

Patricia Dines
708 Gravenstein Hwy N #104
Sebastopol, CA 95472

July 14, 2008

To: Sebastopol City Council
From: Patricia Dines, Professional environmental educator
Re: Creating a Better NEAP (Northeast Area Plan) for Sebastopol

Dear Sebastopol City Councilmembers —

I've lived in Sebastopol for over 15 years. During this time, I've sought to serve both my community and the planet as an environmental educator, empowering constructive action through writing books, newsletters, articles, and reports; giving talks; and co-creating events.

So, like many others, I was delighted years ago when the people of Sebastopol elected so many Councilmembers who spoke of their commitment to environmental principles. I was excited that our local government could lead in integrating earth wisdom into our actions. That's why I've invested countless unpaid hours, officially and beyond, in helping bring some of the Council's green projects into reality, and I've appreciated this Council's acknowledgment of my work. I also appreciate your service to our community over the years. I know that you want what's best for this town, as do I.

Therefore, when I first heard about the Northeast Area (NEA) planning process, I was entirely open to the possibilities and ready to love it also. As I sat in the workshops and presentations and read the materials, I too could see visions that sounded worthy of support — that it would be ecological, economical, pedestrian-friendly, and offer affordable housing. Who wouldn't want that?

But, as I looked underneath those pretty pictures to the plan's specifics, I started to feel that it would create a very different reality. I can understand that this might be hard for some people to hear, no matter how constructively stated, and it's been hard at times to say.

Still, I feel that I must speak, because this is a critical juncture for a town that is rare and precious, that I love so much. I care about its future. So I hope that my communication, as well as that of all the citizens who've expressed their concerns, can help create a better plan, one that truly is wise and innovative ecologically and economically, and reflects this town's unique and special character. I also hope that we can heal the relationships that have been so challenged by this process.

Approaching Our Conversation

In considering citizens' testimonies in this process, I ask three things from the Council.

1) First, that Councilmembers lead in setting the tone away from blanket pejoratives of those who critique this plan **and towards a fact-based democratic discussion of our shared future.** I know that disagreement is hard, but this is an important decision and we need to recognize the value of different perspectives. Many thoughtful, intelligent, and competent people are making important assessments of this plan and EIR which need to be heard and respected if our town is to have the positive future that we all seek. We're not operating from fear. We're looking at the facts and seeking constructive choices that benefit the whole town. Those who suggest otherwise demean this process.

2) Second, that you hear and represent us as citizens, members of a democratic system where people elect officials to represent their wishes. This is the heart of our system. The people have the right to choose the future we live in. We can consult various experts for input but ultimately we get to choose how we live. By communicating with you, we are expressing hope that you will indeed represent our wishes.

3) Third, that you are courageous enough to step back and reassess this proposal, integrating our information, assessments, and wishes, as well as new world economic situations. Great leaders are willing to change their minds, when given new and improved information. I hope that you will be committed to letting informed democratic choice drive this process, and thus will adjust our shared direction before the negative outcomes of this plan move from the page to the real world.

The choices you make on this issue will be far-reaching, impacting not only the character and quality of life in this town, but also your legacy and future electability, and whether green ideas will be seen as valid or failures. It would be a shame, after all your hard work over the years, if you're remembered most for a plan that is so based on old-school development ideas, with such serious downsides for this town, and so

contrary to the people's wishes. **Your choices here will also determine whether the relationship between the people and this Council will be healed or further harmed**, whether you're seen as true leaders and representatives of the people, or just servants of status quo interests and inappropriately-applied theories. Please compassionately understand that people's frustration has come from feeling that this plan's reality doesn't represent their wishes, that we want something better for our town.

You can still turn this around, even now, by considering that our points might be accurate and important. And this is not just about this issue. In the challenging times that I see ahead, I feel that a key determinant of whether we have civil order will depend on whether people see their governments as sincerely representing their wishes or just those of narrow vested interests. Too often people feel that it's the latter.

My Key Concerns

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.**

Therefore, 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 creating ongoing battles with 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 distinctly low-rent, such as outlet stores and art galleries. And Sebastopol's housing is expensive enough without creating an ultra-expensive district, especially at such high financial and livability costs to the City and its residents.

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 new retail comes here, a person who can afford 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 instead grow organically in non-flood-zone areas of town, better receiving the benefits of mixed use while avoiding the NEA's serious downsides.

5) Worsened traffic would likely block needed shoppers. For all it's talk of being "pedestrian friendly," 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.

The City already depends greatly on shoppers driving in, and traffic already discourages many people from coming into town. We've reached a resistance point. Will that many more people really tolerate gridlocked delays to shop here? This to me is a key flawed assumption in this plan.

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 the traffic's negative consequences, including hampered emergency responses, expansion of rush hour to more and more of the day, and hectic traffic in previously quiet and safe side streets. Removing the LOS will also open the doors to construction anywhere in town, regardless of how it impacts downtown traffic.

Despite the consultant's assertions, there is a real difference between taking one cycle to get through a light versus three or five. It matters, for instance, to people choosing to shop or live here, trying to accomplish their daily tasks, and emergency vehicles. The fact that so many intersections have reached the lowest level "F" is meant to encourage traffic solutions, not the false declaration that anything below that level is equally bad and thus of no concern! Perhaps we need to add levels G, H, I, etc. to make this distinction clear. We have real limits to growth here that need to be respected, not ignored.

6) The City (and taxpayers) would be committing to millions up-front based on economically-problematic scenarios. Citizens have brought forward additional excellent questions regarding this. For

example, it seems that the millions in up-front costs to the City (including before any income occurs) are likely much higher, because they don't include key costs such as the expensive fill. Also, the plan for many of the early years depends on income from what seem to be unrealistically-optimistic hotel occupancy rates, without which the project is notably in the red and an economic burden rather than an income source for the City.

