

ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF THE CITY OF CHULA VISTA URBAN CORE SPECIFIC PLAN

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Planning and Consulting**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Chula Vista is San Diego county's second largest city, with a 2005 population of 217, 543. From 2000 to 2005, its population grew at about 5% per year, making it one of the fastest growing jurisdictions in the region. In reality, Chula Vista is really two distinct socio-ecological zones – eastern and western Chula Vista. Eastern Chula Vista, is the sprawling, low density, vast terrain spreading outward from I-805 to the south and east. It has absorbed most of the city's growth over the past two decades, in the form of higher density new towns, mixed use complexes and traditional cul de sac, tract suburban housing developments.

The Urban Core Specific Plan Area lies within the heart of "western Chula Vista". Its higher density, older neighborhoods and traditional "grid" street morphology makes it a distinctly different place within the larger city. It is enclosed by two rivers – the Sweetwater River to the north, the Otay River to the south, and by the San Diego Bay. These ecological elements provide strong "edges" to western Chula Vista. Within these bounds, a smaller area of 1700 acres has been determined to be the "Urban Core" and the subject of the Specific Plan analyzed here. This area encapsulates the highest density and most intense activity spaces in the city of Chula Vista.

The preparation of the Urban Core Specific Plan is a critical step for the city of Chula Vista for a number of reasons. Throughout the United States, cities are rediscovering the value of their historic centers, places that have been abandoned or ignored for too many years. Old city centers and their nearby neighborhoods have been recognized to have the proper pedestrian scale and a historic sense of place, making them excellent locales for recovering lost revenue from retail and tourism activities. Downtowns, across the United States are also recognizing the strategy of creating well designed, affordable housing, at slightly higher densities, thus providing badly needed new housing units, while also creating a larger number of consumers to bolster downtown businesses. These trends have not been ignored in the San Diego region. The city of San Diego has a nationally recognized downtown redevelopment project, managed

by the Center City Development Corporation (CCDC) – which has successfully built large scale infrastructure (ballpark, shopping mall, trolley, port expansion), and achieved “place-based” neighborhood revitalization (Gaslamp Quarter, East Village, Little Italy, etc.). Place-based revitalization means that not only have these neighborhoods been remodeled, but each one is building a unique sense of identity, which enhances its chances for attracting both consumers and investors, as well as residents. Other cities in the region-- including National City, Oceanside, and Escondido – are taking steps to enact policies of downtown revitalization,.

Chula Vista’s urban core has a number of promising features that make downtown revitalization a good bet for the city and south bay area. First, the downtown’s proximity to the waterfront means retail, tourism and residential developments should thrive here. In California, the waterfront is a prime catalyst for development. Second, the proximity of the I-5 freeway, I-805 and the south bay trolley offer easy access to downtown San Diego, and the Mexican border (the latter is an untapped resource I will touch upon later in this report). Third, a successful waterfront/ downtown redevelopment could pull in the entire south bay/ Tijuana consumer market, since there is no other major urban core service/ entertainment center south of downtown San Diego. This is an important point that is perhaps not sufficiently recognized in the Urban Core Specific Plan. At present, if a Mexican businessman or a visiting tourist crosses the border from Tijuana in search of lunch or dinner combined with a waterfront/ urban experience, they will have to drive all the way to downtown San Diego, or to a northern beach town to have that experience. Successful redevelopment in Chula Vista’s urban core/ waterfront could attract a considerable chunk of this growing market of flows between Tijuana/ Baja California and the San Diego region.

Obviously, another important function of Chula Vista’s urban core revitalization is the provision of new and affordable housing. In a fast growing region like San Diego, notwithstanding the fluctuations in the real estate market, housing will continue to be in high demand. Higher density, well designed housing in a “downtown” setting would be a welcome addition to the San Diego region’s housing needs. Further, as land supply diminishes in eastern Chula Vista, the urban core’s “infill” development will offer a much needed alternative for housing.

