



## **Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOIA)**

A non-profit, non-partisan, volunteer-run organization

### **R.I.P. Downtown Los Altos... Or the bigger question, why doesn't the City Council care what residents want?**

Okay, let's begin with the bottom line: you need to write City Council or attend the Council meeting on March 22. Seriously. The very soul of our town is at stake. The residents need to tell the City Council very clearly that on Agenda item 5, we want to preserve parking along El Camino, even at the expense of not having dedicated bike lanes. On Agenda item 6 tell Council that we do not want ALL the parking plazas turned into housing, and for the ones that are allowed to do so, we want a plan as to how the lost parking gets fully replaced, and to figure out and designate who pays for it. Additionally, tell the Council that placing high density housing along the east side of San Antonio Road from Civic Center to the Foothill Expressway on the narrow commercial lots along that strip should not be allowed without providing adequate setbacks as that would have a dramatic negative impact on the residents whose side and back yards are immediately adjacent. And finally tell Council that as elected representatives, they need to be more proactive about getting input from the residents, not getting it primarily from individuals and groups representing special interests in town. Now that you know the bottom line, please read the rest of the article so you can understand why we are recommending those actions.

“Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing.” So goes the refrain from a very 1960's song composed by Pete Seeger and made famous by Peter, Paul, and Mary. But the song has origins as a political protest both before and during the Vietnam war. Perhaps we should be singing it again, but this time to protest a more mundane topic - the slow but sure destruction of our downtown business district with the same fate to await businesses along El Camino, Rancho, and Loyola Corner. If this comes to pass, it will be due to three members of our City Council. Many residents in town have grown increasingly frustrated at the threesome's deaf ear for residents' concerns on numerous issues in town, including, perhaps most importantly, the fate of our downtown

The City Council (or rather three of them) have been taking numerous steps which, in combination, are likely to doom our business districts. As an example, the recently passed Climate Action Plan, which despite its bold sounding name, has ambitious, unrealistic goals and a number of dubious tactics, some of which will make the average Los Altos resident cringe. Think we are kidding? How about: if you don't switch from using gas to using electricity to heat your home, heat your water and cook your food, the City wants to punish you by adding a tax to your utility bill. Want to drive to downtown Los Altos? The Council has endorsed a plan to reduce parking requirements for downtown - what that means is that stores and restaurants will

have a problem if folks want to park in the downtown. Adding to that burden, the Council is likely to turn our parking plazas, Draegers (yes, Draegers), Loyola Corners and Rancho into housing-further reducing the available spaces, particularly as housing will add to the parking demand without providing the necessary additional parking to meet the increased demand. Yes, yes, we know, everyone will walk or bicycle to downtown. Too bad that many cannot walk or bike and less than 5% of commuters bike to work. And last we checked, the passenger train service in Los Altos was discontinued in 1958. And by the way, implementing the Climate Action Plan is estimated to cost \$14 million and require 6 new City staff – more than the current Planning Department staff.

Perhaps you believe that it's unthinkable that the Council would act in such a manner? The City has already taken over 70 parking spots from Main and State Streets and turned them into outdoor dining. While we don't disagree with the effort to help our downtown businesses, to date no thought has been given to how to replace the lost parking that will be needed post-COVID and who will pay for it.

And here's the dirty little secret. While the downtown restaurants and merchants - that is, the folks who own and run the businesses downtown - care a lot about having adequate parking, the reality is that many of the downtown property owners don't, as they would make more money if the downtown retail businesses were replaced by housing. So don't look to downtown property owners for any pushback, even though losing our downtown will hurt the City's tax revenues and force residents to shop elsewhere. But why think of a downtown as a place to shop anyway?? Surely you jest. How come we aren't laughing?

Just look at what happened to First Street. The City Council upzoned that area (*upzoned* is a fancy word that just means that taller buildings are allowed) and what it did was to drive out the existing businesses. Upzoning means that we don't want the current usage anymore. While we understand the reason and rationale for effectively eliminating businesses from First Street, we don't want the same fate to befall the rest of our downtown. Upzoning is a gift to the owner, raising the value of the property and making a compelling case for the owners to sell or get rid of the existing tenants. While this benefits the owners, it, over time, eliminates some of the businesses that residents frequent.

#### Agenda Item #5 - El Camino Real Bike Lanes

The latest bomb to drop is a proposal before Council to eliminate 248 parking spots along El Camino. This means businesses along the road will have to depend upon shoppers parking elsewhere. And for the multifamily housing along El Camino (which is perpetually underparked), those car driving souls will need to park along residential side streets. Our friends on the Menlo Park city council pulled a similar stunt earlier this month, eliminating 75 parking spots, likely causing the demise of several of the businesses there. What is unbelievable is that the assessment of the parking demand was done in April 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, which (guess what?) of course led to a lower parking demand since during the pandemic many fewer people were out and about.

The simple question we ask is where will those cars now park? As an example, one of the areas that has high parking usage in on El Camino near Los Altos Avenue. Much of that demand is

from the underparked hotel and apartments nearby as well as from Adobe Animal Hospital. Residents along Los Altos Avenue complained a few years ago about the hospital's workers taking up much of the available parking along parts of Los Altos Avenue and the adjoining side streets. That problem is about to get much worse with the further loss of parking along El Camino. The same issue exists for much of El Camino. And while the parking may have only be at 50% of capacity along the street a year ago during the pandemic lockdown, by our count once things get back to normal, there will be 100-200 cars that will need to park elsewhere.

