

## **INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE**

# INTRODUCTION

## OVERVIEW

The Beach and South of Laurel area is a priceless resource for the City of Santa Cruz. Its matchless location on the Monterey Bay, its neighborhoods and its national visitor attractions of the Beach, the Wharf and the Boardwalk represent a rich legacy from the past and a pledge against the future.

In the minds of many - both inside and outside of the City - the Beach and the Boardwalk are synonymous with Santa Cruz. It is not only the location of some of the City's most spectacular physical assets but also home to thousands of permanent residents.

Here distinctive and diverse neighborhoods co-exist with major national attractions drawing millions of visitors to the area each year. Issues related to this juxtaposition of land uses - of national tourism and permanent residential use - are the central focus of this planning effort. The following plan is devoted to improving the relationship between these two functions. Its goal is to enhance the residential quality of life while ensuring compatible development in these two vital parts of our City.

It is a **central premise of this plan that the health of the neighborhoods is linked to the health of the commercial areas.** The future of the Beach and South of Laurel lies in the City's ability to design and implement a revitalization effort which benefits its neighborhoods while ensuring the area's health, safety and economy.

As the twenty-first century approaches, the Beach and the South of Laurel - and the quality of life of its citizens - are increasingly affected by the forces of change both within and without:

- The Beach Flats community has become the most densely populated, poorest neighborhood in the City with the majority of its badly maintained rental housing concentrated in the hands of a small number of absentee landlords.
- Increasing numbers of vehicles are coming to the area in strong peak seasonal surges.
- Changing national tourism trends document growing demand for higher quality facilities and well-maintained attractions.
- Home ownership in the Beach and South of Laurel is the lowest percentage in the City, and some of the neighborhoods are "at risk."

How the City responds to these and similar issues will, to a large extent, determine whether the City will continue to prosper in the twenty-first century.

It is clear that Beach Flats must once again become a *livable* community, where residents eagerly seek to live and raise their families. Over the past two decades, the quality of life in this small neighborhood deteriorated dramatically. Where once over 70% of the homes in this community were owner-occupied, now Home ownership is less than 1%. Where once this neighborhood was sought out for its small scale friendly lifestyle, now over 69% of residents say they would live anywhere else in the City – if they could. Recent City initiatives to address the issues of neighborhood safety and living conditions have laid the foundation for the specific recommendations in this Plan.

These conditions result in the unusual urban juxtaposition of the most densely populated, poorest neighborhood in the City, effectively isolated and contained within a nine-acre section, located directly across from a national tourism attraction, the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, the destination of millions of visitors annually.

This has long posed a unique challenge to the urban policies of Santa Cruz. The 1980 *Beach Area Plan* addressed this challenge with recommendations for clearly identifying the Beach Flats as a residential area and restricting the established commercial land use designations to the perimeter of the neighborhood. The 1980 *Plan* also established design guidelines and proposed a variety of streetscape improvements. The *Beach Street Promenade Design Plan* was one of the major accomplishments stemming from the 1980 *Beach Area Plan*. New improvements to the Wharf intersection and streetscape improvements on Beach Street including trees, sidewalks, lighting, street furniture and new decking connecting the wharf with Beach Street were installed from the Wharf intersection to Riverside Avenue in 1993. Attempts to provide landscaping improvements identified in the *Plan* for the Beach Flats were not successful.

In 1991, a new Council initiative focused City efforts in the Beach Flats area. This renewed focus on the Beach Flats resulted in the following initiatives: the establishment of the Community Center and Community Garden; improvements to Beach Flats Park; circulation improvements that closed Leibrandt Avenue to through traffic; and location of a permanent site for the La Familia Center. Other programs established during this time included a Code Enforcement Program and a new emphasis on community policing in the area resulting in the establishment of a new Beach Area police beat. Other improvements identified in the Beach Plan that were implemented include the development of significant new street lighting in the area, and the replacement of a number of water and sewer lines in the area. These efforts have helped make moderate improvements in the neighborhood, but additional efforts are clearly needed.

Thus, the goal of this current planning process has been to develop sensitive and practical recommendations which create a viable and healthy residential neighborhood in the Beach Flats as well as strengthen the residential and economic communities in the Beach and South of Laurel.

