

REZONING PROJECT PROFILE

Transitioning an Auto-Oriented Corridor to a Pedestrian-Friendly, Mixed-Use District

LOCATION: Albany, Alameda County

YEAR: Specific Plan and zoning adopted in 2022

DENSITY: SPA Zone: 30 DUA min, No DUA max; 4.5 max FAR

PROJECT COST: \$250,000 for Specific Plan, Objective Standards, Zoning and General Plan Amendments, CEQA review

PROJECT DURATION: Two and a half years

PARKING: Maximum one space per unit; no minimum residential parking standard. Objective transportation demand management standards, including requirements for transit passes and bicycle parking for electric and cargo/bike trailers.

TOC RELEVANCE: Currently not in a TOC area



STARTING WITH:

- Near public transit
- Single-family and multi-family permitted
- Commercial-only buildings permitted
- 38-foot building height limit
- 1.3 maximum residential FAR
- 63 du/ac maximum density
- Daylight plane restricted ability to meet density standards
- 1 space/unit minimum parking requirement

PROJECT GOALS

This Specific Plan introduces a planning framework that enables the transformation of San Pablo Avenue to a place that supports residential mixed-use development and safe convenient facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists and transit riders. It makes bold changes to allowed uses, densities, building heights, and placemaking to facilitate greater equity, economic vibrancy and community development.

BACKGROUND

For the past 30 years, the Albany community has talked about transforming San Pablo Avenue from an aging retail and auto-oriented state highway corridor into a more pedestrian-oriented urban boulevard. While neighboring cities along the corridor have made the transition and have experienced a boom in vibrant mixed-use development, dated land use regulations have predictably frozen Albany's portion of the corridor in time.

GOING TO:

- Single and two-family housing prohibited
- Continued ground-floor retail requirement (after much deliberation) except for 100% affordable projects
- Prohibited 100% commercial uses on Housing Element opportunity sites
- Maintained two zoning districts: Increased building heights to 50-85 feet and 1.5-4.5 FAR, respectively, transitioning from single-family neighborhoods
- Revised daylight plane standards to allow unit yields, but maintain transitions
- Removed minimum parking requirement and established maximum requirement
- Height/FAR incentives for lot consolidation
- Menu of options for objective community benefits

HOW IT HAPPENED

The San Pablo Avenue corridor is designated by ABAG-MTC as a Priority Development Area. Additionally, the City anticipated that the corridor was an appropriate location for housing development and to meet the 6th cycle Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA).

The planning process included several unique analyses:

1. A real estate broker assisted the project team and decision-makers in curating use regulations and standards to support the continuation of ground-floor retail in the commercial corridor.
2. Urban designers prepared physical models to test building heights and densities that informed changes to development standards and helped community members envision future development.
3. A local developer provided a “gut check” perspective, weighing the effects of increasing densities and heights, with the desire for certain community benefits.

Finally, the CEQA review will allow for future streamlining of projects that are consistent with the Specific Plan.

PROJECT TEAM

ALBANY STAFF: Jeff Bond, Community Development Director, jbond@albanyca.org

LEXINGTON PLANNING (staff reports, plan writing, zoning standards, CEQA): Jean Eisberg, jean@lexingtonplanning.com

URBAN FIELD STUDIO (design standards, site testing, outreach): Jane Lin, jane@urbanfieldstudio.com

OTHER TEAM MEMBERS: W-Trans (transportation planning) SANDIS (infrastructure planning), Ivers Design (visualization), Richard Kos (GIS mapping), Retail Real Estate Resources (retail analysis), Rincon Consultants, Inc. (CEQA)

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

The City has approved one project within the Specific Plan area: to convert a commercial property into three residential units through renovation and new construction. However, since adoption of the Plan in 2022, the City has had little development activity in the corridor or elsewhere in the City, due in part to market conditions and small lots.

AVAILABLE RESOURCES

[Project website](#) (includes staff reports, analyses, presentations and draft/final reports)

[Site testing of development standards](#)

[Design Guidelines and Objective Design Standards](#)

[Specific Plan](#)

[Annotated Draft General Plan amendments](#)

[Annotated Draft Zoning amendments](#)

[Addendum to the General Plan EIR](#)



KEY LESSONS

Some property owners have expressed interest in adding a residential unit within an existing structure, but this is not permitted since the Plan prohibits single and duplex-type units. On the other hand, allowing additions of one or two units now could prevent higher density redevelopment in a few years when market conditions are more favorable.

Although the Plan’s objective design standards for elements like courtyards and open space are appropriate for larger sites, these standards are proving challenging for owners of smaller sites who have inquired about new development. One thing that the City may consider is setting a threshold so that certain objective standards and amenity requirements only apply to larger projects (e.g., 10+ units).

