



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

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

### **To park or not to park—that is the question**

William Shakespeare was a prolific playwright, having written a total of 39 plays and 154 sonnets. Many of his plays have memorable lines, including “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players” (As You Like It), “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them” (Twelfth Night), and “What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Romeo and Juliet).

But for this article we will focus on “to be or not to be—that is the question” a line from Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Our riff on that is “to park or not to park—that is the question?” But while perhaps not appropriate for a noble play, a play on words is indeed appropriate for the current City Council “scheme” (British for *plan*, by the way) to replace one or more of our parking plazas in downtown with a park and an above ground parking garage.

I am sure for many of you, this scheme may be a new revelation, so we encourage you to read on because the plot of this rivals anything Shakespeare ever conjured up. But the bottom line is this: Having experienced Shakespearean like antics by the City, Los Altos residents and local business are recognizing that a community vote, and not the actions of a single City Council, may be a necessary next step for the future of Downtown Los Altos.

#### The Prologue: some background information

- Who decided we should have a downtown park?

Our city council made a decision in February 2025 to have staff conduct community engagement and explore designs for a downtown park in Parking Plazas 1 & 2 with parking. This effort dovetailed with a proposal by the Los Altos Stage Company (Bus Barn theater group) to replace the existing theater with a new theater on Parking Plaza 2. A contract was signed with a leading parking garage consultant in the amount of \$2.5M with several phases to the project.

- Was the downtown park decision driven by community interest in a park?

Not particularly. Residents and visitors had enjoyed the pop-up park which was put in place on Second Street for a number of years; however, there was no overwhelming interest expressed in a downtown park, even though greening the downtown and adding more places for the community to gather was part of the 2018 Downtown Vision Plan.

On the other hand, many have expressed interest in the Downtown Vision Plan's proposed improvement of Veterans Community Plaza as a gathering spot and additional paseos in Plazas 4 and 5, which would green the downtown parking plazas and add outdoor dining.

The outdoor dining envisioned by the Downtown Vision Plan was largely obviated by the parklet program, initiated during Covid, which added outdoor dining to the front side of many downtown restaurants. And despite some suggestions that restaurants and cafes could have dining outside on both the front and rear of their buildings, the operational logistics of that are challenging at best and most likely impractical.

- What did the Downtown Vision Plan envision for our existing parking?

It kept the distributed parking in seven of the ten downtown public plazas. One of the 10 plazas was earmarked for high-density housing (with the assumption that existing public parking would be replaced and new parking added to meet the parking demands of those new residents) and half of one plaza was identified for a potential theater.

By keeping the existing distributed parking facilities in downtown, the plan addressed significant traffic and circulation issues that would otherwise result from centralized parking. Many in town have seen the occasional backups at San Antonio Road going toward Foothill Expressway; that problem would potentially become more frequent and severe during peak hours with the loss of distributed parking.

- Where are all these parking plazas now slated for the Downtown Park with parking?

Plaza 1 is behind Main Street and on the back side of the Post and Le Boulanger restaurants and other stores. Plaza 2 is on the backside of the Post Office; Plaza 3 is next to Los Altos Grill just off of San Antonio Road

- What are park-in-lieu/park impact fees, who pays for them and for what are they intended?

These are fees collected from City-wide residential developments; currently approximately \$19M is available in this restricted park fund. These funds can be used for renovating our existing parks and park facilities as well as acquiring new parkland in

areas of town that are underserved. At present the two underserved areas are parts of North Los Altos along El Camino Real as a result of extensive high-density residential developments, as well as South Los Altos, which historically has had less parkland per capita than other areas of town.

The park funds are intended to be spent in the area of development where the money was generated. As such, a significant portion of the funds come from El Camino Real projects and any funds from downtown development can and should, in theory, first be spent on high priority projects such as the decaying buildings at Shoup Park and Redwood Grove, not in adding parks for which the downtown area already has an oversupply. Many residents in South Los Altos have lamented about the antiquated state of the Grant Park Community Center which continues to get limited remediation from the City.

- The first obvious question is why do we need a park in our downtown?

That is not clear. According to several council members the purpose of the park is to serve the increase in residents now living in downtown and to beautify Plaza 3. However, some residents believe the intent of a new park is to cover part of cost of adding a new, above or below ground parking structure, by using park-in-lieu funds, versus using money from the general fund.

But the justifications for a new park in downtown fall apart under closer examination. The truth is we don't need a new park to accommodate the increase in downtown residents. Currently there are 5 parks within a 5–10-minute walk from downtown: Shoup, Redwood Grove, Lincoln, Village, Hillview/Civic Center and depending upon your perspective, Veterans Plaza, at the intersection of State and Main Streets. Yes, we have added more residents to downtown, but the central part of Los Altos, and downtown specifically, have more parkland per capita than any other part of the City.

- Why do we need more parking?

The City did a parking study in 2024 and those results indicated we had a parking surplus of over 763 spots, but there are several issues with that analysis. It turns out that 60% of the extra spots are in privately owned parking lots/garages which may or may not be accessible by the public, now or in the future. Secondly, the analysis does not include the loss of 250 spots that will occur when the City sells parking plazas 7 and 8 and those lots become housing with limited or no parking to even meet the needs of the new residential buildings, much less replace the lost public parking.