The analysis and recommendations which follow strive to balance specific individual basic needs for housing and community with the broader civic requirements for safe and secure streets, well-maintained neighborhoods, and a sound economic base. Rebuilding livable neighborhoods requires cooperative action involving public and private resources and community participation. It is the role of government to put in place those programs which encourage citizens to feel confident of their ability to create safe and livable neighborhoods.

In addition to the genuinely difficult civic and planning questions posed by these issues of neighborhood stability, this Plan also addresses the essential question of what steps must the City take to ensure the economic viability of the Beach area as Santa Cruz moves into the 21st Century. For this reason, it examines the need for economic stimulus through the conversion of the La Bahia into a quality conference hotel; the benefit of transforming Beach Street into a signature street linking the Beach with the Downtown; the requirements of a transportation infrastructure to encourage visitors to stay longer and lessen the impact of the automobile; and recommends repositioning Santa Cruz as an ocean resort destination, creating an environment which reduces reliance upon the automobile and encourages extended stay.

The South of Laurel area offers great promise to the City of Santa Cruz. Located strategically between the Beach and the Downtown, the South of Laurel area provides an opportunity to physically, aesthetically and economically link the vitality of the restored downtown Pacific Avenue shopping area with the Beach. This area's function is both as a gateway to the Beach and a transition to Downtown. In addition, the Depot Site, bounded by railroad tracks which border the western boundary of the Study Area, is considered in this report for a variety of public uses, ranging from parking and recreational open space to transit connections and a rail stop.

The Plan envisions the South of Laurel as a vibrant urban community composed of new medium density residential, mixed-use developments and rehabilitated neighborhoods. As such, it will play an important role in providing additional housing in a time of increasing residential demand. Vacant land along the San Lorenzo River and the railroad tracks at Laurel have been identified as providing an exciting opportunity to design attractive and distinctive entryways to this community.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this comprehensive *Beach and South of Laurel Area Plan* is therefore threefold:

1. to propose a sensitive and realistic program for neighborhood preservation and revitalization targeted to the Beach Flats, Beach Hill and South of Laurel areas,
2. to establish a comprehensive program for managing:
  - traffic and transportation,
  - tourism and maritime assets,
  - expansion of the season and linkage with the Downtown, and
3. to enhance the historic resort attributes of the Beach area for residents and visitors alike.

The relationship between existing neighborhoods and the proposed new residential and commercial development is a major component of this study. Thus, the following recommendations include not only general guidance for dealing with tourism and its impacts, but specifically incorporate:

- protections for "Neighborhood Conservation Areas",

- recommendations to mitigate the impact of traffic, transportation and parking,
- urban design recommendations and design guidelines, and
- a proposed partnership between government, business and the residential community in working to create and manage the future.

This Plan identifies the Beach and South of Laurel area as a magnificent and irreplaceable resource which needs clear and sensitive management. Central to this strategy are the comprehensive protection of its residential neighborhoods and commercial areas; the appearance and functioning of its tourism assets and lodging facilities; the careful conservation of its major maritime assets such as the beach and the Wharf; and aggressive implementation of transportation policies designed to reduce reliance upon the automobile and create jobs.

