



# MILPITAS

## *General Plan Update*

### MEMORANDUM

**May 23, 2018**

---

TO: Milpitas General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC)

FROM: Ben Ritchie, De Novo Planning Group  
Martti Eckert, De Novo Planning Group

SUBJECT: General Plan Advisory Committee Meeting #7  
(Community Design)

DATE: May 23, 2018

---

#### INTRODUCTION

The May 2018 GPAC meeting will focus on the topic of Community Design. This memo provides an overview of the topic, summarizes how the City currently regulates and influences community design, describes how the General Plan can further address the topic, and identifies issues related to the topic to consider for the meeting's discussion.

#### WHAT IS COMMUNITY DESIGN

---

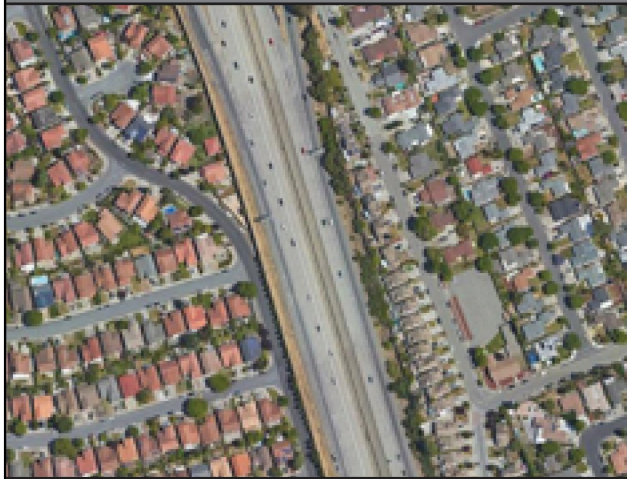
Community design refers to how the natural and constructed elements of the community's physical form shape its identity. These elements generally include buildings; parks, plazas, and other open spaces; streets and pathways; the natural landscaping; the furniture, lighting, public art, and other amenities that occupy outdoor areas; and signage.

#### Physical Elements of Community Design

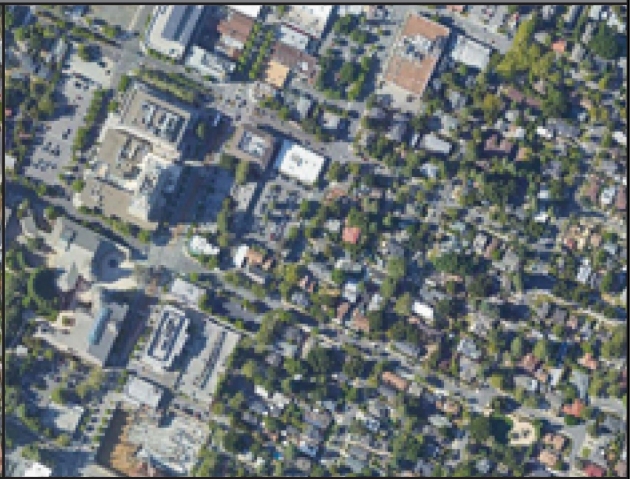
Community design is most often defined through the following categories of physical elements. Taken together, they form the primary image or impression of the community.

- **Edges** - Edges are linear elements that serve as a visual or physical boundary, barrier, or transition between communities and areas within communities and that define the boundaries of a place. They include freeways, flood channels, natural features, and significant landforms, such as hills.
- **Neighborhoods and Districts** – Districts and Neighborhoods are integral areas of a community that possess an identifiable character due to neighborhood design, architecture, unified streetscape identity, land use, and/or topography. Neighborhoods refer to areas predominated by residential uses, while districts identify areas primarily occupied by nonresidential or mixed uses.
- **Paths** – Paths are linear elements that provide passage from one location to another, while forming boundaries between areas of the community. They include streets, sidewalks, multiuse

Table 1: Example Community Design Elements



Edge - Highway



Neighborhood and District



Path



Gateway



Node - Commercial Center



Destination and Landmark

pathways, and trails. Because people primarily access communities along paths, they are prominent places that reflect community identity and character.

