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San Marcos development outpacing general plan

By: **NED RANDOLPH** - Staff Writer | Saturday, March 3, 2007 10:27 PM PST

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SAN MARCOS ---- It's easy to find remarkable stories about the history of San Marcos. What's difficult is grasping just how quickly things have changed.

Thirty years ago, students rode horses to San Marcos High School and left them grazing across the street at the site of today's Vons grocery store and 24 Hour Fitness.

Fry's Electronics was built on a former landing strip. And where developers are grading hills and building roads for the 3,400-home San Elijo Hills, the word bobcat was more synonymous with wildlife than construction equipment.

Such dramatic changes have prompted some residents to call for major revisions to the city's long-term development blueprint, called the general plan, which hasn't been updated since its creation in the 1980s.

"It's a little unusual for such a length of time, particularly for a community that's gone through the growth and development that San Marcos has," said Darrell Gentry, a former councilman and city planning director who helped write the plan. "My professional opinion about the state of the existing general plan is that it needs to be revised and redone in a comprehensive way. It's long overdue."

The plan addresses everything from road width and housing density, to the number of parking spaces per unit and acres of habitat preserves. With the exception of a recent housing update, few elements have been reviewed since the plan was created. Instead, the plan gets amended with each variance and exception passed by the City Council on projects and land-use applications.

Writing on the wall

Without some kind of long-term guide, some residents say, they are unsure of what to expect in the coming years.

Business owners in the industrial area off Mission Road, for example, have said that the city is trying to drive out industrial businesses by embracing more profitable mixed-use projects, like Palomar Station, which would place 333 condominiums and a shopping center on their doorstep.

The project would require a major zoning change because it places mixed-use commercial and residential housing among industrial businesses.

The specter of such a zoning change is not unique to that project. Nearly all of the major projects currently going through public hearings and workshops are proposed in areas that will require zoning changes.

Developer H.G. Fenton, for instance, is trying to rezone an 80-acre parcel near Cal State San Marcos from medical use to mixed-use residential and business park.

The \$1.5 billion downtown creek project, overseen by a citizens task force, would require a specific plan area that would completely change the character of the creek bed habitat and businesses south of San Marcos Boulevard.

The development of San Elijo Hills also required amending the general plan to create a specific plan area.

Changes to the general plan will undoubtedly continue with increasing frequency, said real estate broker Dean Tilton.

"This is not going to be uncommon. It's an old general plan and the city is not of a mind to overdo the revisions of that general plan because ... the crystal ball is always foggy," he said.

Rather than trying to plan too far in advance, Tilton said, the city likes to stay light on its feet.

"They've been very good at seeing what the potential of the city is and also what the popular and well-accepted land uses and styles are," he said. "I think they prefer to wait for developers to come to them with an idea rather than preguess and have that be invalid five years from now."



Looking south toward CSUM in San Marcos on Thursday carpenters, from left, Osbaldo Sanchez, Enrique Martinez and Ebaristo Campos unload plywood at a construction site of a mixed-use commercial area just to the west of the San Marcos Civic Center.

BILL WECHTER Staff Photographer

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Revision versus adaptation

Planning Commissioner Dean Nelson said he hears some people calling for a revision of the city's long-term plan, but he also believes that amendments for individual projects protect property rights and provide city planners with flexibility.

"There are arguments on both sides. ... I think using general plan amendments and specific plan areas gives the market more flexibility, and I think it helps land owners," he said. "People can come in and pitch their case as to why they want residential instead of commercial. We have a lot of that."

He added, "I think if we redo the general plan, I don't know if we could get it through with the amount of opposition you would get."

The city's mayor, Jim Desmond, is likewise not enthusiastic about a general plan revision because, he said, it wouldn't help the city cope with its growth or address evolving changes.

Instead, he said he would prefer more community forums on individual projects.

"Whenever we have (amendments), the general plan is revised and updated. I don't think we need to do an overall redo of the general plan," he said. "The general plan lays out the framework of the zoning of the city. And sometimes as neighborhoods and areas evolve, changes are put in place ---- but only after we have public hearings with citizens weighing in and a vote of the council. It's not taken lightly."