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR THE FUTURE**

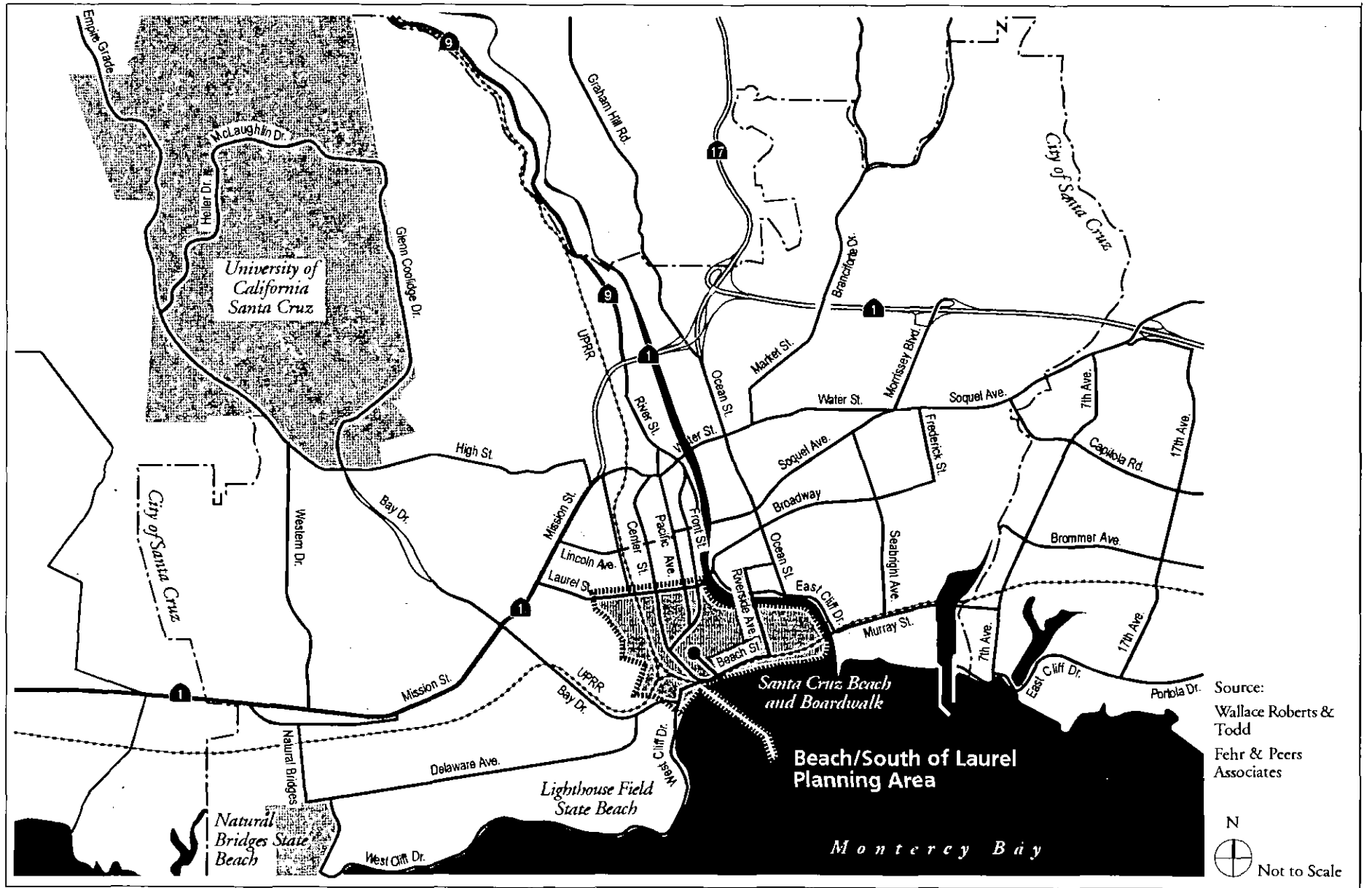
The solutions to the issues which this Plan analyzes have emerged as the result of a continuing dialogue by a wide range of participants which began many years ago. The recommendations represent the creativity of residents and merchants, homeowners and landlords, policy makers and community-based organizations, architects and developers. For that reason, this Plan does not represent a static or inflexible document, but rather one which establishes a broad policy framework to guide the development of programs over an extended period of time.

Public participation during the Beach Area Outlook Conference, Public hearings on the Beach and South of Laurel Plan Strategies, Council Beach Area subcommittee meetings, Redevelopment Subcommittee meetings, and various community public participation efforts conducted during the preparation of the draft Beach Flats Specific Plan also established broad agreement on the objectives for the Planning area.

Specific recommendations are provided where specific approaches are necessary to achieve public objectives, and more general recommendations where multiple approaches should be considered. Each recommendation within the Plan should be weighed for its ability to accomplish the overall goals and whether it strengthens and reinforces the other recommendations.