For all of the above reasons, the Urban Core Specific Plan is a vital first step in creating both a vision and a planning/ design template for the redevelopment of Chula Vista’s downtown core. Planning and design will be critical to the success of the redevelopment project, because the district will be significantly transformed by higher density development. I will suggest in my report that “boiler plate” planning and design guidelines may also be strengthened by strategies that focus on how to make the Chula Vista urban core a great “place”. These strategies should draw more forcefully from the local/ regional/ cultural context, including optimizing surrounding ecological resources, incorporating elements of Mexican/ Latin American culture, and better understanding the role of public spaces in anchoring each district within the Urban Core Specific Plan area.

II. THE CITY OF CHULA VISTA URBAN CORE SPECIFIC PLAN: GENERAL OVERVIEW AND COMMENTS

The City of Chula Vista Urban Core Specific Plan¹ offers a comprehensive planning and design template for the city to follow in the redevelopment of central Chula Vista, transforming it into a high density, thriving and active urban downtown, with innovative 3-7 story buildings, ongoing cultural events, night entertainment, a vibrant street life, a strong micro-economy, substantial new housing and work spaces. The strengths of the Urban Core Specific Plan include:

- More than two years of community outreach, including stakeholder interaction, community workshops, charrettes, high school forums, an advisory committee, an evolving series of dialogues with the advisory committee, and finally, workshops with City Council and the Planning Commission
- A guiding “vision” which lays out a blueprint strategy for redevelopment planning and design that emphasizes “walkability,” mixed use, proportional density, economic success, restoration of the past.
- Emphasis on making the center more “legible” through the creation of design “districts” or focus areas, including a “Village”, “Grand Boulevard” and “Promenade”.
- Recognizing that “density” does not have to be a negative, if development is guided by good design, if it can create profit and become a catalyst for western Chula Vista economic growth, by using economic development strategies, including live-work spaces, creating an entertainment district, and seeking to recapture lost retail sales.
- Recommending a “West Side Shuttle” transit system as a way of connecting the three high density activity centers (Village, Grand Boulevard, Promenade) within the Urban Core planning area.
- The use of a “form-based” design approach to guide development at higher densities. “Form based” codes are nationally recognized as an innovative way to go beyond zoning to provide design standards that fit buildings, mass, height, and density into different sub-districts and different contexts for development.
- Attention to the importance of “transitions” between new development and existing development, to buffer residents from the impact of new projects.
- Recognition that the Chula Vista urban core must be conceptually organized as a pedestrian-scale place where a variety of transit options (bikeways, trolley, bus, etc.) allow urban dweller mobility. Including “traffic calming” design techniques as a way of supporting pedestrian friendly spaces in the urban core.
- Identification of urban design strategies to connect the urban core to the bayfront — including “Gateways” at the E St. and H St. trolley stations, and a retail complex at the southern end of the west of Broadway Promenade.
- Proposing that the Chula Vista urban core needs an “identity”, partly based on historical elements like Art Deco and Moderne style buildings. Recommending that each sub-area of the urban core define an identity through techniques such as “branding” images which can be placed on banners along main streets.

¹ Throughout this report, I refer to the April 2006 Draft version of the City of Chula Vista Urban Core Specific Plan.

- A compendium of detailed design guidelines for new urban projects with emphasis on fine tuning the scale of buildings, setbacks, architectural facades, storefront design, the use of awnings, signage, strategies for entrance design, landscaping and many other architectural and design/planning details.

III. CRITIQUES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CHULA VISTA URBAN CORE SPECIFIC PLAN

One of the biggest challenges to downtown redevelopment is often the degree to which existing residents and property owners feel threatened by change—in the form of higher density, high rise structures, and more activity. When such development is controlled and regulated by local government, some stakeholders also feel a sense of “fear of government.” When you combine this “fear of density” with “fear of government”, the results can often be overwhelming and create political uncertainty. Some of these points come across both directly and indirectly as one surveys the minutes of community meetings and newspaper articles.

While the well crafted maps, drawings and text in the Urban Core Specific Plan take a significant step toward calming the fears of residents and stakeholders in and around Chula Vista’s urban core, it is only a first step along the path of reconstructing the older downtown portions of the city center. There will need to be more community input, and further refining of the details of the guidelines suggested in the Urban Core Specific Plan.

