

An aerial photograph of a city area, likely Larkspur, showing a complex highway interchange with multiple overpasses and ramps. The surrounding area includes residential neighborhoods with houses and trees, as well as commercial or industrial buildings. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

# **DRAFT Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan**

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## **Overview**



*The City of Larkspur has been engaged in a Station Area planning process since April of 2012. This process has been funded primarily through a grant from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, with contributions from the City of Larkspur, the County of Marin, the Transportation Authority of Marin (TAM), Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART), and the Golden Gate Bridge Highway and Transportation District (GGBHTD).*

*The first part of the process was an 18-month review by a Citizen Advisory Committee, which included several public meetings and forums. From these meetings, staff and project consultants have prepared a Draft Station Area Plan and an associated Environmental Impact Report. In addition, staff has created this primer and executive summary. These four documents are now being released to the public for comment and discussion. Forums and hearings before the Planning Commission and the City Council will follow.*

*Interested parties are encouraged to visit <http://www.cityoflarkspur.org/SAP> for current information and to sign-up for electronic notifications of additional documentation and meeting dates.*

## **What is the Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan?**

Before answering this question, it may be helpful to first consider what the Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan is not. The SMART Station Area Plan is not a project application submitted to the City by a property owner or developer to request land use entitlements. Accordingly, when the Draft Plan is considered first by the Planning Commission and then by the City Council, development of any specific property identified in the Plan will not be considered or otherwise acted upon.

The SMART Station Area Plan (the Plan) is a **long-range vision plan** prepared by the City of Larkspur to consider the ideal future for the areas immediately surrounding the future Larkspur SMART station: the Larkspur Landing area, the Redwood Highway area, and a portion of Greenbrae (collectively referred to as **'the Station Area'**). As a vision document, the Plan does not impose General Plan or zoning ordinance amendments to allow growth. Rather, it provides recommendations as to how the General Plan and zoning ordinance, along with other applicable City policies, could be amended to allow for the range of development envisioned in the document to occur. Without amendments to the General Plan and zoning ordinance, much of the land use changes envisioned by the Draft Plan cannot occur.

In authorizing preparation of the Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan, the City Council confirmed its desire for the planning process to produce:

- A circulation and parking plan for the Larkspur Landing and Greenbrae areas.
- A land use and housing opportunity study for the Larkspur Landing area that would look at potential mixed-use opportunities relative to the existing commercial, office, and ferry terminal sites.

Consistent with the City Council's directive, the Draft Station Area Plan considers a variety of improvements to pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular circulation in the Station Area, as well as the

mixed-use development potential of seven opportunity sites. Residential land uses were studied at a range of 20-35 dwelling units per acre (du/ac), which is the minimum density range that can be considered for 'transit supportive' development.

The Draft Station Area Plan focuses on the upper bound of this range, 35 du/ac, in order to fully inform the community and policy makers about the maximum growth potential at the Plan's seven opportunity sites and to consider the impacts such growth might create. The Draft Station Area Plan projects growth to this density to occur over a 20 year period (to the year 2035). As the Draft Plan moves through the public review process, the City's policy makers must assess whether the growth contemplated in the Draft Plan is appropriate for Larkspur. If it is not appropriate, what amount of growth is acceptable?

## **Why Do We Need a Station Area Plan?**

The Station Area Plan examines the City's most dynamic neighborhood. Today, the Station Area is a largely developed community comprised of distinct areas of industrial uses, mobile homes parks and commercial uses to the south, and office parks, multi- and single-family residential, commercial, and retail uses to the north. Particularly noteworthy is the renaissance experienced by the Larkspur Landing area in recent years as its shopping center, now known as the Marin Country Mart, bustles with new retail stores and services, and the residential communities undergo rehabilitation and other enhancements.

The area is a transportation "hub" where different transportation arterials (e.g. Highway 101 and Sir Francis Drake Boulevard) and modes (cars, buses, ferries, bicycles, and pedestrians) converge. The Station Area experiences congestion at peak travel periods during the morning and evening. This congestion is primarily caused by vehicles traveling between Highway 101 and the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, and vehicles traveling to and from the Larkspur Ferry Terminal. Additionally, visitors to the Marin Country Mart and weekday commuters to the Larkspur ferry terminal find parking to be limited.

