

They Want to Build What?

Martinez' Most Important Project: The General Plan Update - Introduction

Thousand Friends of Martinez - Summary #1 - December 31, 2016

43 YEARS since the existing, out-of-date Martinez General Plan was adopted in 1973.

3,233 DAYS -since Martinez General Plan update began February 26, 2008 (that's 8.9 years).

475 DAYS - since the draft Martinez General Plan was released on Sept 15, 2015 (almost 16 months).

Did you know that Martinez is updating its General Plan, its most important guiding document? Or that it's been an almost 9 year process? The General Plan represents the city's vision for itself for the next 20 years. It should involve residents at every stage of its development.

What should downtown look like? Should developers pay their way? How much more traffic do we want? Should Martinez absorb Pacheco, or Vine Hill? Should we allow more development in the Alhambra Valley or in Franklin Canyon? How much high-density housing should be allowed Downtown and throughout Martinez. Should there be more apartments or more retail? The General Plan has a direct effect on what you can do on your property and on your property value.

If you're interested in our city, in politics, or even whether someone can build something big next door to your house, in the Marina, or on our beautiful hills, you should be interested in Martinez' General Plan Update. Will the city council aim for a superior, state of the art General Plan, or the least they can get away with?

In this introductory article we'll summarize the General Plan Update process, which has been on again off again for nine years, how the process works and what you can do. In upcoming articles we'll talk about the old 1973 General Plan, the citizens task force that met from 2010-2012 and their recommendations, parts of the draft updated Plan released in September 2015, and what's still missing from the Update in 2017. Frankly, the city should be doing this kind of outreach. So far they're not.

The General Plan Guides Development Decisions

California law requires that each county and city adopt a general plan, consisting of a statement of development policies and including maps and text setting forth goals and policies. It is a comprehensive long-term vision for the physical development of the city. It can be a set of best practices planning guidelines, or so lacking in detail that developers can run roughshod over residents.

The existing Martinez General Plan was adopted in 1973. It was state of the art and visionary at the times. After 43 years it's horribly out of date. It's been "amended" so many times over the years that city files are incomplete and almost impossible for the public to find or figure out.

An Update Process Began in 2008, Then Stalled

A process to update the General Plan started February 26, 2008. A citizens Task Force was formed in June 2010 and met 20 times through April 2012. At the end, their work was largely ignored. We'll talk about those recommendations in a future article.

As usual in Martinez, there are several systemic reasons. The task force was knowledgeable but planning decisions are made by the Planning Commission and the City Council. Planning Commissioners are all appointed by Mayor Rob Schroder, which doesn't encourage independence. The mayor and the city manager also generally set agendas for meetings. The city council was embroiled in infighting as it

often is. The city manager's office, which should provide ongoing direction and leadership, has been a revolving door with more than eight acting, interim or full City Managers since the process started.

Meanwhile, the DeNova Pine Meadow project, and Martinez residents' successful March 2015 referendum to stop that project, further complicated the politics of updating the General Plan.

A Draft Plan Was Released 16 Months Ago, Then Stalled Again

In Sept 2015, soon after the Pine Meadow referendum succeeded and the project was withdrawn, a draft General Plan Update document and draft Environmental Impact Report (dEIR) were issued. Emails uncovered through "Public Records Requests" by Friends of Pine Meadow revealed detailed discussions between city officials including the mayor and De Nova, the Pine Meadow developers, about modifying the new General Plan.

Maybe an interim city manager wanted to get the Plan done. Or maybe the length of time the process has taken had become embarrassing politically. In any case, that city manager was soon gone. The citizens Task Force was not reconvened.

The General Plan documents are vague and inadequate. They lack vision. No significant public outreach was attempted. But a few residents and organizations did publicize the process. Over a hundred comment letters about the draft documents were submitted by various agencies and the public, and legally must be responded to and considered. So far, there's been no sign of responses to the comments and most of the comment letters are not online.

The process stalled again. There have been several more City Managers this past 15 months; Brad Kilger started in June 2016. The consultants who prepared the draft Plan and dEIR are no longer involved. The Planning Director also left; Jim Reese is now Interim Planning Director but he will be leaving in January 2017.

The City Has Restarted The Process Again

Not having a current General Plan puts the city at legal risk. Each disorganized half-step in the process by the city makes the Update more likely to be challenged – by developers, or by residents. The only real solution is to bend over backwards in being open, transparent, and in involving the public.

Soon after the November 2016 election, the city restarted the process, again without any real attempt to involve the public. Did you know that the city is updating its General Plan? Very few Martinez residents do know. Undoubtedly City Manager Kilger wants to complete the update in part to show progress. However the quality of the Plan does matter, since it's the city's vision for itself for the next 20 years.

