently used as a soccer field, children's play area and tennis courts. Its underlying geology appears to be undisturbed and stable and it is now considered to be completely buildable with appropriate engineering design.

Ironically, we currently have our buildings in the least stable portion of the site and our playing fields in the most buildable portion of the site.

Town Center Citizens Advisory Committee

During the past seven years the Town Council has collected an enormous amount of data about the Town Center issue. In 2003, after a public review meeting of the currently understood situation, the Town Council formed an Ad Hoc Town Center Citizens Advisory Committee (TCCAC) to gather citizen input on how to best navigate this complex data. Over thirty five concerned citizens signed up to help process the options and give advice and feedback to the Council. This group represented a very diverse set of viewpoints. The committee held a half dozen meetings getting acquainted with the history of the issues, the emerging understanding of the geology, the legal issues involved and the needs of the various Town Center uses. All opinions were heard.

One subgroup was formed to further evaluate potential uses. It confirmed the results of the earlier 1995-96 Ad Hoc Committee, and concluded that all of the current uses of the Town Center should ideally be accommodated. A second subgroup investigated and documented various financing alternatives. This subgroup was unable to finish its work without further direction on amounts of necessary capital and other parameters, but they stand ready to assist the Council down the road.

The TCCAC then tackled the location issue. A half dozen site analyses were done by various site advocates and these reports were provided as outputs of the committee to the Town Council. No conclusion was reached about the relative merits of one site over another.

At the conclusion of the committee's work, a group of members created a straw poll to try to characterize the spread of opinion across the committee. This straw poll was far from definitive and rigorous, under the circumstances, but it indicates some majority viewpoints that were reached after much discussion.

- Roughly two thirds of the participants felt the Town Center should remain entirely or predominantly on the current 11-acre site. The remainder individually liked a broad

variety of different options involving a mix of sites, but with no clear alternative consensus.

- However, roughly 60% of participants were willing to consider buying another property if needed. The median amount this group was willing to pay was \$2-5M. Few were willing to pay more than \$5M.
- Roughly three quarters of the participants were comfortable with an overall budget ranging from \$5M to \$15M. There was also a willingness to rely on debt financing or significant fundraising.
- Participants generally agreed with the Town Administration function being constructed first, followed by the library and MUR.
- Members of the committee floated potential additional uses, e.g. fitness center, pool, carpool lot, but less than a majority supported each of the new uses. There was general agreement that the Town should continue to support the current uses, and wasn't missing any important ones. A list of current uses was ranked by voting into high, medium or low priority. There was a strong feeling that the town center space priority should be given to uses that enrich the broadest number of citizens and can share the space with other uses. Less priority should be given to uses that benefit a small number of individuals or require the exclusive dedication of space, or specialized facilities.

To be sure, some members of the committee did not agree with the general conclusions above. In fact, there was not even complete agreement on the simple facts surrounding the issue. For example, a subset of members felt the town should ignore state mandates on earthquake safety and the Alquist-Priola Act, and do an independent risk assessment. There appeared also to be some disagreement whether the costs for earthquake retrofitting were as high as the Town's hired experts indicated. Consequently, we would not represent that the TCCAC reached a full and complete consensus on the complex issues of usage, siting and finances presented to the Council with this Town Center issue.

Conclusion

Portola Valley is in fact a topographic feature created by the San Andreas rift zone. It has been known since at least 1906 that the main active trace of the San Andreas fault passes through the valley floor and specifically through our current Town Center site. It has been clearly documented that the fault ruptured in 1906 on Portola Road just north of the current Town Center. Fifty years ago, the school district relied on the best engineering and understanding of the issues at the time, and constructed a new school on their site. These buildings were, in fact, built for a fifty year life, and were tailored for the needs of a school. In 1975, when the school district was pressed to act on the earthquake risks, the Town stepped in and took over the site on favorable terms. Nevertheless, it was concluded at that time that the Town should limit the magnitude, nature and length of stay for those uses in the existing buildings. However, as often happens in these cases, as time passed, the general understanding of those limitations has slowly faded, and as demands for space increased, our utilization of the site grew.

The work by various committees as well as Town staff and expert consultants has brought this into sharp focus. A number of alternatives have been examined, and our options on the current site have been definitively proved. We believe a clear majority of the Town Center Citizens

Advisory Committee formed in 2003 to review these matters supports the following conclusions in front of the Town Council on February 9th, 2004, namely:

1. The current buildings on the site represent an unacceptable risk, particularly in light of the most recent geologic investigations. The Town is exposed to unnecessary liability and uncertain future availability of basic insurance. And the buildings have aged to their full lifetimes and declined in health. They should be abandoned.
2. There is room at the back of the current site to safely and efficiently build a new Town Center complex, and to replace the current buildings with open recreation facilities. The most recent geologic investigations have fully confirmed this fact.
3. The Town should endeavor to provide for all of the current uses at a new Town Center complex, and generally continue to provide facilities that enrich the broadest spectrum of citizens, consistent with our economic capability to fund it.
4. The Town Council should seek to fund these efforts, over time, out of running revenues, and avoid public financing, if possible. The next priority for funds should be public contributions. Only as a last resort should the Town attempt to raise further funds via bonds or other taxation.
5. The construction of this process should be tackled in phases after an initial master plan, so that uses can be “rolled” from existing buildings to the new buildings, where feasible. The order should be to do the Town Administration and related facilities first, followed by the library and other cultural and recreational amenities second, with lowest priority going to uses serving few residents with special facilities.
6. The Town is blessed with a wide range of valuable citizen expertise and therefore should involve the public in the master planning and design of the complex and its phases through the use of a public Charrette process.