If you take out the private spots and the loss of the 250 spots, the City has a surplus of only 76 spots. In fact, when the City signed an agreement with Safeway to allow public parking in their garage, one of the stipulations was the city had to maintain parking in the nearby plazas or risk triggering a default clause. While we do not know the exact

terms of the agreement, the loss of parking in Plazas 7 and 8 could result in a loss of Safeway parking for the general public, although Safeway shoppers would still be able to park there while shopping.

The recently revised plan to locate a park in Plaza 3 would have a significant impact on Los Altos Grill, which has an agreement with the City for its high usage of parking spaces around its building, both at lunch and more significantly during the evening hours.

Finally, when the city council rezoned San Antonio Road to allow multistory housing, there was an acknowledgement by the Council that the City would need to address parking for those future buildings/residents when redeveloping the nearby parking plazas. This would mean factoring in that parking demand and adding more parking as many of the adjoining streets to San Antonio do not have the capacity to park cars from any new developments.

- What is the status of the proposed park project?

The city has allocated \$2.5 M for the initial phases of the project. Those first phases include community input and design concepts. To date approximately \$750K has been spent. The City held a Phase 2 study session on February 24<sup>th</sup> to review possible design concepts and locations. While the original proposal and contract placed the park/parking in Plazas 1 & 2, the consultants presented an option to locate a park in Plaza 3, while using Plaza 1 and 2 for parking and a Performing Arts Center (the new name for the theater)

Various configurations of above or below ground parking along with various “themes” for the park (redwood grove, apricot orchard, meadow, or garden) were presented. Each of the proposals had a cost associated with the combined park project and the parking as well as the net addition or reduction in parking. Those respective costs ranged from \$27-\$33M if the option of underground parking was not included; with underground parking the total cost was nearly \$63M. While some of the costs would be covered by the park in lieu funds, not all would be, and at this point in time the budget for any of the options is greater than the amount of money in the account. It should be noted that the City has applied for state park grants which might cover the shortfall.

- Are Park and structured parking the only options for redevelopment of our existing parking plazas?

No, the plazas can be left as is or resurfaced to make them more attractive and more functional. One compelling reason NOT to develop the plazas as parks is that they may be needed to meet the City’s state-mandated housing requirements in the next cycle. Why? Because if there aren’t enough suitable sites identified for housing, then the City will be forced to allow high-density affordable housing projects in single family

residential-zoned districts.

We find it ironic that this City Council has been taking credit for saving our residential neighborhoods from large scale multifamily housing, yet by pursuing a park and a theater downtown, those decisions may actually precipitate that result.

- What are residents and downtown business owners saying?

There were 21 public speakers at the February 24<sup>th</sup> City Council study session, 19 spoke against a downtown park. There were approximately 40 letters sent to the City Council, 35 were against a downtown park in the parking plazas. There are numerous downtown business owners who are against a downtown park that will reduce the supply of convenient, surface level shaded parking in downtown. Yet the council failed to even acknowledge the extent of the community feedback that was against a downtown park in the parking plazas.

This feedback may or may not be different from what was gathered in conversations with 1000 people by city staff and consultants over the past 6 plus months. But those surveys and pop-up events did not specifically ask people if they wanted a park with an explanation of the tradeoffs. Instead, the focus of community outreach was simply on what amenities would be desired in a park. Sort of like asking someone what they wanted to eat without telling them how much it would eventually cost them. And while most of the people surveyed were likely Los Altos residents, we suspect that some were not, given there was no demographic information collected as part of the survey. In fact, no detailed community feedback report has been made public.

Over the past few months, residents have raised concerns about the loss of the Chinese Pistache canopies throughout the downtown parking plazas. In addition to providing shade, phenomenal fall foliage, the trees help reduce downtown temperatures by several degrees. Businesses in downtown have asked for an economic evaluation of the benefits of a downtown park. Others business owners are upset that the parking plazas were originally owned by the downtown property owners through an assessment district. They were turned over to the City to ensure ongoing maintenance. None of those original owners expected or wanted the City to sell or convert the parking plazas to other uses as convenient parking was and still is important to attract downtown visitors.

Based on the comments by the City Council members, who are overwhelmingly supportive of a downtown park, Council chose not to consider the disapproval of a downtown park by a vast majority of residents who provided feedback either prior to or at the meeting. The meeting had an alleged purpose to get community feedback for Council. We remain more than a bit mystified why a city council elected by the residents appears tone deaf to the community feedback, particularly when they had promised to seek out and listen to whether or not the community wanted a park in the first place.

- What came out of the Council meeting?

Parking plaza 3 was introduced as an additional park/ parking location, bringing the total number of impacted parking plazas to five.

City staff acknowledged a constraint on developing plazas 1 and 2 (and also 7 &8) with their extensive underground utilities, including electrical transformers plus water and sewage lines which increase the cost, complexity and time to do any project on those sites.