Either way, the political and legal process is incomplete, and a lot has changed over the past 9 years--not to mention the past 43 years. A new public engagement process should start, documents should be updated and re-circulated, and the public should be given plenty of time to comment. New comments and those already submitted at the end of 2015 should be responded to, as legally required. Only then should the updated General Plan be considered at the commission and city council level.

It's Not Acceptable For The City To Approve The Current Inadequate Draft Plan

Instead of transparency and inclusion of residents, the city may be just trying to finish the General Plan update without real improvements, or real citizen input. After more than a year, the Planning

Commission held a hearing on November 29th to review the first of 4 “white papers” about issues raised more than 15 months ago. The process restarted without any real explanation or outreach to the public about how the Update would resume.

Since all of the Planning Commissioners are appointed by Mayor Rob Schroder and haven’t shown much diversity of opinion in the past, we’ll have to see whether they aim higher on this current planning effort.

According to the Nov. 29th Planning Commission staff report: “In April of 2016 the City Council approved a contract with Christine O’Rourke, General Plan Consultant, to prepare four “white papers” or reports addressing specific issues raised by comments received by the City on the Draft General Plan Update (DGPU). The DGPU was circulated, along with the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR), for review and comment in late 2015.”

http://martinez.granicus.com/MetaViewer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=1314&meta_id=98613 :

Needless to say, the 4 issues selected for white papers do not address all of the significant issues raised by the citizens task force in 2010-2012, or by the public in Fall 2015 after the draft documents were issued. We’ll talk about the White Papers next time.

Timing

According to the staff report: “At the conclusion of the review of the white papers, a determination will be made on whether the DEIR *{draft Environmental Impact Report}* needs to be re-circulated for additional public comment. If this step is not necessary, then the DGPU *{draft General Plan Update}* and DEIR *{draft Environmental Impact Report}* will be presented to the Planning Commission and City Council for final hearings and adoption. The General Plan Consultant estimates that, if recirculation is not necessary, then this process could be concluded sometime in mid-2017.”

Actually, it’s been almost 9 years and the documents represent a pretty screwed up process and an attempt now to get to the finish line without worrying much about the quality of the planning effort, and without the consultants who prepared the original documents. The Nov. 29 staff report also missed discussion of the crucial legal step of responding to comments from the public and from other agencies while preparing a Final Plan, and a Final Environmental Impact Report.

Conclusion

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires various levels of environmental review for significant project and policies, including General Plans. The Planning Commission appears uninterested in seeking wider public review of the 15 month old draft General Plan Update and draft Environmental Impact Report. It will be up to the (Planning Commission and) City Council to decide whether a more inclusive process should be used and whether the draft documents should be recirculated and improved. (Yes, they should).

A General Plan Update is likely to be a waste of time or legally challenged if the City doesn’t conduct an open, transparent and inclusive process.

Please Contact the City Council

Martinez City Council, City of Martinez, 525 Henrietta Street Martinez, CA 94553 - 925-372-3500 - website@cityofmartinez.org It’s better if you send a paper copy, but please also send a copy to Thousand Friends at PO Box 225, Martinez, CA 94553 or thousandfriendsmartinez@gmail.com.

Tell them to:

1. A new General Plan Update public engagement process should start;
2. Hold public workshops and Planning Commission; Park, Recreation, Marina and Cultural Commission; and City Council study sessions to educate the public about the process and about General Plan issues;
3. Recirculate the draft General Plan Update and draft Environmental Impact Report for public comment;
4. Respond to the Task Force, 2015 and 2017 comments, and improve the draft General Plan;
5. Hold public hearings to discuss the updated draft Plan; and
6. Complete the General Plan Update by late 2017, but not without an open, transparent, inclusive process.

Thank you. Stay tuned for upcoming articles about the General Plan process. We'll keep you posted about upcoming meeting dates.

On *Thousand Friends'* Facebook page and in our E-Blasts we'll regularly post about the General Plan process:

<https://www.facebook.com/Thousand-Friends-of-Martinez-1673996572917936/>
<http://www.thousandfriendsofmartinez.org/news-info.html>

1973 Martinez General Plan: www.cityofmartinez.org/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=7569
2010-2015 Process: http://www.cityofmartinez.org/depts/planning/general_plan_update.asp
2015 draft "Martinez 2035" General Plan and Environmental Impact Report:
http://www.cityofmartinez.org/depts/planning/general_plan_update_notice_of_availability.asp

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