

Memo Regarding Atascadero Downtown Development – January 2008

As I thought about the subject of developing Atascadero's downtown, I realized that it is important and complex enough to warrant a considered analysis. For that reason, I decided to address the subject in writing. This resulting memorandum incorporates observations and ideas formed during three-plus years of living in Atascadero--a period long enough to become familiar with the area and become committed to staying, but not long enough to lose objectivity in looking at it.

Despite the various controversies that seem to divide the citizenry of Atascadero, there seems to be general agreement that it would be beneficial to revive the downtown area of the City. The fact is that virtually all Atascaderans would benefit from a vibrant downtown area, and few interests would be threatened by it. Perhaps for that reason the Atascadero Main Street Association was created with the mission "to transform downtown into the historical, cultural, social and economic center of Atascadero." It is that worthy goal toward which this memorandum is directed.

Before going further, let me make a proviso. However critical some of my observations might seem, the reader should know that my wife and I like Atascadero well enough in its current condition that we decided almost four years ago to sell our properties and move here lock, stock and barrel from 3000 miles away. We did not know then of any plan to change the place, and we certainly had no any plan of our own to change it. To this day we think that Atascadero is fine the way it is, and we will not become disgruntled if the downtown is not revitalized.

Nevertheless, nothing is perfect and the fact is that our City would be an even better place to live if it had an attractive hub area with a vibrant commercial, cultural and social life. Currently, Atascadero is without a real center, a place where people are drawn to come, get out of their cars, walk around, browse, shop at a few different stores, snack, dine, take in some entertainment or get together with others. The existence of that kind of a hub area would help give the City definition, strengthen its sense of community, enhance civic pride and raise the overall quality of life here. Economically, it would be good for property values and help considerably in drawing tourists and successful businesses to Atascadero. So the hope is to help find the way to create such a hub in Atascadero's historic downtown area.

Existing Reality: A City Dominated by Linear Sprawl

As things stand, what most defines Atascadero is the ten-mile-plus Strip that runs along El Camino Real. There is also the bisecting 101 Freeway and, for those who get to know the place, miles of large-lot neighborhoods spread over the hilly terrain, including some of the most attractive residential areas to be found anywhere. But it is that Strip which overshadows everything else in shaping Atascadero's image. For visitors and others passing through the City, the Strip is far and away the dominant feature. For residents also, the Strip is a constant presence, as it is where virtually all day-to-day business needs are taken care of. From both an appearance and practical perspective, for visitors and residents alike, the El Camino Strip is the signature feature of Atascadero at this point in the City's life.

Even Atascadero's most enthusiastic boosters can find little to praise about the El Camino Strip. There is simply no denying that it is an unsightly, disorderly hodgepodge of properties, and that it extends far too long. It was obviously not the product of any considered planning, but developed incrementally, one structure or strip mall at a time, with little or no attention directed to City planning, aesthetic attractiveness or overall organization. The best term that comes to mind to describe the phenomenon represented by the El Camino Strip is "linear sprawl."

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The El Camino Strip's deficiencies are compounded by the fact that along its entire length it is contiguous to the 101 Freeway and its grinding traffic flow. From the appearance of things, anyone who ventures off of the Freeway gets the impression that Atascadero is little more than a population concentration that assembled because of the Freeway, and that El Camino Real's long, jumbled string of commercial establishments originated for the purpose of servicing the Freeway traffic. That faceless image of the place is underscored by the fact that one of the main thoroughfares in the center of Atascadero, which supposedly leads to the downtown, has the dehumanizing name of "Traffic Way." If visitors are not too put off by the name of the exit to follow the sign for downtown, and get off of the Freeway there, and if they are intrepid enough to look beyond the Strip for a town center, they might make their way into the area that was historically the downtown area. If so, what they will find is a few interesting old buildings, especially the renovated Carlton Hotel and the distinguished City Administration Building, along with a pastorally pretty town square, in what looks like a semi-abandoned downtown district with less activity and fewer stores and dining establishments than there are at most of the strip malls scattered along the length of El Camino Real. It does not make for an inviting or impressive place. However painful it may be to admit it, one recent visitor's characterization of Atascadero as "cheerless" is all too accurate. The image that Atascadero presents to the world is one that is aesthetically challenged and devoid of charm.