- **Gateways** - Gateways announce arrival into a community, district, or neighborhood through the use of arches that extend across the street, piers or columns that flank the street, public art, signage, special landscaping treatments, and/or unified architecture.
- **Nodes** – Nodes are important locations where uses are concentrated, people gather, and/or where paths converge, creating heightened levels of activity. Common examples of nodes are commercial centers, transit stations surrounded by mixed-use development, and plazas.
- **Destinations and Landmarks** – Destinations are uses which generate special purpose trips from within the community and throughout the region. They include clusters of related uses, such as commercial and civic centers, or single specialty uses. Landmarks are physical elements that provide a point of reference or serve as a community identity marker. They include structures and portions thereof, such as towers; open spaces; and natural features. Most landmarks are also destinations within the community.

## Other Community Design Topics

In addition to the community design element categories, community design may also address additional topics related to the character of the community's design and architecture; special considerations for historic resources and open spaces; the elements that occupy open spaces, streetscapes, and other outdoor areas; and the preservation and enhancement of viewsheds. Topics that are likely relevant to community design in Milpitas include the following:

- **Community Character** – Community character refers to the visual characteristics and quality of a community's physical form. Community character broadly encompasses all of the elements that comprise the form and is reflective of the community's geography, history, architecture, and natural setting. Community character is also dynamic, evolving as the community grows and changes over time.
- **Land Use Character** – Land use character refers to the mixture of land uses that comprise a community and the degree to which the community is urbanized. Typically, urbanization is represented by a scale that ranges from rural to urban. Many communities include multiple clusters of land uses and varying degrees of urbanization, thus creating a diversity of land use character.
- **Architectural Character** – Architectural character refers to the visual characteristics and quality of a community's buildings. Architectural character evolves based upon the construction of new buildings that possess distinct stylistic characteristics, the redevelopment of existing buildings with different architectural expressions, and the extent to which the community's building stock is maintained.
- **Historic Preservation** – Historic preservation refers to the preservation, conservation, and protection of buildings, structures, and landscapes of historic significance. Community design

incorporates historic resources as important components of the physical form, often designating them as landmarks that help define a district or neighborhood or anchor a node.

- **Open Space** – Open space refers to an undeveloped piece of land that generally lacks buildings and structures and is accessible to the public. They include green spaces, such as parks and community gardens; urban open spaces, such as plazas; and protected natural resources. Often, the spaces are occupied by outdoor furniture and other pedestrian amenities, playground equipment, picnic shelters, and/or similar facilities. In combination with the surrounding buildings and streets, they form important, highly visual components of a community's physical form.
- **Landscaping** – Landscaping refers to the planting of trees, shrubs, or grass, and/or altering the contours of the ground to enhance the appearance open spaces, parking areas, streetscapes, and similar locations. Within the context of community design, landscaping can play an important role in defining the character of a district, neighborhood, path, gateway, node, destination, or landmark.
- **Signage** – Public signage, include street, directional, and wayfinding signage plays an important role in defining the character of streetscapes and open spaces. Similarly, private signage helps define the character of districts and nodes where commercial uses are concentrated.
- **Public Art** – Public art refers to art, such as sculptures, fountains, murals, and landscape designs, installed in the public domain. Public art installations can enhance a community's streetscapes, open spaces, and nodes, and serve as landmarks.
- **Utilities** – Utilities, such as power and phone lines, stations, and boxes are generally considered unsightly, but necessary components of a community's physical form. Community design can provide solutions to reducing the visual impact of utilities, such as relocating lines underground and installing public art to masking the presence of stations and boxes.
- **Scenic Views** – As a community grows and urbanizes, preserving views of natural forms and landscapes within and beyond a community emerges as an important community design consideration. Community design policy can play an important role in advancing this consideration.