The consultants shared that no traffic or circulation studies have been done to determine the best location for a central parking structure and the impact on traffic. A new parking structure was stated by several Council members to be the top priority and considered urgent. While no reason was offered, we know that underground, nor any additional parking is unlikely to happen in parking plazas 7 & 8 due to the aforementioned underground utilities and the costs to build on what developers have characterized as sub-optimal lots. So, our best guess is that when the parking plazas are sold, which Council intends, all of those 250 parking spots will no longer be available.

This is vastly different from when the City first identified the properties for affordable housing. Originally there was a requirement that any new development provide parking for residents as well as to replace the existing parking in those plazas. The feedback from developers was replacement parking would not pencil out and so as an alternative, the park and possible underground parking idea was proposed by the City Council. A community gathering space which provides a connection between the downtown and the Civic Center is a new stated goal of this project by Council. Council members were enthusiastic about converting Plaza 3 into a park since it is “ugly, had parking configured in a way that is difficult to navigate” and would be a good bridge to the Civic Center. Nothing was stated about it being on the edge of the downtown in addition to the significant noise issues along San Antonio Road. These issues were discounted since it was claimed that they could be mitigated with screening. One Council member suggested businesses would reorient themselves to face the park in addition to facing Main Street, without any evidence from downtown businesses to support that belief.

The Council will now proceed with plans for a park and new parking without waiting to see if the theater group is able to raise private funds for its downtown (now deemed) Performing Arts Center. In the interim, half of parking plaza 2 is being held by the City for that use.

And finally, if a park in North Los Altos/El Camino Real corridor is a community priority to serve new high-density housing, one City Council member said “find us the land.” Unfortunately, there was no discussion of how the City would pay for the required land if all park-in-lieu funds were already spent on a downtown park and parking structure.

## Our take on this matter

The City Council stated it was seeking public input but made at least two decisions which undercut that objective. First, they allocated only one hour for the meeting, with the first 30-40 minutes taken up by presentations and Council member questions. Secondly the meeting was held in Council Chambers which has limited seating capacity. The result was that the meeting lasted for 2 hours, public comments were limited to one minute, and many who wanted to attend the meeting were unable to even get into the room and some just left. If the Council is serious about listening to and hearing community input, the time allocated for subsequent meetings should be longer and it should be held in a much larger room, perhaps one of the large rooms at the community center or at Grant Park.

It appears the City has been spending a lot of money on consultants (\$750K through the end of February) before really developing a clear set of goals or even determining whether residents want such a development. We are in full agreement that the City needs additional parking, but it needs to broadly consider what that means, factoring in not only the loss of parking from plazas 7 and 8, but additional development that may occur both in downtown and on the perimeter of the downtown. Any less is simply irresponsible.

We also think that traffic and circulation analysis needs to be the first step in siting a parking structure. City staff mentioned the upcoming \$9M San Antonio Road improvement project that may impact designs, and decisions for the use of parking plaza 3.

Finally, we do agree that the City needs a better gathering spot for people downtown. Why isn't there a concerted effort to fix the poorly designed Veterans Community Plaza, perhaps by reconfiguring it or expanding it into parking plaza 6? It will cost far less than the other proposed options and create a park-like environment in the center of our town, away from San Antonio Road while still providing a logical connection point to the Civic Center.

As for the downtown performing arts center, why not rebuild it on the existing Bus Barn site. Our downtown needs parking and also needs the flexibility to potentially add more affordable housing so residential neighborhood are not impacted by additional state mandated requirements. While professing not to put housing in residential neighborhood, the City Council has changed zoning to allow multistory residential housing at Rancho Shopping Center, along San Antonio and near Lucky's store, all of which directly impact adjacent residential neighborhoods. Moreover, the City recently applied for and has been awarded the "pro-housing designation" by the State, which means the City has promised to build 125-149% of the amount of affordable housing mandated in order to access state grants.

## What residents have done

A new community-based organization called ForLosAltos <https://www.forlosaltos-now.com/> has been advocating for greater community input, and urged the City Council to pause the park effort. ForLosAltos has just filed a voter initiative for the November 2026 ballot that will give voters the opportunity to vote on any significant changes to our publicly-owned downtown parking plazas. The ballot measure includes the following key points:

- Requires voter approval before parking plazas are sold, repurposed, or reduced
- Protects convenient public parking for shoppers and visitors
- Prioritizes the village charm and walkability of downtown
- Safeguards protected trees, the tree canopy and open space
- Prevents third party development deals on public parking plazas
- Allows for affordable housing on two parking plazas per current plans

## What can you do?

Become informed, attend a City Council study session when next scheduled, voice your opinion at one or more of the pop-ups the City has organized to collect community input and/or write the City Council to express your views on this matter. We also think residents should support the ballot measure by signing the initiative to place it on the ballot in the November 2026 elections. The group needs to gather 3,000 signatures by April 30th. Look for signing tables at Draeger's Market, Trader Joe's and near the downtown Los Altos Main Street Post Office. More information about signing the ballot initiative can be found at [www.forlosaltos-now.com](http://www.forlosaltos-now.com).

We think the community needs to have a stronger voice (and vote) into what happens to our downtown parking plazas as the City Council continues to ignore public input.

And that is the way we see it.

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