Combating Linear Sprawl by Redeveloping the Downtown

The fact is that, as a city of almost 30,000 residents which was planned almost a century ago around a downtown area, and which did not just spring up to service Freeway traffic, Atascadero deserves better than a faceless identity dominated by the El Camino Strip. Atascadero should have a central business district and a hub for the community in its historic downtown area. The founders of Atascadero endowed it with two centrally located architectural gems: the City Administration Building and the Printery. In the classic Roman tradition, they also placed a town square (in various locations referred to as a piazza, plaza, place, commons or village green) in front of the most majestic structure in the City. Indeed, the Sunken Gardens with the City Administration Building presiding over it is one of the most impressive sights in the entire county, and is a signature image that Atascadero needs to resuscitate and rebuild around. At this point, however, with the City Administration Building vacant and not expected to be occupied in the foreseeable future, and the Sunken Gardens barely utilized and surrounded by single-story, suburban-style structures with front lawns that compete with its green expanse, what should be a central square is a bare and moribund block. The sight more closely resembles a relic of a lost community than a modern town center.

Hope for reviving the downtown area has recently been kindled, however, by three development projects that have been undertaken there. Before going farther into that topic, though, let us be precise about the area referred to by the term "downtown": It is the area bounded by Highway 41 and El Camino Real on the south and west, Traffic Way on the north, and Capistrano Avenue, West Mall Rd. and Olmeda Avenue on the east. (Though the redevelopment area has been defined by the City government to include a long area of El Camino Real north of Traffic Way, that area is too remote from the historic center to qualify as part of downtown, and promoting that area at this time will only further reinforce Strip-centric development at the expense of downtown.)

The first major redevelopment step taken in the downtown area that has provided a ray of hope was the renovation of the Carlton Hotel. The second step was the commitment to pursue the Colony Square project. The third step was the construction of the Lewis Avenue

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Bridge. Due to those three developments, some optimism has arisen in the community recently about the prospects for creating a hub area for the City in the area that historically was the downtown of Atascadero. People are imagining the possibility of a center for retail, dining, entertainment, cultural and social activity in downtown Atascadero. In fact, I and several of my acquaintances have been excited enough by the recent developments that we have found ourselves envisioning what a vibrant downtown area would look and feel like, and how it would contribute to the quality of life in the community. We have even shared a few flights of fancy about relocating in twenty years or so from the spacious homes we now occupy to more compact housing units situated in a multi-dimensional downtown area where we could have within convenient walking distance shopping, entertainment, social activity and the support and security that comes from living among others in a congenial environment.

At any rate, the prospect of revitalizing Atascadero's downtown arouses considerable enthusiasm among Atascadero residents, and may be one of the only causes that almost everyone in the community supports. The three initial steps that have been taken, however, must be followed by many more in the future if the newly awakened hopes for redevelopment of Atascadero's downtown area are going to be realized.

Essential Facets of Successful Downtown Redevelopment

A. City Administration Building

One of the most important parts of the process of revitalizing downtown is getting people back into the area on a constant basis. No matter how many structures are restored or built, revival of the downtown will not be realized until there is a critical mass of people present in the area on a regular basis.

On one end of downtown, the restoration of the Carlton Hotel has helped revive activity in the immediate vicinity of the Hotel. On the other end of the area, the Colony Square project promises to draw people in to frequent the new shops, restaurants and movie theater to be built there. That represents a beginning. It is necessary now to extend the revival to other parts of the area.

A critically important place to bring back to life is the City Administration Building. As a recent arrival to Atascadero, I find it striking to see how complacent the community seems to be about allowing the City Administration Building to remain unoccupied. Of course, I understand that the Building was damaged in the earthquake four years ago and is awaiting repair and retrofitting. But where is the sense of urgency about that project? Since moving here in early 2005, I think that I have not heard the need to restore the City Administration Building mentioned more than a half dozen times. Nor have I heard of any schedule for the commencement of the retrofit, much less its completion. Most amazingly, I have also not heard anybody complain about the situation. Despite all of the attention given to so many other aspects of Atascadero's civic life, nobody seems concerned enough about getting the City's centerpiece, heritage structure restored to life to even raise the subject. Equally astonishing, nobody seems uncomfortable about a situation in which the City government has taken up residence indefinitely in a former bowling alley.

