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# Creating a Better NEAP (Northeast Area Plan) for Sebastopol

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By Patricia Dines

Excerpted from an article in the West County Gazette, July 2008

This flyer is at <[www.healthyworld.org/07BetterNEAPEssay.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/07BetterNEAPEssay.html)>

I'm deeply committed to environmental change, and understand the ecological and economic needs that proponents of Sebastopol's Northeast Area Plan (NEAP) describe. Unfortunately, I feel that the gap between the NEAP's hopes and its reality significantly compromise its ability to create positive results in both areas.

## My Key Concerns

I offer here a summary of my primary concerns, in the hope that these assessments, added to those of other citizens, will help support a fruitful NEAP process.

**1) Building this extensively in a flood and earthquake liquefaction zone would likely be expensive, dangerous, and not ecological.** It violates the first two eco-principles (align with nature, and reuse before building new) with impacts that include dredging tons of fill dirt from the Laguna; redirecting and battling nature's floods; and bringing in traffic, pollution, noise, and light that will push wildlife further from the town's edge. Plus, disasters like Katrina's floods and the Marina's quake-collapsed homes warn us about intensive building in such areas.

**2) High construction and insurance costs would greatly limit what's possible here,** making it primarily for the rich and likely unaffordable for community activities.

**3) It's questionable that there's a market for such costly stores and housing.** The retail scenarios considered viable in the City's economic analysis were instead quite low-rent, such as outlet stores and art galleries. Sebastopol's housing is expensive enough without creating an ultra-expensive district, at such a high cost to the City.

**4) High costs would make mixed use (and its potential benefits) less likely.** I love the idea of people living, working, and shopping in the same area, saving car trips and increasing convenience. But, even if retail comes here, someone affording the \$500-750k condo won't be working for the coffee shop's minimum wage, and those now living and working in town will likely not afford the expensive stores. Thus many trips will still occur. To me, smarter mixed use would be to grow organically in non-flood-zone areas of town, avoiding the NEA's serious downsides.

**5) Worsened traffic would likely block needed shoppers.** This plan is actually quite car-centric. The economic analysis says that NEAP retail will depend on many new shoppers driving in, making traffic much worse, which the City says is basically unsolvable.

Traffic already discourages people from coming into town. Will that many more people really tolerate gridlocked delays to shop here, as the plan assumes?

Fortunately, the citizen-created General Plan (GP) has traffic Level of Service (LOS) standards for downtown. Unfortunately, NEAP proposes removing them! But that won't stop traffic's negative consequences, including hectic side streets and hampered emergency responses.

**6) The City (and taxpayers) would be committing to millions up-front based on economically-problematic scenarios.**

Overall, I think this plan inaccurately applies an urban idea to a rural spot where it just doesn't fit.

## Answering Proponent Assertions

**1) Will density and bad traffic magically create a better public transit system?** This is unlikely in our spread-out county, especially with governments' tight budgets.

**2) Will peak oil reduce traffic?** It might, but it'll also reduce the imported shoppers required for the plan's projections. Plus we won't need expensive chi-chi shops then, but affordable ones serving our daily needs. Also, building costs will skyrocket, making this area even more expensive while funds and resources are even more scarce. Thus, I think a sensible peak oil plan would look quite different (and I have examined this topic extensively).

**3) Does this plan allow less development than current zoning?** This odd new claim is directly contradicted by many facts, including increased building heights and consultant David Early's statement (at the May 20 CC meeting) that the GP's standards for traffic and growth management were preventing landowners from building in this area. Was serving these landowners actually a key goal of this process? That seems to better fit the facts.

## Essential Solutions

**1) Sincerely address the inadequacies of the plan and EIR,** per Councilmember questions and citizen statements, to help create an approach that actually achieves our ecological and economic goals.

**2) Retain the GP's traffic standards and growth management ordinance.** Let's grow modestly, within our constraints. If this plan is truly less dense than now allowed, it shouldn't require eliminating these GP provisions.

**3) Create a complete economic analysis** that: demonstrates demand for added retail that can afford higher rents and won't cannibalize current businesses; realistically calculates full City costs and income, including up-front, to ensure timely net gain; specifies funding sources; and understands that traffic will limit new shoppers.

**4) Do a greenhouse gas (GHG) analysis that reflects this plan's actualities,** including: construction for fill and podia; increased pollution from clogged traffic; and our real-life limits to mixed use. Compare that to the GHG picture for modest growth on higher ground.

**5) Place the plan on the ballot,** providing complete information to citizens. A change this significant and costly should only be done if the majority makes that informed choice.

**TAKING ACTION:** Send your comments directly to Councilmembers (emails are at <[www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us/citycouncil.shtml](mailto:www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us/citycouncil.shtml)>) or to <[mgourley@sonic.net](mailto:mgourley@sonic.net)> or to: City Clerk, 7120 Bodega Ave., Sebastopol CA 95472.