My suggestions will focus on how to implement some of the ideas in the plan, by applying them even more directly and forcefully to Chula Vista itself. In particular, I am convinced that the plan should further emphasize how to make the urban core a great place that people will want to come to, or live in, or invest in. This “place-making” strategy should draw from the biggest advantages of the downtown Chula Vista location, as well as those cultural, historical and ecological factors that give Chula Vista an “edge” over other places in the San Diego region and that will allow the design details in the Urban Core Specific Plan to come to life even more. I outline some of these factors below:

1) VISIONING THE URBAN CORE: CONNECTIONS

The vision described in the Specific Plan calls for a renewed and economically vital Chula Vista urban core. In order for this vision to be successful, at least five critical “connections” must be achieved. These are mentioned in the Specific Plan, but I would suggest that they be further explored, and addressed more seriously. In some cases, I am proposing follow- up workshops or additional studies/analyses to flesh out important directions and design/planning strategies:

a) Regional connections.

The Urban Core Specific Plan (UCSP) mentions Chula Vista's access to other parts of the region, but I think a more explicit strategy of "regional connectedness" should be part of the downtown vision. Freeway access and two trolley stations allow downtown San Diego, National City, and the Mexican border to be within quick reach of Chula Vista. My sense is that downtown Chula Vista, until now, has not been on the radar screens of people living and working anywhere between the San Diego urban core and the Mexican border, nor those living in Tijuana. As I mentioned earlier in this report, we are talking about some 2 million Mexicans in Tijuana, and probably another 1.5 million people who live in the area between I-8 and the border. This represents a huge market of potential consumers for Chula Vista's future entertainment/tourism district in the urban core area. Some discussion of how the city links up to these populations should occur in the short term. I would like to see that discussion somehow appended to the Urban Core Specific Plan, perhaps in the chapter on mobility.

b) Bayfront connections.

The linkage between Chula Vista's urban core and the bay is fundamental to the future of downtown Chula Vista. This is mentioned in the UCSP, and a number of gestures are made to the bay connection. For example, the tree-lined "promenade" vision area, and its retail complex to the south are proposed as a link to the bay. The West Side Shuttle is also an important new transit circuit that would move people between the urban core and the bayfront.

My concern, however, is that the bayfront connection was not given center stage in the Chula Vista urban core redevelopment vision. My view is that the bayfront is one of THE MOST SIGNIFICANT features of downtown Chula Vista, and must be a central element in its redevelopment. Indeed, one could even make the argument that the Urban Core Specific Plan and the Chula Vista Bayfront Master Plan ought to be merged into a single effort. However, while I recognize the reality that they are two different plans, and that the Urban Core Specific Plan did not include the Bayfront question, I still believe the bayfront connection must be given greater priority. It is the single most powerful ecological element that defines western Chula Vista. Ideally, the Bayfront Master Plan and the Urban Core Specific Plan should feed off each other.

Having said this, one also has to recognize that there are some significant historical, ecological and geographic hurdles to linking downtown Chula Vista to the bay. They include; i) physical barriers such as I-5, the rail line, and industrial zones west of the freeway; ii) a geographic mismatch between the direction and flow of east-west streets/urban movement in the urban core (E,F,G, H streets), and the location of the future urban development along the bay. Urban core streets flow toward the ecological protected Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge. In order for urban development in the core to connect with the bayfront, movement will need to "bend" south and then west toward the "Harbor District" and marine, where more intensive urban uses are projected in the Bayfront master plan. For example, it is possible that almost no residents will live in the Sweetwater district of the Bayfront area, the district that lies closest to the Urban core "Promenade" vision area.

These concerns can be resolved. Some follow-up discussion on Urban Core/Bayfront connections should be included in the implementation phase of the Urban Core Specific Plan.

c) Other ecological connections.