Desmond said that as the city approaches the point of build-out ---- where it has built everywhere allowable under the old general plan ---- he expects more citizen task forces, such as the San Marcos Creek Specific Plan Task Force, to guide development a major project.

In addition, Desmond said, his proposal that each council member come up with annual goals and objectives will help residents keep track of the city's direction.

"That will help to show the direction that City Hall is trying to take the city," he said. "We haven't had that in the past."

Market forces

Developer Michael McDonald, who has built numerous projects in San Marcos, said he sees land-use changes being dictated by economics not only just but across the state and nation.

Heavy industrial manufacturing, for example, is becoming obsolete based on labor costs and land values in the U.S.

For example, Signet Armorlite, a San Marcos-based film and lens processing company that would be a neighbor of Palomar Station, retired six of its emission permits last year and is moving its manufacturing operations to Mexico.

Signet Vice President John Hingy said that the San Marcos location is now primarily used for distribution and administration, as well as refinishing operations for lenses. Its remaining permits are rarely used, he said.

"They're close to inactive," said Hingy.

"That's a case in point," said McDonald, who is trying to develop a 15-acre business park east of the Palomar Station project with smaller, specialty manufacturing tenants.

"You can't make it (heavy manufacturing) work in this environment with the cost structure that exists in California or the U.S."

Specialty manufacturing is still viable, he said, pointing to his proposed project, as well as a proposal by Fenton to build a 25-acre high-tech and biotech park near Cal State San Marcos.

"There's an industrial demand for space among more specialty manufacturers," he said.

Desmond acknowledges that market forces are changing in San Marcos, but he said there's no plan to push industrial tenants out of the Mission Road area.

Palomar Station is proposed on a parcel of land at Las Posas and Mission roads that no manufacturing entity has ever developed because of the cost, he said.

"There have been no manufacturers or businesses able to use that particular land because of the huge drainage issues," Desmond said. "It takes a single entity or owner to absorb the cost for that site. It's been zoned "LM" (light manufacturing), but no LM has ever gone in there because they can't afford the infrastructure cost."

To the southeast of that site, just south of the Las Posas Road and Highway 78 interchange, 33 acres were rezoned from light industrial to commercial retail to allow construction of the Grand Plaza shopping center.

In fact, the Las Posas interchange that opened last year has increased land value all along Grand Avenue, where such businesses as American Fence and the Chamber of Commerce are destined to change hands with others willing to pay more for freeway access and visibility, Desmond said.

"That's going to change," he said, adding: "We have to allow areas to improve and evolve over time."

Revamping the general plan, said Desmond, would not allow that flexibility.

Good stewardship

Environmentalist and San Marcos Middle School teacher Larry Osen has a little different take. He says that without a comprehensive revision of the city's long-term plan, its precious natural resources will slip away little by little.

Shrinking open spaces and natural habitat deserve higher priority today than they were assigned in preceding decades, he said.

"When I see Double Peak's scar and the water tank, it's symbolic with development in San Marcos, coupled with poor planning," he said.

"I hope that City Hall can hold a town hall meeting similar to (Councilman) Mark Loscher's "Imagine San Marcos in the '90s," Osen said.

Loscher's project resulted in a 98-page study of responses from more than 1,000 residents in 1995, who could easily be speaking today. They wanted fewer strip malls, safe neighborhoods and responsive elected leaders. The comments were collected during town hall meetings, and from telephone surveys and mailed questionnaires.

Similar workshops today would engage new residents whose arrival in the last decade account for nearly a quarter of the city's 78,000 to 80,000 people.

"Very few people in the city are aware of what the general plan is and what's contained in it, especially with respect to development and conservation," Osen said. "We need more environmental sensitivity so that what little is left will have stewardship and a watchful eye over it."

-- Contact staff writer Ned Randolph at (760) 761-4411 or nrandolph@nctimes.com.

