

SAGA OF THE GENERAL PLAN REVISION

Thousand Friends of Martinez's Efforts

Dramatically Improved the Plan

On November 2, 2022, the City Council approved the Martinez General Plan 2035 and the Final Environmental Impact Report

The General Plan is the most important document the Council passes. It will control all development in Martinez for the next 15-20 years or more and directly affects the quality of life of all Martinez citizens.

The process to revise the General Plan started over 10 years ago and culminated in a feverish process in the last year to finish it.

Thousand Friends made a major effort to try to get a good plan, or at least one that did not have major flaws that could damage our town.

Our efforts helped correct significant glaring issues. Below is a recap of major issues we addressed--- both what the General Plan Revision proposed and what finally ended up in the General Plan 2035.

Waterfront—the General Plan Revision authorized major high-density, high-rise housing development north of the railroad tracks right next to the open space marsh and park.

It allowed 400-500+ housing units and 1000+ residents on the Waterfront across the tracks from the Amtrak station and west to the area across from the Telfer property.

It would severely affect both the open space and the park: wildlife and plant impacts; noise and light pollution; all 24 hours a day.

It would be dangerous to potential residents---train accidents and blocked crossings, earthquake & liquefaction, periodic flooding, train noise.

Historic homes and sports courts & huge parking lot would be lost.

What was finally put in the General Plan 2035: no new housing will be allowed on the Waterfront. In the Granger Wharf area where historic housing currently

exists, additional low-density housing will continue to be allowed. (Note: These changes have been accepted as errata and will appear in the official copy of the General Plan 2035 that is in preparation.)

Downtown---the General Plan Revision authorized major high-density, high-rise housing development throughout the Downtown.

Heights of 3-4-5-even 6 stories were allowed with no standards for setbacks, parking or heights. Hundreds of new housing units would be allowed.

All this development would potentially ruin the historic, safe, small-town nature of our Downtown. The height and density would cut off our connection with our hills & waterfront.

What was finally put in the General Plan 2035: A height limit of 3 stories/40 feet was put into the Plan for about 35 blocks of the Downtown area.

Downtown---the General Plan Revision authorized a special density and height district in the very center of Downtown.

Called the special “Downtown Residential Opportunity Area”, higher density and height would be allowed on six major blocks on Marina Vista and Escobar between Castro and Las Juntas.

This huge development area would completely block much off our Downtown from the waterfront and the hills---our own Berlin Wall in the middle of Downtown Martinez. It would essentially cut off any connection with the waterfront and to the hills to the west.

What was finally put in the General Plan 2035: The “Berlin Wall” was eliminated, but that level of density was transferred elsewhere to a similar number of blocks interspersed throughout the Downtown.

Martinez Parks--- the General Plan Revision showed the wrong park list and overstated the total park acreage. It also stated we had met our legal goal for total park acreage.

The modified park list the City used added several incorrect park areas and grossly overstated the total Citywide park acreage. The statement that we had met our legal goal for total park acreage was wrong, as it was based upon the incorrect park list and resultant incorrect total park acreage.

This incorrect information would mislead the public and undermine public support for acquiring new parkland to meet our legal goal. Equally important, it would make it more difficult to successfully compete for parkland grants.

In our trying to rectify these errors, we provided maps and information to support the correct park list and total acreage, some of which should have already been in City records.

Based upon the maps and information we provided, the City accepted our accurate park list and total acreage. That information was used to correct the acreage and park list errors in the Revision. The City also deleted the statement that the City had met our legal goal for total park acreage, as that statement was not true when the accurate park list was used.

What was finally put in the General Plan 2035: the correct park list and total park acreage figures are in the Plan. The statement that we have met our legal goal has been removed. (Note: These changes have been accepted as errata and will appear in the official copy of the General Plan 2035 that is in preparation.)