These circulation challenges are not an entirely new condition. In the 1990's, the City adopted General Plan policies to restrict any re-use of property or expansion of use located north of Corte Madera Creek that might increase afternoon peak hour trip generation. New land uses and development must either maintain or reduce traffic generation for the structure in question, regardless of whether they provide needed services or enhance the vibrancy of the community. They have effectively locked into place both the uses and the structures put into place before the 1990's, and they do not take into account the significant role regional through-traffic plays in congestion in the area.

Peak travel time congestion and limited parking are topics that have received considerable attention in Marin in recent years. All indications are that these conditions will worsen in the foreseeable future, regardless of whether the growth envisioned in the Station Area Plan is ever realized. The Draft Station Area Plan is based upon existing circulation and land use conditions, several of which may change in the near future.

## **Potential Circulation Changes**

- The Transportation Authority of Marin, in concert with the Town of Corte Madera, the City of Larkspur, and Caltrans, has conducted extensive studies of circulation issues in and around the Station Area. In 2013 the TAM Board recommended further study of several significant projects that could impact circulation in the Station Area, including a direct connection between Highway 101 and Interstate 580.
- The Larkspur ferry terminal, owned and operated by the GGBHTD, serves thousands of commuters every weekday with service to San Francisco, and is a key contributor to vehicular congestion and overflow parking demand in the Larkspur Landing area at peak travel periods. GGBHTD has considered numerous scenarios to increase ferry service and on-site parking at the terminal, including consideration of a parking structure which could potentially draw hundreds of more commuters to the terminal, through Larkspur.
- The new bicycle connection from San Rafael through the Cal Park Hill Tunnel has increased bicycle traffic through the area. Completion of the Central Marin Ferry connection project will help to alleviate the impacts of bicycle traffic travelling through the street system. However, both commuter and recreational cycling through the area will continue to grow.
- The future SMART station itself will represent a significant change to circulation in and around the Station Area. Though construction of the terminus of the Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) commuter line is not included in SMART's Initial Operating Segment, the City and SMART expect it to be completed within the next decade.

## **Land Use Changes**

After the City Council initiated the General Plan update process in 2010, the Larkspur Landing area was identified by a Council-appointed Citizen Advisory Committee as an area in the City that might be suitable for land use changes in the future, recognizing that the majority of the City was "built-out". The Committee recommended that the City conduct further study to determine what kind of changes might be appropriate for Larkspur.

In addition to having potential for redevelopment, the Station Area contains one of the largest parcels of vacant land in the City: the parcel owned by the Ross Valley Sanitary District No. 1 on Larkspur Landing Circle. Development entitlements for this parcel were approved by the City Council in 2006 for 126 multi-family dwelling units, a 100-room hotel, and District office buildings and parking facilities. These entitlements remain in effect. Given its location relative to the waterfront, retail services, transit, and major thoroughfares, the property remains a valuable asset for the Sanitary District and will continue to be a focus of potential re-development in the near future.

## Must the City adopt a Station Area Plan?

In accepting the grant money that sponsored the Station Area planning process, the City committed to adopting a Plan. But while the funding agencies have been involved with the preparation of the Draft Station Area Plan, the Plan's final form, as well as how and when the Plan is incorporated into the City's General Plan, are decisions to be made by the City Council.

Adopting a Station Area Plan serves many purposes. It allows the City Council to establish a vision for the area in the vicinity of the SMART station. It also lets the City Council take a comprehensive look at the planning area to determine what levels of growth are appropriate in the future – those levels already allowed by the General Plan or something different. And if the Council elects a new level of growth, the Plan's accompanying Environmental Impact Report can serve to clarify what impacts must be mitigated before growth can occur.

## What Does the Draft Station Area Plan Recommend?

The Draft Plan proposes a long-range, integrated land use and transportation plan for the Station Area through the year 2035. It includes recommended **circulation system improvements** to make it more convenient for cars, pedestrians and bicyclists to move through and around the Station Area, and recommends redevelopment of several sites in the Station Area at a range of intensities and densities. Design guidelines presented in the Draft Plan allow the City to control the physical form of new development, including maximum building heights and architectural character (*see table below*).