Aside from the bay, Chula Vista's urban core and surrounding "western Chula Vista" is bordered by two rivers – the Sweetwater River to the north, and the Otay River, to the south. These rivers are an important part of the history and ecology of Chula Vista. Indeed, the Sweetwater River's water enabled Chula Vista to launch its citrus agricultural economy in the 19th century, and vegetable-growing operations after that. The two rivers might be incorporated more into the process of place-making and the construction of an identity in the downtown. For example, \$30 million is allocated for creating Lower Sweetwater Park which lies just north and east of the urban core. This ecological resource could be linked with the "Village" sub-area of the urban core specific plan, perhaps using signage, a landmark design element (like a tower), or other strategies. Transit connections (jitney, bicycling, walking paths) would also add to the linkage of the river ecology to the urban core. The Otay River is obviously further south, but it too is part of Chula Vista's history and identity, and might be part of an "ecological bike tour" that moves from the urban core along the bay and down to the Otay River.

d) Activity zone connections to residential areas.

I note that the three key focus areas of the UCSP – the Village, the Urban Core (Promenade and Grand Boulevard) and the Corridors (southern ends of Third Ave, Broadway) surround two residential spaces that appear as "holes" in the center of a donut. The development within the high density, mixed use areas should make a stronger gesture to connect back into the residential areas that lie inside the developments that will surround them. Some of this is achieved with streetscape transformations proposed for the major travel corridors – E, F, and G streets on the north end. However, some additional attention might be given to this question – and perhaps new strategies could emerge. For example, the use of signage, landmarks, way-finding designs or kiosks might strengthen the flow from these streets toward the focus areas and high density activity zones.

e) Cultural identity/ the Mexican connection.

The UCSP vision is grounded in the idea that Chula Vista's urban core will work better if it's built environment (buildings, streets, storefront designs, plazas, paseos, promenades) is defined by having an "identity". I am convinced that the identity-building work done in the UCSP could go further. In particular, I believe the identity of Chula Vista, and it's comparative advantage in "place-making" should be more forcefully built around the Mexican connection. For one, Chula Vista's history cannot be entirely separated from the larger history of the San Diego region, thus an obvious force is the proximity of Mexico to Chula Vista. The Chula Vista Heritage Museum's "Brief History of Chula Vista" notes that during the "Mexican Period", the Mexican government allocated land grants (ranchos), as it did in much of California, which redefined the landscape of south San Diego. Ranchos surrounding Chula Vista included the Janal and Otay Ranchos. The heart of Chula Vista was a large ranch called "El

Rancho del Rey”, which was later given to the brother in law of California’s governor Pio Pico, and renamed Rancho de la Nacion (National Ranch), the area that would ultimately define National City, Chula Vista and Bonita.

The “Mexican connection” is mentioned in the UCSP, but not seriously developed as a theme in urban design, place-making and cultural identity. The fact that 50% of the population of Chula Vista is of Mexican/Latino origin reinforces the importance of this cultural connection. As you drive and walk the streets of the urban core, you are struck by the evidence of Mexican presence here, in the place names, in commercial signage, in the people you see in public spaces. One must also not forget that “Chula Vista” means “beautiful view” in Spanish.

One simple example of Mexican culture and “place identity” is the El Primero Hotel, on Third Avenue. This small, boutique hotel has been refurbished to bring out its original “Zig-Zag” moderne design from the 1930’s. It has the feel of modernist hotels in Mexico from the same era. In speaking with the owner of the hotel, I noted that he is aware of the potential market for Mexican clients at his hotel.

How should the Mexican connection be incorporated into Chula Vista’s core design and cultural identity? I recommend that an additional study be commissioned to answer this question in more detail. But let me offer a few suggestions:

- First, Chula Vista’s identity could be built around the positive contributions that Mexican and Latin American city-builders have made. These contributions include architecture, public art and public space design.
- Colonial Architecture & Design: the colonial theme in Mexico was re-conceptualized in California in the Mission Revival and Spanish colonial revival movements. Perhaps more to the point, colonial planning was inspired by Spanish urbanism. Thus, the “Latino” cultural theme can be extended to include the example of Spanish cities (including Barcelona, which I mention further on). One of the essential components of Spanish and Mexican city building was the importance of great “plazas”. Plazas were the central anchor of Spanish grid-iron colonial cities. The theme of plazas could be incorporated in the design and planning of public spaces in the urban core (see also my comments on public space further on in this report).
- Modernism: Latin America is celebrated for its great “modernist” artists and architects. Cities like Brasilia attest to this. Modernist architecture could be a driving force in part of Chula Vista’s urban core. There are a number of modernist Mexican architects like Felix Candela who work with elliptical, curving designs that could be quite dramatic in Chula Vista. Mexican modernists are also very adept at using indigenous or colonial themes to create beautiful modern buildings. Luis Barragan’s work in Mexico in the 1950’s and 1960’s would be an inspiring example for Chula Vista. His use of color, plazas and patios, water, and landscaping would be superb for public spaces and buildings in the urban core. One of his disciples, Ricardo Legorreta, was the main architect for the south Chula Vista public library, so there is already a precedent.
- Public art/muralism. Mexico’s muralist movements of the 1920’s produced some of the greatest and most colorful public art in the world (Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco are the most well known artists). Muralism could be an important part of place-making and cultural identity in downtown. Specific kinds of murals and public