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San Marcos resident

[\[-\]](#) wrote on Mar 4, 2007 8:30 AM:

We do need public meetings on the general plan and direction San Marcos is going. I and many others see it as a runaway train, very poorly planned and designed. Let's have the meetings and do the surveys. Until then, the real estate agents and developers, and the city council and city manager, will act as if they have carte blanche to pave over everything in order to line their pockets, and the rest of us deal with bad air quality, gridlock, lifeless "open space", and ever rising costs for public services to fix the problems the poor planning has caused. Please, we cannot allow 20 people to destroy San Marcos. Mr. Osen, we need to conduct the surveys and have hearings with the council. If you provide contact information, I will help.

City Resident

[\[-\]](#) wrote on Mar 4, 2007 10:02 AM:

I think the ease with which general plan amendments are approved are a quick way to bypass and not consider public wishes. Let's work around those zoning restrictions and approve more density. Bring on more traffic! San Marcos needs more of that! More community workshops on specific projects are not the answer. They're just a way to wear down the residents and eventually allow whatever it is the developer wants. I think we need to take a long look at what we, the citizens, want our city to look like. We may not all be in agreement but the majority voice should be heeded. I guarantee that the majority of residents would not be in favor of zoning changes that benefit developers to the detriment of existing neighborhoods in the city.

What Plan?

[\[-\]](#) wrote on Mar 4, 2007 11:36 AM:

The plan has always been (at least for the last twenty years) to take the money regardless of lack of infrastructure, quality of life issues, or the complaints of neighboring communities. With Corky the Plumber gone, maybe this group of city administrators will actually look beyond the number of zeros on the developer's check.

Ask

[\[-\]](#) wrote on Mar 4, 2007 12:13 PM:

Typical of growing towns. I move in and my vote goes to stop growth.

Too late

[\[-\]](#) wrote on Mar 4, 2007 12:38 PM:

Hate to tell everyone but it is too late already. Go ahead and bulldoze the last little patches of open land. They are islands with no interconnectivity and are enviromentally useless. San Marcos and the rest of north county have already been over developed. Back in the eighties they used to

talk about Los Angelization of north county. Well with four lane thoroughfares and six lane freeways all of which are jammed with traffic I would say they failed to prevent the Los angelization of north county.

Calculated Obfuscation

[-] wrote on Mar 5, 2007 12:05 PM:

Residents of San Marcos are being hijacked by development interests under the guise that "we have to be light on our feet". Say what? The softening up of the residents by putting them through rigorous community forums is absurd. I've been to several of these "calculated obfuscation" sessions and anyone that thinks that the best interests of the residents is weighted more heavily than the interests of the "Boys in the Back Room" network is a fool. The two people put in to council seats most recently both ran on platforms of success in stopping a bad development in their respective areas....WalMart and a cement plant. Now with Mayor Desmond in place the table is apparently set. Just bring on the zoning change requests Boy's...we'll "git er done" for you. The only plan going forward is to continue to obfuscate in a calculated manner to the detriment of the community at large. Why? Because getting a Residential zoning designation makes the owner of a Light Industrial parcel ten times richer overnight. This proposed Palomar Station is on land that shouldn't have people living on it for 100 years! The ground there is saturated with known carcinogens at out of sight levels. That's why it zoned Industrial! Hello! We'll see what these new council people are really made of when asked to swallow this Love Canal in San Marcos proposal when it comes forward.

What a shame it is...

[-] wrote on Mar 6, 2007 5:47 PM:

Change can be beneficial, but change always brings with it a big price tag. The Price tag today appears to be the health and safety of our citizens of today and of the future. It is understandable to bring stores and shopping centers, but it is sad to see the slow and painful death of the older centers. There is a large-scale movement to smooth-over the health risks of future residents -THE RISKS THAT THEY ARE TELLING US ABOUT. Everyone involved with the specific project will be GUILTY. What about the people who get sick - very sick ?

EIR vs Peoples Right To Know

[-] wrote on Mar 6, 2007 6:25 PM:

How many of the citizens of San Marcos have requested ADDITIONAL public hearings on specific projects - ones which will effect all of us ? There are NO ADDITIONAL public hearings, (the people's right to additional information and to be informed.) Is there something out there to hide from the public, or to WITHHOLD from the public ? There surely must be something BIG to take the risk that somebody will be unhappy enough to stand up for the rights of everyone ! The whole EIR process is nothing but a PR puff-piece designed to bring out the most OBVIOUS flaws, explain them away, and then file 'FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD' Just who might that public be ? Not me, probably not thee.....