### Proposed Design Guidelines

	Building Height Max.	Story Range	Massing and Form
<b>North of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard</b>	55 feet	2-5 stories (3-5 stories only appropriate adjacent to hillside areas)	All buildings should be designed to reduce the appearance of bulk and mass, consistent with the City's Design Review ordinance. This can be achieved through articulation of architectural features, stepping back upper stories from lower levels and the street, and varying roof forms.
<b>South of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard</b>	45 feet	2-4 stories (3-4 stories only appropriate adjacent to hillside areas)	

The Draft Plan integrates the recommended land use changes with the recommended circulation changes by requiring improvements to the circulation system prior to approval of land use changes. Though the Plan cannot solve all the existing traffic congestion that exists in the area, these improvements would create a more connected community and safer experience for pedestrians and bicyclists traveling within and through the area. The Plan also recommends placing a vehicular trip cap

on all future development in the Station Area to limit vehicular trips generated by Plan area to a defined acceptable level. The Draft Plan also analyzes the existing parking supply in the Station Area and recommends a parking management strategy to make parking more accessible and to make more efficient use of the land area devoted to parking.

## **Why are We Studying New Development in the Station Area?**

This is a question that has been asked by many Larkspur residents and Marin residents throughout the Station Area planning process.

When applying for grant funding from MTC to prepare a Station Area Plan, local jurisdictions must classify their Station Area as particular **'place type'** for the Plan to study. These place types are characterized by different development standards, mixes of land uses, and intensity and density of development, and range from urban job centers like downtown San Francisco to more suburban residential neighborhoods, like those in Marin County. A more detailed explanation of the Station Area place types can be viewed in MTC's Station Area Planning Manual (2007), available on the MTC website [www.mtc.ca.gov](http://www.mtc.ca.gov).

When the Larkspur City Council applied for grant funding to prepare the Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan, the application identified the **'Transit Neighborhood'** place type as the most appropriate type of neighborhood for the Plan to study. A 'Transit Neighborhood' is a primarily residential area served by rail or ferry service or multiple bus lines that connect at one location. Suggested residential development guidelines for a 'Transit Neighborhood' include a mix of housing types, including townhomes, mid-rise, and small lot single-family homes at a net density of 20 to 50 dwelling units per acre (du/ac). The 'Transit Neighborhood' represents the least dense and least intensive of the classifications to study. The existing Station Area, even without operation of the SMART train, already exemplifies many of the development characteristics of a 'Transit Neighborhood'.

The Draft Station Area Plan studies a range of residential densities of 20-35 du/ac, consistent with the development guidelines for 'Transit Neighborhoods' (the Plan does not consider density above 35 du/ac). The Larkspur General Plan currently includes residential density maximum of 21 du/ac, which falls within this range. The Plan studies potential residential development at a maximum of 35 du/ac in order to assess this outer limit of potential land use changes in the Plan area.

## **Will New Development Increase Traffic Congestion?**

One of the primary concerns voiced by the public throughout the Station Area planning process has been the potential impact of new development in the Station Area on traffic conditions on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard.

How can traffic congestion be reduced if development is intensified in the Station Area? The SMART Station Area Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) analyzes vehicular trip generation (how many cars will move to and from the Station Area) and vehicular trip distribution (where the cars are

coming from and going to, at peak morning and afternoon travel periods) that would be generated by the proposed maximum build-out considered by the Draft Plan. Trip generation and distribution varies by the type of land use (e.g., residential or office).

The analysis finds that due to the particular mix of land uses proposed by the Draft Plan and the availability of transit options other than private automobile, build-out of the maximum end of development envisioned by the Draft Plan would not significantly exacerbate existing circulation challenges and congestion problems in the Station Area. Based upon this data, the Plan and EIR propose a suite of improvements to the circulation system in the Station Area to offset traffic impacts of the development proposed by the Draft Plan. The Plan also proposes additional strategies to reduce *existing* traffic congestion throughout the area.

## **What's Next?**

Adoption of a Station Area Plan should define the maximum acceptable level of new development in the Station Area, and the preferred circulation system changes and improvements. These decisions can only occur through an open dialogue between the community and the city's decision-making bodies: the Planning Commission and City Council. At a minimum, the Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan should present a coordinated strategy to respond to the variety of anticipated changes to the Station Area that the City will face in the upcoming decades and a defined vision of the Station Area's future character and form.