Important Clarifications

I feel that I need to clarify key aspects of my approach, because the waters have been muddied by inaccurate statements about the citizens who critique this plan. I hope I can put these "straw men" aside so that we can keep the focus on the actual plan's content.

1) I am for modest growth, per the General Plan (GP). Everyone who came to the meetings and wore a green "Save the GP" circle is supporting the GP's modest growth. We're not against growth or new people coming to town. We just want "digestible" growth that "fills in" within City limits (reducing sprawl) and accepts our "fair share" of Bay Area growth while maintaining the small town feel and sane pace of life here. I believe we can have both, and that is what the citizens chose during the lengthy and truly grassroots GP process. The resulting expression of the people's will needs to be respected. What we're objecting to, and what we don't think is in this town's best interest, is fast, excessive, unsustainable growth that's out of scale with the rest of this town and blows through our very real physical constraints. This plan is just too big and isn't a sensible way to reach our shared goals. (To learn more about how excessive growth can actually harm a city's economics and quality of life, I recommend the book *Better Not Bigger*, by Eben Fodor.)

2) I am for democracy. One of the odd attacks I've heard from proponents is that those with concerns are NIMBYists. I'm confused. What is the purpose of local democratic governance if not for us to choose our town's future? Isn't that the point? And isn't this the time when our town is supposed to debate the pros and cons of a proposal so we can make a wise decision? I want for this community what I want for all communities — informed democratic choice, wise decision-making, ecological sanity, and economic sustainability.

3) I am for affordable housing. I've been among those who've helped build the unique value of this town as an eco-haven, then watched real estate prices skyrocket, benefiting some while driving out many who made this town special. So, yes, I'm a fan of affordable housing. But, if that's our goal, I think there are much more effective ways to achieve that, without this proposal's enormous and unnecessary costs in money and livability.

For instance, what if we took just the many millions of dollars being spent to overcome nature here, before a stick of buildings are built, and instead put that into building affordable housing on dry land? How much housing would that buy? That seems like a much more straightforward approach, if that's truly our goal. On the other hand, I feel that the only way that we'll get even modestly affordable housing through this plan (**meaning for the slightly less rich people**) is by making everything else in this area even more out of scale with this town, even bigger and more expensive and out of reach for most people to live and shop here, and even more vulnerable to disaster. To me this makes the plan not about being affordable but about being expensive, both to live and shop here, and is seriously out of synch with the times and what is to come.

4) I have a vision. It's just different from this proposal. I value change, just different change than this proposal. Contrary to what some claim, this is not a debate between visionaries and naysayers. This is between two different visions. The people here have already stated their vision, in the GP, and by investing their money, time, hearts, and minds here, in bringing this town alive. We can continue to enhance that direction. However, **the character of this town should not be altered to be so much more expensive and hectic unless the vast majority of people overtly want that change of direction**, and if the plan design truly will bring the benefits it claims.

During the NEAP process, many community members brought forward various different ways that we could approach rezoning the Northeast Area, to benefit the people and town first not the landowners, to work with nature, to respect our traffic constraints, to be more in scale and in tune with this town, to make demonstrated economic sense, to avoid the downsides clearly evident early on from this approach. However, these approaches just weren't reflected in the design, which seemed by some to be driven by something other than the people's wishes. We also asked that the negatives be addressed and integrated into the process, for instance with a constraints analysis, but we were told that the negatives would instead be addressed now. Hopefully, at least now, with the EIR more fully describing those downsides, the people will be heard and a better path chosen.

Answering Proponent Assertions

1) Will density and bad traffic create a better public transit system? This is not proven and is unlikely in our spread-out county, especially with governments' tight budgets. Here and overall, I feel that this plan inaccurately applies an urban idea to a rural spot where it just doesn't fit (an error that an early "New

Urbanism” proponent actually cautioned against).

2) Will peak oil reduce traffic? It might, but it’ll also reduce the imported shoppers required for the plan’s financial 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, as Executive Editor of the City’s recent CAGE report on preparing for peak oil, I’ve spend many months examining just this question.)

3) Should we not worry, because this is a policy not a project? The fact is that this policy will open the door and create the shape of the projects allowed in this area. What is allowed is what can be built. Plus this plan commits the City to millions in costs before any projects begin, an important decision to weigh beforehand.

4) Should we not worry, because this will happen over 15 to 25 years? If that’s true, then why remove the growth management ordinance here? This clearly would allow projects in this area to happen more quickly than they otherwise would.

5) Does this plan allow less development than current zoning? This odd new claim is directly contradicted by many facts, including the increase in 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 a barrier to developers building in this area. Was serving these developers and landowners actually a key goal of this process? That seems to better fit the facts. A well-known way to earn money in real estate is to go to the edge of town and get the zoning changed so that the land has more value, then flip it for a substantial profit without having to build a stick. And it seems that current landowners are the only ones who will surely benefit from this proposed change. But any rezoning should be first for the people and the town, not for the landowners and developers, because it is the time when we have the most authority to choose what’s built in our town.

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. The GP was the result of a true grassroots bottom-up process, identifying the whole town’s vision for our future. Let’s respect that and grow modestly, within our constraints. If this NEAP 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.

Humans have the capacity to plan ahead and, through this, reach our aims and reduce future suffering. We need to do that here. We will all be living with the reality that this creates.

I hope that these comments are of service to your process and our shared positive intentions for the well-being of this town.

Sincerely,



Patricia Dines