General Plan needs vote of citizenry

[-] wrote on Mar 7, 2007 6:46 AM:

Sure, development IS outpacing the General Plan. Wasn't San Marcos planned for a maximum of 80,000 to 90,000 people ? We have achieved just about that now. The problems have really arisen when we have had runaway development - not just some neighborhoods, but especially in the commercial area. San Marcos is becoming one big Mall with inadequate infrastructure to support all of it ! It is a shame that the people voted in Proposition R to make development pay their fair share and clever consultants have the pull to get around it completely ! Why can't we set aside land for parks and preserves (small ones to be sure) so the rape of the land just doesn't go on unfettered ? The amendments to the General Plan go on and on. How many are allowed per year ? If amendments (that change the general plan) are contemplated, why can't the people vote on them ? Super-majority ! Then we would have some control over the abuse of the process How many years and thousands of volunteer hours did it take to shape the General Plan. My guess is that very few people in San Marcos are even aware of the HUGE EFFORTS that went into shaping our city. How much do YOU think went into it ?

To What a Shame

[-] wrote on Mar 7, 2007 11:18 AM:

What exactly are you talking about? Specically what illness are you talking about?

To "What Plan"

[-] wrote on Mar 7, 2007 2:19 PM:

"Growth" isn't making a hodgepodge out of an orderly sensible General Plan. Try reading the General Plan before you crap on it. And by the way wise-acre, "growth" doesn't include putting children in "affordable condos" next to toxic waste polluted industrial sites to make money. Corky Smith never approved a project that would hurt kids, unlike Jim Desmond, and if you actually knew what you were talking about,you'd know that.

Illnesses/Industrial Pollution

[-] wrote on Mar 7, 2007 2:49 PM:

Illnesses go along with the territory when you start building industrial projects next to neighborhoods like the Fenton Plan or putting residential into Industrial zoning like Palomar Station. That's why SANDAG warns cities against putting residential near industrial and vice versa. Anybody see the article about the cluster of sick kids who have an incurable blood disease that can be caused by chemical pollution? Two of those kids are in San Marcos. That's the reason you revise and review a General Plan not just muck it up by piecemealing the changes. These guys are using "old" as an excuse for screwing up a good plan. If I remember correctly we lost a perfectly good experienced Mayor to a guy who said he had to go because he was too "old". Now that guy is mucking things up good and proper.

What's all the fuss...

[-] wrote on Mar 7, 2007 7:20 PM:

The fuss is about people and their health ! If anyone has been watching or reading the news, what about the 'cluster' of North County children who have developed a VERY RARE disease - one which is primarily caused by exposure to TOXIC CHEMICALS or radiation. I do not imagine these children have ben exposed to radiation, but what about toxic chemicals ? Where might this coming from ? Possibly a toxic spill or two which may have happened quite some time in the past. Maybe...

Get a Clue

[-] wrote on Mar 13, 2007 10:45 AM:

Our new Mayor Jim Desmond says, "I don't think we need to do an overall redo of the general plan". That's your problem Jim, YOU DON'T THINK. Apparently YOU DON'T READ either because instead of following the laws of the State of California which you swore to uphold when you took your oath of office, you make it up as you go along.

General Plans Prevent Disasters

[-] wrote on Mar 18, 2007 9:42 PM:

If Hal Martin and Jim Desmond have their way we'll be housing children next to toxic chemical spills and having their parents sign hold-harmless health waivers before they buy a condo and move the tots in. What is this City coming to? Can you believe that the City wants to build "Palomar Station", a condo project next to a toxic cleanup site? Bring back Corky quick, at least he cared about people.

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207 East Penn. Ave.
Escondido, CA 92025

Oceanside

(760) 433-7333
1722 South Coast Highway
Oceanside, CA 92054

The Californian

(951) 676-4315
28765 Single Oak Drive, Suite 100
Temecula, CA 92590

Fallbrook

(760) 728-6116
1112 S. Main Ave.
Fallbrook, CA 92028