art need to be fitted to different buildings and public spaces based on the location, surrounding context, and needs assessment of potential users.

- **Public space:** Spanish and Mexican cities have some of the greatest plazas and public spaces in the world. Since, Chula Vista's redevelopment will be defined by the creation of new paseos (a Spanish word of course), and plazas (also a Spanish word), why not learn more about the great plazas of Mexico and Spain, and incorporate this into plaza designs? A number of Mexican cities offer important lessons – these include Puebla/Cholula, Queretaro, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, San Miguel de Allende.

In general, the Mexican/Latin American cultural identity project should avoid references to negative stereotypes and political issues associated with Mexico (immigration, border and homeland security, Mexican poverty, corruption).

2) LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS/ URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES

The “form-based” approach is an excellent leap beyond traditional zoning to begin to offer more detailed guidelines in creating pedestrian- scale, high density, mixed use districts where multi-story buildings can be scaled to fit the needs of specific sites, each of which has different mixes of land use, and user needs. The use of the 3 land use districts (Village, Urban Core, Corridors), and 26 sub-districts creates the necessary finer mesh to apply form-based ideas to specialized micro-spaces. The use of floor area ratios (FAR's), height controls, and set backs offer further controls on balancing high density with street friendliness. Special provisions for live-work units, regulations on signage, and other similar details will further enhance the effectiveness of the form-based approach.

However, the “form-based” design/planning proposed for the three UCSP districts (Village, Urban Core, Corridor) still has somewhat of a “boiler plate” quality to it. This is to be expected, since the codes are being applied across a vast array of 1700 acres of streets, and redevelopment sites. However, I strongly urge the City of Chula Vista to create a series of follow-up workshops and design exercises in each major district. These design workshops can focus on defining in greater detail the identity of each district, determining how to make it a place that attracts people, and deciding on which form-based designs will fit in specific sites. As I argue in the next section (Public Space), I believe some of these decisions will spring from a more detailed public space design strategy for each district (see section 3 below). In general, I propose a workshop for each district, and would offer the following comments:

Village district: The UCSP proposes that the “village” atmosphere be preserved here. Some of the design decisions will revolve around the important public spaces created at the 3rd Ave./F Street intersection, as well as the future design of the quadrant of Memorial Park that fronts on 3rd Ave. This part of the park needs to be redesigned to interface with the more urban feel of 3rd Ave. The connection between 3rd Ave. and many of the side streets is not well defined, and needs to be explored.

Urban Core-- H Street “Grand Boulevard” corridor: This corridor will be vastly redefined by the public spaces proposed at 3rd, 4th and 5th Ave. intersections with H street. For example, the current plaza at H St. and 3rd Ave. (near the County Court building) is a lost

space, and needs to be rethought. Further, the Hospital and the mall are both critical destinations that must be well articulated in their relationship to the street and to future public space designs. The Hospital role in the public space system proposed does not appear to be well defined. The connections and flows between mall, plazas, and hospital/plazas should be reconsidered.

Urban core – Promenade (west of Broadway): one critical design question for this district is: how will the relationship between the fast moving, regional transit-oriented, and auto-centered Broadway corridor be reconciled against the slower pace of the proposed “Promenade”, just a short distance from Broadway?