The Beach and South of Laurel area presents a very complex set of issues. This document outlines public policy and improvements recommended for implementation. The study outlines a series of development scenarios for various areas of the Beach and South of Laurel that have been developed as a result of extensive public processes including the development of the *Beach Area Plan Strategy*, *South of Laurel Area Plan Strategy*, *General Plan*, the *Beach Area Outlook Conference* and the draft *Beach Flats Specific Plan*.

The Plan has four distinct planning areas including the Beach Flats, Beach Commercial, Beach Hill, and the South of Laurel. An "existing condition" analysis for each area is provided, followed by recommendations in the areas of Land Use, Circulation, Parking, Alternative Transportation, Economic Development, Parks & Open Space, and Public Services.



The Phipps Group

City of Santa Cruz - Beach / South of Laurel Area Plan

Figure 1

Area Location Map

## **PLANNING & POLICY CONTEXT**

In addition to the studies listed above which have established policies, standards, and guidelines for the study area – the Beach and South of Laurel lies within, or is adjacent to several previously adopted public plans and policies. These include:

*Downtown Recovery Plan*

*Local Coastal Program*

*Beach Management Plan*

*Beach Street Promenade Design Plan*

*Nearby Lagoon Management Plan*

*Redevelopment Plan*

*San Lorenzo River Design Concept Plan and Enhancement Plan*

Under the authority of the existing Redevelopment Plan, the proposed *B/SOLA Plan* project is expected to use various redevelopment powers, such as acquisition and assembly of property, demolitions, relocations, and sale or lease of acquired properties. Tax increment financing is also authorized under the existing Redevelopment Plan. Specific approvals required for the implementation of the *B/SOLA Plan* include General Plan and zoning text amendments, Local Coastal Program and Land Use modifications, construction of public improvements and public facilities, vacation of streets and alleys, realignment of streets, development of new housing and new commercial development, execution of disposition and development agreements, use permits, and other approvals. Appendix A describes the overall development anticipated for the Beach and South of Laurel areas that was analyzed in the project EIR.

The EIR will be used to provide decision-makers and the general public with relevant environmental information to use in considering the proposed Plan and considering subsequent site-specific projects. The City will use the EIR to consider all necessary General Plan amendments, rezonings, vesting, tentative and subdivision maps, and possible future development agreements required for the implementation of the *B/SOLA Plan*.

It should be noted that any proposed amendments to the General Plan amendment would result in simultaneous amendments of the existing Redevelopment Plan covering the B/SOL Area. The EIR may also be used to cover future actions to implement the *B/SOLA Plan*, including infrastructure funding mechanisms, or may serve as the basis for identifying the scope of subsequent environmental review for actions that require additional environmental analysis. The project would require a number of approvals and ministerial actions and permits, including but not limited to, building and grading permits, street abandonment(s), street encroachment permits, and utility hookups. In the event that amendments are made to the *B/SOLA Plan* as a result of a subsequent public planning process, additional environmental review will be required.

The *B/SOLA Plan* EIR is a “program EIR.” Case law makes clear that a “program EIR” can often function as a “first tier EIR” to be followed by additional negative declarations or EIRs. The rules governing the use of “program EIRs” are set forth in CEQA Guidelines section 15168. Subdivision © of that provision, section 15168 provides that “subsequent activities in the program must be examined in the light of the program EIR to determine whether an additional environmental document must be prepared.” Subdivision (c)(4) states that “where the subsequent activities involve site-specific operations, the agency

should use a written checklist or similar device to document the evaluation of the site and the activity to determine whether the environmental effects of the operation were covered in the program EIR." Subdivision (c)(1) further provides that "if a later activity would have effects that were not examined in the program EIR, a new Initial Study would need to be prepared leading to either an EIR or a Negative Declaration."

The overall development recommended by the *B/SOLA Plan* reduces the amount of growth in the planning area currently allowed by the General Plan and by current zoning by more than 184,000 square feet. Specifically:

- it reduces high density designations by 4.19 acres,
- it increases medium density designations by 1.89 acres,
- it reduces visitor serving commercial by 5.23 acres, and
- it increases public facilities and parks by 7.55 acres.

In addition, the *B/SOLA Plan* recommends stringent controls mechanisms for growth and provides detailed Design Guidelines and Landscaping Standards.