While some may find parking in existing parking lots adjacent to those on-street parking, most cannot and will not. Where will they park-or are they simply supposed to get rid of their vehicles, or use a bicycle instead? And what is the impact on the businesses? This problem will only get worse as additional development is happening and will continue to occur along El Camino, with State law preventing the construction of adequate parking onsite. More demand for parking and less parking supply will only exacerbate the problem.

#### Agenda Item #6 Housing Element

We are sympathetic to the plight of the Council - the State has mandated the City ensure there is enough suitably zoned "available" land in town to accommodate nearly 2000 new housing units as part of the update to the Housing Plan. The reality is there really isn't enough available land to meet that requirement. Taking parking plazas and rezoning them only means that either the City or residents will have to pay to build above or below ground parking. But there are a number of the sites other than the parking plazas which have been identified by the consultant for housing, which if rezoned, will place an undue hardship on the surrounding neighborhoods.

At this Tuesday's meeting, Council will decide which properties should be included for possible rezoning as part of meeting the mandated housing targets. While the actual rezoning won't occur until the housing plan is approved by the State later this year, placing properties on the list ensures that they will come before Council for rezoning. We are particularly concerned with the proposal to rezone the OA district along San Antonio Road across from the downtown to accommodate multifamily housing. While for some this may sound like a great idea, those who live nearby are rightfully concerned as this zoning change would replace the one- and two-story office buildings on the east side of the road with 40-60 foot tall buildings of three or four stories. For the single-family residential homeowners who live immediately adjacent to these narrow lots (most are less than 150 feet deep), 40, 50 and 60 foot buildings towering in your backyard is an unwelcome new neighbor that creates dramatic light and privacy impacts and would dwarf those single family residences. By contrast, the properties along El Camino which have these tall building can provide at least 40-50 foot setbacks as those properties are several hundred feet deep.

Round up the usual suspects - how our housing plan is being hijacked by special interests

"Round up the usual suspects" is a classic line from the classic 1942 movie *Casablanca* for those of you who don't recognize the quote. However, in this case, it refers to the same people who are in overlapping groups with special interests instead of reaching out and getting input from the broader community. While the quote references the arrest of the usual suspects who may have

committed a crime, in the case of Los Altos it's a little different. We wrote an extensive article on this in October 2020, entitled "House of Mirrors" (for those of you who want to refresh your understanding, the article can be found here: [https://friendsoflosaltos.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A\\_House\\_of\\_Mirrors\\_or\\_Has\\_Los\\_Altos\\_Politics\\_Just\\_Turned\\_Dirty.pdf](https://friendsoflosaltos.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A_House_of_Mirrors_or_Has_Los_Altos_Politics_Just_Turned_Dirty.pdf)).

There are a number of reasons why the consultant hired by the City to develop the Housing Plan is recommending these zoning changes to downtown parking plazas, along San Antonio Road, at Loyola Corners and at Rancho. One reason is that the consultant has talked to numerous groups who support the addition of housing in these areas. While the consultants have promised to reach out broadly, to date the public meetings and the one-on-one meetings with various groups in town, does not reflect that stated goal of broader outreach.

The City is blessed (or some might say cursed) with numerous organizations with fancy sounding names, many of which have the same, overlapping leadership. Los Altos Downtown Property Owners, Los Altos Forward, Los Altos Community Coalition, and Los Altos Community Voices, all have overlapping leadership. But with the different names it gives community members, City staff and the City Council the appearance that there are many independent and well-balanced community organizations supporting the same views and opinions. There are other examples as well: Los Altos Housing Alliance and Greentown both have overlapping leadership. And while all these organizations may have a range of "members" the spokespersons are almost always the same. But there has been zero, z e r o, outreach to the neighborhoods most affected by some of the proposed zoning changes. So why do organizations which have a very targeted agenda get a louder voice than the residents most affected? For over half of these organizations, the answer is simple: follow the money. Property owners can make substantially more money if their properties are upzoned. We would like the City Council to address this apparent inequity. And in the spirit of full candor, the FOLA Board was asked to provide input to the Housing Plan as well.

Even the well-regarded League of Women Voters (LWV) is not immune to this problem. Sue Russell has been the longtime head the LWV housing subcommittee and also is part of the leadership of the Los Altos Housing Alliance. That effectively gives her two bites at the apple. There is also the mistaken belief that the LWV is a non-partisan organization that recommends policies evaluated in a non-partisan way, that are deemed good for Los Altos residents. It turns out that the positions the Los Altos / Mountain View League of Women Voters recommends are based on what the State level organization (State level League of Women Voters) supports. What may be good from Sacramento's point of view is often the wrong answer for Los Altos.

Mark Twain once stated "*The report of my death was an exaggeration*" when a reporter wrote that he was near death in 1897. It turned out that Twain lived for another 13 years. We can only hope that our business districts survive that long. We also hope that the Council has the courage and wisdom to think about what is best for a majority of Los Altos residents, and not listen to all the same voices masquerading as different groups. A house of mirrors makes for good amusement at the circus, but the circus in Los Altos needs to end.

And that is the way we see it.

**If you are as concerned about what is going on in town, please send an email to the City Council or attend the City Council meeting on March 22, it starts at 7 pm, but agenda items 5 and 6 likely won't get discussed until 7:30 and 8:30 pm respectively.**

[PublicComment@losaltosca.gov](mailto:PublicComment@losaltosca.gov). Emails sent to this email address are sent to/received immediately by the City Council. Please include a subject line in the following format: PUBLIC COMMENT AGENDA ITEM ## - MEETING DATE

Meeting Details: Telephone: 1-650-242-4929 Meeting ID: 146 486 0475

<https://webinar.ringcentral.com/j/1464860475>

## **Friends of Los Altos**

Los Altos, CA 94022 & 94024

<https://friendsoflosaltos.org>