Measure I—Martinez Open Space and Park Protection Initiative protecting all open space and parks in Martinez by requiring a public vote to approve conversion of any of these lands to more intensive development. Passed in 2018 with support from Thousand Friends of Martinez.

The General Plan Revision left out whole sections of this Initiative that citizens voted into law and presented the Initiative in a confusing mishmash that even we could not understand.

Critical information in the Initiative was not incorporated into the General Plan Revision---such as accurate maps showing the lands protected by Measure I and also the protections for the Franklin Hills.

Information about Measure I that was provided in the General Plan Revision was confusing and spread out all over the Revision.

These defects made the Initiative confusing and unclear to the public. It would have seriously undermined the public's ability to use the Initiative effectively in protecting Martinez open space and parks.

We ended up providing one map to the City and provided technical information and a mockup to help them accurately show the protected open space and parkland on the Land Use Map, the main map in the General Plan Revision. We also provided copious written changes to clarify several confusing areas in the Revision.

What was finally put into the General Plan 2035: The correct maps and other information has been put in the Plan. Cross-references and clarifying statements have been added to the Plan to more clearly explain the Initiative.

(Note: The wording changes have been accepted as errata and will appear in the official copy of the General Plan 2035 that is in preparation.)

These results represent a great deal of effort. But we believe they will help our town grow to a better future for us all---a future that preserves and protects what is most special about Martinez while still supporting responsible growth.

Please note that some Councilmembers have suggested they may try to reverse some of the density and height changes when the Housing Element comes up for discussion in the next few months. YOUR E-MAILS AND LETTERS TO THEM WILL HELP PERSUADE THE COUNCIL TO NOT CHANGE THESE HARD-WON IMPROVEMENTS.

We are proud to have helped achieve these changes to the General Plan 2035.

But we believe much more needed to be done.

For the last two years we have campaigned to get the City Council to start the entire General Plan Revision process over again---to start from scratch rather than try to take an old, rewritten and flawed revision from 2016 as the starting point.

The process to update our General Plan has been going on for over ten years now. It was essentially halted about six years ago after a flawed General Plan Revision was published. It then was essentially set aside for about 5 years. Then a year ago it was revised again and put out to the public for review, comments and approval in a rushed one-year process.

But this latest General Plan Revision was full of problems and was a mixture of the six-year-old version and this current attempt---truly a Frankenstein's monster.

Added to that is the fact that several Planning Managers and staff and City Managers had all had their hands in the revisions over the 10+ years since the revision process started---and NONE of them was even still with the City when this latest version came out a year ago.

(We believe only one City Management person was left from the beginning of the General Plan Revision process 10+ years ago, our Assistant City Manager, and that

several complete turnovers of Planning personnel had occurred, as well as approximately six City Managers in that period).

There was little current understanding of why the plan was the way it was and virtually no “institutional knowledge” to draw on. Indeed, when questions were asked of staff or consultants why something was in the Revision, often the answer was “I don’t know”. Yet the Revision was on a one-year fast track for presentation, review and critique by the public and the City Council and Planning Commission.

Compounding this, the General Plan Revision was a very complex document and could not be digested and reviewed quickly. The Revision itself was 287 pages long, and other General Plan documents incorporated in the Revision added over four hundred more pages. Plus the Draft Environmental Impact Report was 824 pages.

No one, including the elected and appointed officials and the public, could understand and critique all of that in the time allowed.

Additionally, the public review process for the General Plan Revision was essentially ineffective. Public sessions were limited to just three short sessions that were given in the holiday period: December 1 and December 15 in 2021, and January 12 this year. They were essentially useless.

When we and others petitioned for more sessions, some were scheduled. But the City scheduled them for late in the evening tagged on to the end of other meetings, like City Council or Planning Commission meetings. Few people came.

Citizens were allowed three minutes for comments. And the sessions were so short that little or no discussion occurred on issues the public brought up.

Public education by the city did not occur.

