

Summary of the 10/29/14 Community Meeting #1

By Matthew VanOosten

The first Blossom Hill and Snell Urban Village community meeting was held on October 29, 2014, at the Southside Community Center with approximately 50 community members in attendance. The meeting included three Urban Village Planning staff from the City of San Jose as well as eight members from the American Institute of Architects (AIA), an organization that has volunteered a great deal of their time and energy to aid in the planning process. Also in attendance was representation from the District 10 and District 2 City Council Offices (since the planning area includes both districts).

The meeting began with a presentation by Planning staff from the City of San Jose introducing the Urban Village planning process. Following questions by those in attendance, several members of the AIA then presented their initial site analysis work and spoke about best practices in neighborhood planning. District 10 Councilman Johnny Khamis also spoke and answered questions from the audience.

After this introduction to the Urban Village concept and planning process, City staff and members of the AIA engaged the community in a Lego exercise designed to help community members think about land use, urban design, and transportation solutions in their area. Audience members were split into tables of around eight people with two facilitators taking notes and guiding discussion. At the end of the meeting, community members presented key points of their tables' discussion and also had an open floor to comment any further on the plan and planning process.

The City received a great deal of feedback from the first community meeting and it is synthesized it below.

Community Strengths

- Proximity to bus routes and light rail
- Large amount of trees in the neighborhoods
- Nice neighbors
- More affordable than other areas
- Great deal of community involvement
- Proximity to Martial Cottle Park and other parks
- Good mix of businesses that meet many needs
- Many nearby businesses are small/local businesses.

Community Issues

- Traffic
- Blossom Hill "Expressway" (traffic volume and speeds are too high on Blossom Hill)
- Homeless population that makes the area feel unsafe

- Lack of security at the VTA Light Rail Station.
- Walking is unpleasant
- Not as clean as it used to be
- Poor accessibility to transit and services – requires lots of walking if you don't use a car
- Area lacking character or charm and could use better aesthetics
- Gas stations on all four corners- could be better uses

Opportunities

- Greater connections to Martial Cottle Park
- Need for more public gathering spaces including space to allow for a farmers' market
- Need for wider sidewalks, benches, and shade trees
- Better street lighting needed for cars and pedestrians
- More restaurants with outdoor space and/or parklets (Aqui, Togo's, and McDonald's have good outdoor seating but more restaurants are needed)
- Connections to transit can be improved greatly
- Need for more senior housing and denser, walkable environments
- Lots of space for a company to build a new office development
- Very underutilized parking lots for the most part
- Area could use special district for landscaping
- With a better connection to downtown, there could be a market for student housing

Community Concerns

- Higher densities will come before public transportation improvements and add to traffic
- No need for more people in the neighborhood
- Properties adjacent to new development could be impacted
- Cost of living could go up

In addition to these general concerns, Planning and the AIA specifically discussed height and land use with meeting attendees. Comments on these topics were made both verbally and through the placement of Legos during the small group exercise. Below are summaries of what community members said in regards to future height and land uses of the Urban Village area.

Height

The height of new developments was of particular concern to some of the participants. Residents in the area wanted to ensure that new development is well integrated into the existing neighborhood and suggested that particular attention be paid to new developments that are adjacent to single-family residences. Participants wanted low-rise development (1-4 stories) throughout most of site but were generally ok with mid-rise development 4-7 stories) in

specified areas further away from single family neighborhoods. Residents opposed high rise development throughout the village. The location that received the most support for taller buildings is the southwestern portion of the Urban Village that does not abut any residential neighborhoods and is located closest to the VTA Light Rail Station. Higher density in some areas of the Blossom Hill and Snell Urban Village will allow for more amenities to go into an area and make efficient transit travel more viable.

Land Use

The community agreed that commercial would be a preferred use throughout this area, with the potential for a larger office development on the southwestern portion of the plan area. Most residents mentioned that there was a variety of commercial options in the plan area but agreed they needed to be modernized and have better aesthetics to be more viable. The community also wished for more public spaces within the plan area. These aesthetic issues and increases in public space could be solved through the implementation of design guidelines when there is new development.

As for residential uses, the community had many different ideas. Some residents did not wish to see any increases residential density through this plan. The main reason for opposition to more residential is that the area already has too much automobile traffic. Community members worried that increased density would come before any transit and/or road improvements to alleviate existing traffic congestion. A small number of complaints about density came from residents who also believed it would lead to increased crime and negatively impact adjacent properties.