One of the important parts of downtown redevelopment is getting the City Administration Building restored and reoccupied. It is Atascadero's, and possibly the entire County's, most majestic building. Yet it looks like it has been abandoned. On this matter, there is a need to act with a sense of urgency. The City Administration Building is the most important symbol

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of Atascadero, and it occupies a central position in the City, both literally and figuratively. For it to sit vacant and seemingly forgotten sends out a message of apathy, at best, and ineptitude and despair, at worst.

Restoring the City Administration Building is vital to the mission of bringing life back to the heart of Atascadero. Getting the City government out of the bowling alley and back into the City Administration Building would also help to improve the image of Atascadero and boost civic pride among its residents. If downtown redevelopment is to proceed in earnest, a high priority has to be assigned to doing everything possible to get the City Administration Building repaired and reoccupied on the shortest timetable that is feasible. The time to be patient on this point has passed.

B. Sunken Gardens and Adjoining Blocks

Likewise, the City's other heritage venues need to be revived. In that regard, the Sunken Gardens should be promoted as the City's center. To aid in that process, there may be alterations or additions that could be made to it which would encourage more intensive use of the Sunken Gardens. Perhaps a tasteful bandstand would help. Maybe some more shade trees would make it more user-friendly. It could help also if the Sunken Gardens were separated more definitively from the adjoining Strip by adding a well-chosen structure or two along the side of it that borders El Camino Real. Those structures could then be rented to the kinds of retail establishments that draw customers who are inclined to linger in the area, such as coffee shops, restaurants or bookstores.

The Sunken Gardens would serve as the City's central square in a successfully redeveloped downtown, in much the way piazzas serve as the hubs of Italian towns or, closer to home, the square in Paso Robles serves as the hub of that community. Making the Sunken Gardens into a true central square will depend on success in restoring life to the City Administration Building, as outlined above, and in redeveloping the bordering blocks along the East and West Malls. Ideally, the redevelopment on those blocks would entail replacing the low-density structures on the East and West Malls with multi-story buildings that preserve the street lines and do not have front lawns that compete with the green expanse of the Sunken Gardens. Obviously, such redevelopment cannot be perfectly controlled, as the owners of the existing structures may not be ready to make changes in the near future. If downtown redevelopment gathers enough momentum, however, rising local property values should be enough to produce more intensive utilization of the lots adjoining the Sunken Gardens. But if market forces alone do not achieve that at a fast enough pace, redevelopment funds could be applied and tax, zoning and other incentives could be used, along with other creative approaches, to produce the density needed on East and West Mall to enable the Sunken Gardens to realize their potential as the central square of the Atascadero community.

C. Junior High School Campus

Another zone of critical importance in downtown redevelopment is the area currently occupied by the Atascadero Junior High School. The first point to note on this subject is that the presence of the Junior High School in its present location is fundamentally incompatible with the goal of redeveloping the downtown area. One only needs to pass through the area on any weekday during the school year to witness the problem first-hand. Vehicular traffic is restricted when school is in session, with West Mall closed off and cars prohibited from using it. That restriction of traffic is certainly understandable as a precaution to protect the school children. For the redevelopment of the downtown area, however, more traffic needs to be recruited to the area. Obviously, these are competing interests, one of which will have to

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give if the downtown area is to be revitalized. In that regard, the best solution for the community would appear to be to relocate the Junior High School to a place outside of the downtown area.

At least during the three-plus years while I have been living here, there has been talk about declining enrollment and how that has made the Junior High School campus in the middle of Atascadero expendable. Based on the vague rumblings that have found their way even to my ears, the School District has shown interest in moving the Junior High School to a place well outside of the downtown area. With the redevelopment of downtown having been started at this point, the School District might have an opportunity to sell the Junior High School property for a significant sum, especially if the City and the various constituencies that stand to benefit from downtown redevelopment come out in favor of strategic development in the area where the Junior High School campus now is. In such circumstances, developers might be willing to pay a lot to be able to build there.