More important, public input to help overcome the lack of “institutional knowledge” and Martinez history in the City staff and consultants did not happen.

The walk Thousand Friends of Martinez led in the Downtown and Waterfront with verbal descriptions of what development was planned there was the type of outreach the City should have done to bring the public into the process, but that did not happen.

It felt as though the goal was to keep the public out of the process.

(The only thing close to true public input in the entire 10+ year process seems to be from the General Plan Task Force in the preparation of the first Revision in 2016. And that Task Force never produced any written report or recommendations and was disbanded by the City before the first Revision was even written.)

So we had spent over 10 years producing and revising a complex General Plan Revision with a complete turnover several times of City staff so no one currently even knew why much was in the current revision. It was a tremendously complicated document (and yet tremendously important). And the review and approval process was being rushed with the obvious intention to keep the public out, and failed to take advantage of public input to fill gaps in knowledge and history that the staff and consultants had.

That is why we believed the only way to develop a decent General Plan Revision was to start over and do the General Plan Revision process the right way. But that did not happen, so we have a plan with obvious major faults, some of which we have detailed below.

Some of the major concerns that we were unsuccessful in getting the City and City Council to rectify and that remain in the General Plan 2035 are:

1. The General Plan 2035 is not really a plan. It is more a listing of hundreds of goals, policies and measures that do little to point the way to the future we want or to specify concrete steps to achieve that future. Issues like sea level rise, wildfire prevention, homelessness, etc. are treated in only the broadest terms.

The Plan does not give a clear vision of Martinez in the future and a plan to achieve that vision.

2. The Plan is very weak. The hundreds of goals, policies and measures that are listed and seem to form the backbone of the Plan are mostly just suggestions. Weak words and phrases like “consider”, “encourage”, “explore”, “support”, “maintain”, “when feasible” and the like are used frequently.

Few firm protections, guidelines or restrictions or dos and don'ts are included. Strong words like “will” or “shall” that set firm limits and boundaries are not used often. Protections, standards or restrictions that citizens can rely on are few and far between.

One exception in the General Plan to the weak words and boundaries is Measure I: Martinez Open Space and Park Protection Initiative, which Thousand Friends helped draft and support, which sets firm limits to protect our open space and park land, including the Franklin Hills.

3. The General Plan Revision was never compared to our existing General Plan to let the public see clearly what was being added in the General Plan Revision and what was being deleted from the Revision that was in the existing General Plan. That is a key part of the education process and also critical information for the public to have, especially regarding safeguards and restrictions in the existing General Plan that may have been dropped out in the new one.

And the last-minute comparison done by staff only compared density zones. It never even looked at comparing actual areas of our neighborhoods that had been changed to denser high-density housing zones. This occurred throughout Martinez but was never shown to the public.

4. No economic analysis of the implications of the General Plan Revision for our City finances was done. How would the plan results affect our City income and costs? Would the proposed directions the Plan was pointing us to be economically feasible? Would it allow us to handle major future expenses like infrastructure replacement, sea-level rise expenses and employee health and pension costs?

5. Public education was poorly done and public input was stifled, as we have discussed above.

6. Because update of the Housing Element of the General Plan was deferred to a later stage, No discussion or other communication of housing and retail/commercial development parameters or density and height was done on a detailed level to let the residents and other affected parties know what they could expect from this plan on a neighborhood level. As housing and retail/commercial development is so central to neighborhood quality of life, the decision should have been made to carefully expose this to residents and take feedback.

The Housing Element of the General Plan 2035 is in process of being developed now for approval in the near future. That document will determine much more

precisely where housing and retail/commercial development will be mandated in our town, and the State mandates appear to be forcing us to some difficult choices.

We are placing our trust in our new Mayor and Council and our new City Manager to lead a careful and open process in developing this crucial document.

With your help, Thousand Friends will continue to watchdog the process, as a new Housing Element is developed. When we contact you, please help support our efforts.