3) PUBLIC SPACE

The chapter of the UCSP on the Public Realm (Ch. VIII) offers many good suggestions on the proposed functions and design elements for major streets in the urban core. It outlines important design changes for streets (medians, landscaping, sidewalks, crosswalks, etc.), and calls for the creation of gateways, signage, public art, parks, plazas, and *paseos*. There are useful recommendations on plaza designs (physical access, sunlight, shade, focal elements, architectural style). Still most of these guidelines are of the generic variety.

Public space should play a critical role in the process of “place-making” and creating an identity within the three sub-areas of the urban core of Chula Vista. The future of public space will go a long way in energizing the core. It therefore deserves even more attention than it was given in the UCSP. As an example, let me suggest the case of Barcelona, Spain. Obviously, Barcelona is a much larger city, but in some ways, Chula Vista can be considered a smaller version of Barcelona. Both cities have an urban core that hugs the waterfront, and both cities have rivers to the north and south of downtown, that drain toward the sea. Like Chula Vista, Barcelona’s waterfront was clogged by industrial space that blocked access to the downtown.

Barcelona appointed a Catalan architect, named Oriol Bohigas, as the Director of City Planning in the 1980’s. Bohigas immediately formed a partnership with the Mayor’s office, convincing city stakeholders that the success of downtown redevelopment should be built around what was termed a “tangible projects” approach. “Tangible projects” focused on either redesigning old public spaces or inventing new ones.

The idea was that redevelopment would succeed if the city could create exciting, meaningful spaces that people would actually want to go to. Public monies were aimed at building some 160 public projects, which ranged from new promenades, gardens and parks to plazas, playgrounds and public monuments. Some of the projects included:

- A “Sculpture in Space” program that commissioned artists, architects, and sculptors to create colorful, attention-grabbing public art on spaces
- Recycling projects that converted abandoned factories, slaughterhouses, and quarries into plazas, parks and gardens
- “Defensible space” designs that converted crime-laden public spaces into safe and heavily

- used neighborhood plazas
- Rehabilitation projects that transformed old parks and paseos into dynamic spaces
- Street redevelopment strategies that turned dull streets into vibrant commercial corridors
- Waterfront design strategies that shifted old industrial zones into dynamic public promenades
- A “pedestrianization” program that defined streets and spaces to be closed off to automobile traffic

Since plazas, paseos and promenades will be important to the “place-making” and identity construction of each new design district, I propose that Chula Vista consider a “Public Space Design and Place-making Study,” to be accompanied by community workshops. This process would look specifically at the public spaces proposed for each district. It would explore in greater detail the key public spaces (parks, plazas, streets) in the UCSP Facilities/Implementation phase. I propose the following steps be taken to study key public spaces:

- a) A survey of user needs be carried out for selected sites/sub-areas,. The survey could include such issues as comfort, security, passive and active engagement, and discovery.
- b) Analyze access and space needs for different potential users
- c) Analyze design and possible public space “meaning” goals for different sites. Questions to be asked might include: i) does the space invite people in? (legibility); ii) do children and adults feel connected to the space? (what will they do in it?); iii) would different user groups (children, seniors, clubs, schools, sports teams, ethnic groups, etc.) identify with the space?; iv) would the space have larger symbolic meanings, such as connections to history, culture, spiritual feelings or even fantasy?
- d) spatial impact on surrounding space—do plazas “reach out like an octopus”?

IV. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS/ NEXT STEPS

During the implementation phase of the UCSP, I propose the following:

- 1) Further explore design/planning strategies that will connect the urban core with the bayfront. In addition, re-evaluate connections between the urban core and surrounding ecological areas, especially along the Sweetwater River, as well as the connection to residential zones that the new development areas surround.
- 2) Commission a study/ workshop series on “Mexican/Latin American Culture and Place-making in Chula Vista’s Urban Core”
- 3) Carry out a series of community design/planning workshops that explore the details of “form-based” strategies for growth in the Village, Urban Core and Corridors areas of the UCSP area.
- 4) Commission a “Public Space/Place-making Study” that further analyzes the design of

proposed plazas, parks and redesigned streets within the major focus areas of the UCSP

5) Create a Citizens' Advisory Committee for each sub-district to explore land use planning, "form based" design options, and the future of public spaces

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