



Friends of Los Altos, Inc. (FOIA)

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

By the way, we are selling two of the downtown parking plazas.

Did we forget to mention that to you?

Yep, you heard it. The City of Los Altos Staff sent out a letter dated July 16th stating that two public parking plazas in downtown are available for purchase or lease. The two parking plazas, labeled “surplus property” by the city, are located behind State Street stores between First and Second. Each is approximately an acre in size; together they provide 226 parking spots for the downtown. The letter, a “notice of availability,” was sent to a list of over 560 developers and government entities.

Now that we have your attention, here are the specifics. The City will give priority to projects that provide at least 25% affordable housing. The purchaser must provide at least 226 replacement parking spots and adequate parking for residential and other uses of the properties. Current state law, however, says that adequate parking can mean a number much closer to zero than the parking actually needed for the project.

You can speak your opinion in person at tonight’s (August 27) Council meeting or send a letter to council. Agenda and participation details at:

<https://meetings.municode.com/adaHtmlDocument/index?cc=LOSALTOSCA&me=9c46f4b984ed499abe890ead063f3dd1&ip=False>

How did this happen?

Three of the five City Council members are determined to turn the parking plazas into housing without holding resident-input meetings, addressing the loss of parking, the impact on the City finances or the health of the downtown. This process has proceeded without involving the public in a timely manner, and no further public input is required. The City Council allowed City Staff to send the “notice of availability” without consultation or supervision. Once started, this process means that residents, Staff, and Council will eventually have little to no control over approval on the final project, with unknown consequences. Is it possible that the City could get paid nothing for the parking plazas, lose all our parking spots in those lots, and have a housing development which provides no parking? Unfortunately, this is absolutely a distinct possibility.

Why did this happen?

Unfortunately, there is a majority on the Council who apparently feel that either 1) sufficient public input has already been given or 2) the City Staff should be competent enough to initiate and proceed with this process without Council or resident input. It seems as if at least three of the five Council members believe they have been given a mandate by the residents to build housing at any cost and regardless of the impact of that housing on the City and certainly, without any public review and input.

Let us explain. When the Vision Plan was put together for downtown, housing on one or more parking plazas was identified as an opportunity. However, and this is a big “however,” there was no real plan laid out for how to proceed. Residents were assured that before anything happened, there would be public discussion and input, as those properties are an incredibly important and valuable part of the downtown. When the recently completed Housing Element included the idea, after public input, the City Council and Staff once again reassured residents that there was no concrete plan, and public discussion and input would precede any definitive plans.

Here's the catch. Once City Staff put out the “notice of availability” (irrespective of whether or not they obtained the approval of Council), a process was started that now appears will NOT allow for any further public discussion or input. If a developer is interested in the parking plazas, all further discussions and negotiations will happen in closed sessions of the City Council. Lease or sale? How big can the buildings be in height? What public amenities will be part of it? Will the existing parking be fully replaced and will the new uses be fully parked? All these important issues that need discussion and prioritization by the greater community WON'T HAPPEN. What this means to those who love the charm of our downtown is that the source of that charm is being seriously eroded. In the 1950's the downtown business/property owners DONATED the back portions of their properties to the City in order to create these much-needed parking plazas in order to induce shoppers and diners to our downtown. If those parking plazas are now converted into housing, either the parking spots are replaced (at a cost estimated to be \$10-15 million if above ground and \$20-30 million if below ground parking) or we as a community suffer the consequences.

What are the risks?

The way this process has evolved leaves residents with no input and the City Council with very little control of the outcome. According to State law, a recently approved low-income housing project on Distel Circle did not actually need to provide any parking spaces. However, a realistic analysis suggested over 100 spots would be required. The developer originally offered (and Council approved) 90 spots. They then asked Council to reduce that number to 40 to decrease costs, AND THE THREE MEMBERS OF COUNCIL APPROVED THE REDUCED PARKING.

The Distel Drive project has unfortunately demonstrated that despite an approved plan, the developer could and did come back and renege on the promised parking for the project. Such a scenario could easily play out on a much larger scale downtown.

Beyond the financial impact, we should also be concerned that this proposed development, along with others, will start an unstoppable replacement of downtown restaurants and retail with residential buildings, all looking to take advantage of the “downtown.” Few, if any, might provide enough parking. The irony is that without sufficient parking, more and more retail and restaurants will effectively be forced to leave until our downtown is in name only, with a few boutique stores and coffee shops surrounded by a sea of high-rise residences. We understand this may be financially attractive for downtown property owners. We don't think it serves the community well.

What we think should happen

The City Council will discuss the declaration of surplus land at its meeting on Tuesday, August 27, 2024, starting at 7 pm. Residents who are not happy with the lack of public notification, input and the process need to let Council know how they feel. The agenda, along with instructions for watching via Zoom and/or sending a letter to the City Council can be found here:

<https://meetings.municode.com/adaHtmlDocument/index?cc=LOSALTOSCA&me=9c46f4b984ed499abe890ead063f3dd1&ip=False>

We believe that, in compliance with all State laws and rules promulgated by HCD (the 800-pound gorilla in Sacramento that is ensuring every city in the state comply with housing laws), the City Council should schedule a study session to discuss the parameters around what a successful housing project would look like and solicit public input (which hopefully they will actually listen to and act upon). The how and what of development on our parking plazas is just too important to allow City Staff to proceed alone and ditto for the City Council which, at times, appears unaware as to the impact of development on surrounding neighbors. Telling residents to suck it up when a 7-story housing project gets built in their backyard is just not okay. Good governance depends upon major decisions being made by elected members of the City Council after having factored in input from the public.

Will Rogers and Mark Twain both famously said “buy land, they ain’t making any more of it”. In this case a legitimate question might be should the City even be selling the land instead of insisting on a long-term lease which would give the City both more control as well as a financial return on the property? So, while we are reserving judgment on the actual structure of a sale or lease, we are dismayed that this has been essentially put out to public bid with the City indicating sale is a viable option.

Regardless of any eventual impacts, we as a community should be disappointed that this process is happening without Council review and approval at each step in the process. Equally important is that this process is happening without timely input from residents. Selling or leasing the land, setting the minimum requirements for parking and addressing other considerations will have a dramatic impact on the City and the viability of our downtown going forward. It sort of reminds us of someone selling your house and only informing you about it after it’s been sold. We expect and deserve better.

And that’s the way we see it.

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