## Placemaking

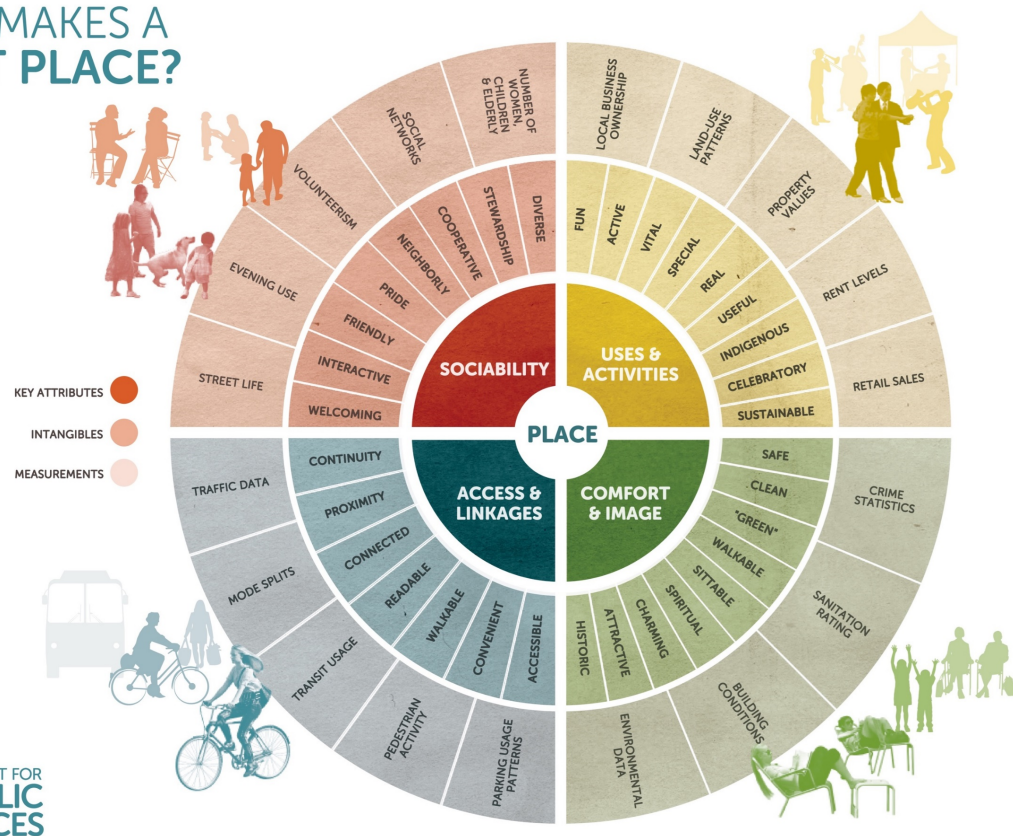
Community design is rooted in placemaking, the concept of creating a unified, unique identity for individual communities through the inclusive, community-based design of open spaces. Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design, and management of open spaces that capitalizes on local assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating spaces that promote people's health, happiness, and well-being. Placemaking also embodies the shared values of a community, expressing the physical, cultural, and social identities that define the place through the facilitation of creative patterns of use.

The placemaking approach ascribes the following four key attributes to well-designed places.



- **Sociability** – The place is welcoming, inclusive of diversity, accommodates friendly interactions between neighbors, creates a sense of pride within the community, and is well-maintained in cooperative fashion.
- **Uses and Activities** – The place is fun, vital, real, encourages activity, celebrates the local culture, and functions in a sustainable manner.
- **Access and Linkages** – The place is well-connected to the local circulation network, especially pedestrian facilities; proximate to other uses; identifiable and convenient to reach; and accessible by all users.
- **Comfort and Image** – The place appears safe, clean, and charming, acknowledges the community's history, incorporates landscaping, is designed to the human-scale, and includes abundant seating options.

## WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLACE?



**Figure 1:** The Place Diagram is a tool developed by the Project for Public Spaces to help communities evaluate places. The inner ring represents a place's key attributes, the middle ring its intangible qualities, and the outer ring its measurable data. (Source: [www.pps.org](http://www.pps.org))

## **HOW DOES MILPITAS CURRENTLY ADDRESS COMMUNITY DESIGN?**

---

Milpitas lacks a comprehensive approach to addressing community design, but does include community design-related regulations and guidelines in the following documents:

- **General Plan** – Several of the existing General Plan’s elements, including Land Use, Circulation, and Open Space & Environmental Conservation, provide policies that pertain to various aspects of community design. These include community character; the preservation of the natural landscape along hillsides and scenic views and corridors; the inclusion of ample open spaces; the use of distinctive architecture to reinforce a distinct identity in the Midtown Specific Plan area; pedestrian-oriented development in the Transit Station Specific Plan area; the implementation of a balanced circulation network that accommodates all modes of travel and provides access to all areas of the city; and the development of a Streetscape Master Plan, including design guidelines.
- **Zoning Code** – The Zoning Code provides development standards for the majority of properties in the city. These standards identify the permitted extent of building forms, the height of fencing and landscaping, and where the various components of the physical form located outside of the public right-of-way may be located. The document also identifies certain zones where design review applies.
- **Midtown and Transit Area Specific Plans** – Both of the city’s specific plans, the Midtown Specific Plan and Transit Area Specific Plan, include development regulations that are intended to achieve a well-designed physical form and comprehensive design guidelines. Collectively, the regulations and guidelines are intended to create vibrant, urban, mixed-use districts that feature pedestrian-oriented development comprising multistory buildings located near the adjoining sidewalk, complete streets that accommodate all modes of transportation, and well-integrated parks and plazas.

Concurrent with the General Plan Update project, the City is updating the Midtown Specific Plan. Both documents will incorporate consistent community design policy language for the Midtown area.

- **Streetscape Master Plan** – The Streetscape Masterplan provides standards for the trees and landscaping, wayfinding and signage, lighting, and pedestrian amenities that line the city’s streets.
- **Trail Master Plan** – The Trail Master Plan includes standards for the city’s trail network and includes the currently uncompleted implementation action of developing design guidelines for the network.

## **HOW CAN THE GENERAL PLAN FURTHER ADDRESS COMMUNITY DESIGN?**

---

The updated General Plan will include an optional Community Design Element. This approach facilitates compiling most design-related general plan content into a single, comprehensive resource. The Community Design Element will include the following sections/content:

- **Existing Conditions and Key Opportunities** – This section, located near the beginning of the element, will describes the existing condition of the community’s physical form and key

opportunities to enhance the form. This section will be organized into subsections that analyze the individual physical elements of community design (i.e., edges, neighborhoods and districts, paths, etc.) and include one or more diagrams that illustrate the location of the elements in the planning area. The section may also include subsections that analyze other community design topics (i.e. community character, architectural character, signage, etc.).

- **Goals, Policies, and Actions** – Like the General Plan’s other elements, the Community Design Element will include a comprehensive policy framework for the topic. Commonly, community design elements provide policies and actions that address community design on an overarching, citywide basis, along with the individual community design elements and other design-related topics, how community design can be further integrated into the project review process, and how design can be further implemented through the adoption of additional standards, guidelines, and documents.

Additional design-related goals, policies, and actions may also continue to appear where appropriate in the other elements. Given the limited amount of existing design-related policy language that appears in the existing General Plan, this will likely amount to some additional provisions that address specific community design elements and topics as they relate to the topics of land use, circulation, and open space and environmental conservation. In this instance, all elements containing community-design related content must be made consistent with one another, and the Community Design Element will include an additional section that describes how the implicated elements collectively address community design.