Other residents were in favor of residential projects citing their potential to bring more amenities and better commercial uses to the area. Several members of the audience also mentioned interest in uses like senior living facilities being allowed in the area. These residential projects were preferred to be located on any of the four corners of Blossom Hill Rd. and Snell Ave. or in the southwestern quadrant of the plan area.

As for public spaces, residents were satisfied with the number of parks in the area, especially given the proximity of Martial Cottle Park and Miner Park. However, community members did express interest in more public gathering spaces in the central portion of the plan area. These spaces could include smaller “pocket” parks, plazas, or wider sidewalks with benches and shade trees. It is possible for the final Plan to ask developers to include a public space in new developments and opportunities for wider sidewalks with greater amenities will be further investigated by the City.

Online Survey Results

After the workshop was completed, community members were also given the opportunity to participate in an online survey to further share their thoughts on the area. The City received 86 responses to this survey over two months. Survey participants were asked about their overall

thoughts on the neighborhood, their transportation options and use, and on their preferences for new amenities. Below is a summary of their responses.

Neighborhood Satisfaction

Residents appeared most satisfied with their neighborhood's access to retail that meets their daily needs with 35% of respondents being "very satisfied". This was followed by access to schools (30%), healthy food/farmers' markets (25%), and access to parks and community spaces (24%).

Forty-seven percent (47%) of respondents were "very dissatisfied" with the attractiveness of the neighborhood, making it by far the biggest issue in the minds of community members. The next biggest issues were: access to healthy food/farmers' markets (27%), access to community events (18%), access to parks and community spaces (13%), and availability of different housing options (12%).

Community members were also able to write in comment section to speak about other issues not polled directly. The most consistently brought up issue was crime and safety, with residents saying that they have been perceived to worsen over the years. Also mentioned often was the bad traffic problem in the area especially at the Blossom Hill and Snell intersection and near the highway on-ramp.

Travel Modes

The automobile is used heavily by residents in this area, with 91% of participants stating they use a car daily. The next most used mode of travel was walking (18% of people daily), followed by biking and light rail (4% daily), and finally bus at 2% daily. Despite little daily or weekly use, the proximity to light rail in this urban village does have some effect on the area with 25% of respondents using it monthly.

The survey also asked residents to describe how difficult it was to use each travel mode. As for driving, 28% of respondents reported "great difficulty" with that activity which was the highest on this list. Second was biking with 12% reporting great difficulty. However, given the low levels of people biking in the first place, this number may be low. In the comments section, one of the most common complaints was how difficult it would be to bike in the area. The traffic and current design of the major streets seems to preclude bicycling in the first place. Residents voted finding parking was the least difficult thing in the area to do regarding travel. The ease of parking would likely attract additional automobile use and speaks to parking lots being underutilized spaces.

Regarding the comment section, security at the VTA Snell Light Rail Station was the largest issue for residents. Many people stated that the station would be used more if it felt more comfortable to leave their car there or to walk there (especially at night). A few people also cited accessibility issues saying that it was not a good experience walking across the Snell Avenue overpass to get to the station and that sometimes the elevator down to the station was broken. One other issue that was brought up multiple times was that due to an inadequate

number of crosswalks on Blossom Hill Road, many people resorted to dangerously jay-walking across this major street.

Public Amenities

When polled about amenities in their neighborhood, a farmers' market was the most popular amenity residents would like to see followed by outdoor dining and trees for shade. An additional park, community gardens, and wider sidewalks rounded out the top six choices of the thirteen given. Whether it is shade trees and wider sidewalks speaking to the desire for a more comfortable pedestrian environment or spaces for a farmers' market, park, or community garden, these responses speak to the community's desire for a greater amount of useful public space and community interaction. It was brought up in the meeting and reiterated in this comment section that the Blossom Hill and Snell area was lacking a distinctive character and charm. Essentially, the area needs better placemaking to create an attractive place that fosters more people using it.

Conclusion

When asked about what residents liked about their area, the most common responses were the location in the city/proximity to shopping, quiet neighborhoods with kind neighbors, and the groundwork laid for the neighborhood to improve. The goal of the Blossom Hill and Snell Urban Village Plan is to create a community development plan that builds upon the many noted assets of the area while also paying attention to community concerns. Planning Staff will continue to work with the community to address these concerns and neighborhood issues where possible. The Plan will be long term in scope and seeks to be out in front of any new development activity. In that sense, this Plan is the community's chance to tell the City and future developers what they would like to see in their community if/when new development happens. Planning looks forward to your continued participation!