The Draft Plan presents a range of development options for the Station Area consistent with the mix of land uses at densities considered adequate to support public transit and consistent with the goals of the Station Area planning grant program. As review of the Draft Plan and Draft EIR begins at public hearings, community members and decision makers must consider a variety of issues to decide how to balance what is optimal for transit with what is optimal for Larkspur:

- *Should the City consider amending the land use designations for certain opportunity sites to permit a mix of potential uses, as opposed to identifying single-use designations for development?*

Should residential housing be considered in conjunction with retail or office uses, and vice-versa? The Draft Plan promotes the concept of a mix of uses of varying degrees on various opportunity sites, most of which are currently developed. Not every site is considered appropriate for mixed use.

- *Is residential development of up to 35 du/ac acceptable on some sites, if traffic impacts can be minimized or eliminated through the policies and programs outlined in the plan? Is the current standard in the General Plan, 21 du/ac, a more appropriate number for Larkspur? Is the ideal figure somewhere between these two points?*

The Draft Plan has identified that higher density development can be built in a manner that is consistent with the scale and character of surrounding development in the area. While the

current density maximum of 21 du/ac meets the minimum standards for what is considered a 'Transit Neighborhood' residential density, higher densities would increase the potential for development of housing opportunities near transit, helping the City to meet many of its General Plan goals and policies.

- *Should development of additional retail services and/or offices be permitted on some sites?*

Where the current General Plan designations limit commercial uses to 0.40 Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and office uses to 0.35 FAR, the Draft Station Area Plan allows between 0.5 to 1.0 FAR. While the higher ratios represent some increase in the intensity of uses in areas, they also increase the potential for successful mixed uses.

- *Should the City amend the existing trip cap regulations that apply to the Station Area to allow for greater flexibility in development and recognize the traffic benefits of a more synergistic mix of uses?*

The Draft Plan contemplates a more vibrant community around existing and future transit services while minimizing additional traffic demand from within the plan area.

- *Should the City adopt the proposed Station Area design guidelines?*

These draft guidelines would direct the City to:

- Ensure that the design of buildings and site improvements are consistent with the scale, form, and character of the area, while promoting sustainable design.
- Create a program for public signage and improvements to enhance the experience and safety for pedestrians and bicyclists traveling both within and through the area.
- Create a design program for public signage, facilities and art to enhance local identity.
- Enhance public open spaces along the waterfront and public access improvements to Remillard Park and Miwok Park.

- *Should the City consider allowing building heights of up to four stories south of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard and up to five stories north of Sir Francis Drake Boulevard?*

While these sizes are generally larger than most existing development in Larkspur, the guidelines require a variety of building sizes and forms, to avoid a 'monolithic' design approach or repetitive box development. In addition, every project would be subject to Planned Development zoning review and approval. However, the community must decide if the guidelines adequately maintain the character and scale of the community or whether reduced heights, greater setbacks, or other control measures should be considered to manage the scale of development.

- *Should the City amend the General Plan and actively pursue policies and programs to reduce*

*vehicular use in the area, enhance use of transit, and create more efficient use of parking in the area?*

Significant policies and programs include:

- Street improvements to ease traffic congestion and related improvements to enhance bicycle and pedestrian movement and safety.
  - Adjusted parking ratios and shared parking strategies that would better manage and response to demand for parking in the area.
  - A vehicular trip cap for the area that would limit trips generated by new projects in the Station Area to no more than 10% above existing traffic generation.
  - Updating the transportation demand management (TDM) strategies contained in the Trip Reduction ordinance (LMC 18.13).
  - Establishing a Transportation Management Association (TMA) to assist properties in the Station Area in meeting TDM and parking management goals.
- *Should the City adopt a policy to actively encourage the transit agencies, such as SMART and GGBHTD, to study an alternative location for the SMART station on the ferry terminal site?*

While the Draft Plan is not a study of alternative locations for the SMART station, the Citizen Advisory Committee and community at large expressed strong support for the locating the station at the Ferry site. The City's General Plan supports the development of the rail system all the way to Corte Madera, but does not discuss a potential link to the Ferry Terminal.

As the community and City policy-makers begin their discussion of the Draft Plan's vision and policy recommendations, it is important to recognize the power of local control in this planning process. At the end of this community discussion, the Larkspur SMART Station Area Plan that is adopted will represent the vision of Larkspur citizens for their city, for the next twenty years to come.