#### **WHAT OTHER COMMUNITY DESIGN-RELATED TOOLS MAY BE ENCOURAGED BY THE GENERAL PLAN?**

---

The General Plan may include actions that support the adoption of additional practices, standards, guidelines, and documents that increase the City’s consideration of community design during the development review process. In Milpitas, this could include the following items:

- **Communitywide Design Guidelines** – To address community design on a comprehensive, citywide basis, the City can adopt communitywide design guidelines. Typically, the document is organized by major land use categories that share similar development characteristics. Each land use category includes guidelines for architecture/building design; site design, including landscaping, open spaces, parking, and utilities; and signage. Because the City’s two specific plans provide comprehensive design guidance within the specific plan areas, the document will be of more relevance to the remainder of the city and the uses that occupy these areas, especially the locations that comprise employment-generating uses. The document may also address development within public rights-of-ways and other special topics, such as historic preservation, the preservation of scenic views, and/or public art.
- **Zoning Code** – The Zoning Code’s oversight of community design may be increased through the inclusion of additional design-related standards, such as form-based development standards for zones that encourage pedestrian-oriented development, and the expansion of the City’s design review entitlement process.



Figure 2: Example Community Design Diagram. (Source: Arcadia General Plan)



- **Design Guidelines for Trails** – The City may adopt design guidelines to accompany the Trails Master Plan.

## **WHAT INPUT HAS THE PUBLIC PROVIDED ON COMMUNITY DESIGN?**

---

While the project's first two workshops have not specifically focused on community design, through activities pertaining to related topics, such as visioning and land use mapping, workshop participants provided the following feedback related to community design.

- **Physical Elements of Community Design**
  - Edges
    - The hills form an edge, constraining future development.
    - Neighborhoods and Districts
    - There is an opportunity to intensify development within the employment districts.
    - There is support for additional shopping and dining in the Downtown area.
    - Opportunity areas identified by the public include:
      - South of E. Calaveras Boulevard near South Park Victoria Drive
      - E. Calaveras avenue near Piedmont Road
  - Paths
    - The Hetch-Hetchy Trail and greenway is considered an important resource.
    - The City should better accommodate alternative transportation, including east west active transportation access.
    - The City should improve connectivity to creek trails.
    - Traffic and congestion is problematic and should be addressed.
    - There is support for improve Calaveras Boulevard's "main street" image and connection to the Great Mall.
  - Nodes
    - There is support for encouraging mixed-use development, a configuration that could activate nodes.
    - There is support for increasing density and intensity in select locations. Nodes are ideally suited for this purpose.
    - Strip malls should be better utilized.
    - Potential anchor uses include the Great Mall, museums, a performance center, and transit stations.
  - Destinations and Landmarks
    - There is support for preserving historic assets.
    - Landmarks include the Library and Great Mall.

- **Other Community Design Topics**

- Community Character
  - Participants describe Milpitas as having a small-town feel, cultural and ethnic diversity, and scenic beauty.
- Open Space
  - The city enjoys good access to open space.
  - Neighborhood parks and Cardoza Park are considered important resources.
  - There is desire for additional parkland and open spaces, including:
    - Beautiful spaces that can accommodate special events
    - Sports fields
    - Amphitheater
    - Water features
- Public Art
  - There is desire for additional art.
- Scenic Views
  - There is desire to preserve views of hills.

#### WORK EXERCISE

---

The meeting's work exercise will focus on identifying the location of community design elements within the city and discussing the design characteristics and aesthetic quality of the city's physical form. Similar to a workshop activity, GPAC members will work collaboratively to complete the exercise, using a digital base map projected for all attendees to see. In preparation for the meeting, please come prepared to share your responses to the following questions:

1. Where are the community design elements located in the city?
  - Community design elements include: edges, paths, neighborhoods and districts, gateways, nodes, destinations and landmarks
2. Which of the elements exhibit high quality design and positively contribute to Milpitas' image? Which of the elements would benefit for aesthetic enhancement?
3. What other areas of the city exhibit excellent design characteristics? What other areas of the city would benefit from aesthetic enhancement?
4. Would any of the following topics benefit from design-related policy direction? What are the important considerations for the topics?
  - Other design-related topics include: community character, architectural character, open space, signage, public art, scenic views