Making the Junior High School available for development would unlock the eastern part of downtown and be the key to opening the downtown area up to full-scale redevelopment. The site occupied by the Junior High School campus is so large and well located that its integration into the downtown business district would insure that the downtown area would be more than just another modest retail center situated along the El Camino Strip. Inclusion of that site would also insure that the downtown area would be able to accommodate the volumes of vehicular and pedestrian traffic needed to produce a vibrant central business district.

There are many possibilities for how the Junior High School area could be developed. One idea would be to build a boulevard extending east from the City Administration Building, with rows of buildings on each side that would have shops and other retail outlets at street level. The area is also large enough that it would be possible to fit in a few selected, magnet stores, such as specialty big box stores selling electronics, housewares, upscale foods, beverages, sporting goods, or the like (in contrast to more universal big box stores such as Wal-Mart and Costco, which are so large that they could overwhelm the area). Those magnet stores, which could be required to be built to conform to carefully considered aesthetic guidelines, would help to draw shoppers to the downtown area who otherwise would start their shopping trips at malls on the El Camino Strip or in neighboring towns. Having been drawn by the magnet stores into the area, the shoppers would then have pedestrian access to the entire downtown district, with its shops, restaurants, coffee houses, central square and urbane atmosphere. In this scenario, Atascadero would have the distinction of being the only City in the Central Coast where shoppers would be able to combine big-box-type shopping with the pleasures of downtown browsing and lingering.

Having the large Junior High School campus available for development would also make it possible for the downtown area to accommodate more parking, which would add to the accessibility of the area for all. Another bonus of developing on the site of the Junior High School is that it would encourage greater utilization of the Printery building located right across the street from the Junior High School building. Reclaiming that historic structure for use by the community as, for example, an event center, performing arts facility and meeting place for social and cultural organizations, should be part of redeveloping the downtown. That prospect would be greatly enhanced if the neighboring Junior High School campus area were integrated into the downtown. Moreover, recruiting a few, selected magnet stores to locate on the eastern edge of the downtown area would have the effect of deterring them from locating in other places where they would draw business away from the downtown area and possibly add to overdevelopment along the El Camino Strip. Having

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them instead in the central business district would allow them to complement downtown development rather than compete with it.

The bottom line is that strategically including the Junior High School campus in the downtown development process would turbo-charge that process and result in a more dynamic, diverse and economically stable central business district. It would also resolve what are now irreconcilably opposing existing uses, and make it easier and less costly for the community to protect the safety of its junior high school students. There is a political challenge to be overcome in making this happen, of course, but the political figures responsible for managing the School District and the City government should be able to recognize the compelling logic of relocating the Junior High School and incorporating the key area that it now occupies into the downtown redevelopment area, for the benefit of all concerned.

Conclusion

Atascadero should not be content with the strip development that has come to dominate its identity. Its founders gave it the ingredients for a downtown, and it has the population base to support a vibrant central business district. With the City Administration Building and Printery vacant and not scheduled for use anytime soon, the Sunken Gardens grossly underutilized, and the City government ensconced in a former bowling alley, the outlook would be grim indeed if it were not for a few recent favorable developments. The renovation of the Carlton Hotel, the commencement of construction on the Colony Square project and the opening of the Lewis Avenue Bridge has given the redevelopment of downtown a start. That, in turn, has aroused interest, enthusiasm and even urbane fantasies on the part of residents who are beginning to imagine a hub area in the downtown section of Atascadero. There is still a long way to go, however, before the Strip-development orientation of the City is reversed and replaced by a downtown-centric orientation. The public sector needs to do its part by, among other things, committing to a plan of downtown development, channeling redevelopment funds toward the core downtown area, creating incentives for high-density development in the downtown area and relocating the Junior High School. The private sector needs to give the downtown development bandwagon an initial push, in recognition of the economic reality that once it gets going, having a vibrant downtown in Atascadero will enlarge the pie in a way that benefits the entire business community. If Atascadero develops a central business district that regularly attracts a critical mass of people for shopping, dining, cultural activities, socializing and touring, it will work to the material and non-material advantage of every constituency in the City.