

Community Workshop Summary – April 6, 2009

On April 6, 2009, the City of Benicia hosted a workshop at the Benicia Library to get community input on the Lower Arsenal Mixed Use Specific Plan. Specifically, participants discussed issues and opportunities related to the following two topics:

- Historical and cultural resources
- Residential / industrial use compatibility

Mayor Elizabeth Patterson opened the meeting and welcomed the participants. Planning Director Charlie Knox provided background information on the Lower Arsenal Mixed Use Specific Plan and an overview of the meeting agenda.

Daniel Iacofano and Vikrant Sood from MIG, Inc., facilitated the meeting and recorded comments.

Meeting handouts included an agenda and a comment card (see Appendix A). A total of 17 comment cards and three letters were submitted as written comments (see Appendix B).

Summary of Comments

This report summarizes comments received at the workshop and from comment cards.

A. Historical and Cultural Resources

Many participants consider the Lower Arsenal area as a unique resource similar in some ways to the Presidio in San Francisco and the Gas Light District in Grand Rapids. Most participants agreed that the City should protect historic structures as well as the public and open spaces around buildings that define this area's character.

Participants identified the following historic resources that should be protected:

- **Commanding Officer's Building.** The building is a major landmark in the Lower Arsenal. A number of social and cultural events took place in this building when the base was active including the Sunday Afternoon Tea for example.
- **View Corridors and Access-Ways.** The placement of buildings in the Lower Arsenal defines view corridors that symbolize the character of this area. In addition, the Lower Arsenal stairway and other access-ways are part of the landscape that contributes to a sense of place and ambience.
- **Character of the District.** The scale and layout of buildings and public spaces on Jefferson Ridge, especially the parade grounds and overall layout of buildings and structures are integral components of the historic sub-districts C and D. Historic buildings, structures, sites and landscapes in the Lower Arsenal maintain its sense of time and place.

Participants identified the following issues and challenges as barriers to resource protection:

- Maintaining economic viability of the Lower Arsenal through revitalization and reuse.
- Integrating new development in the historic districts. The type of use, character and scale of new buildings and placement on the site should be consistent with existing buildings and landscape.
- Maintaining the historic character of this area as the City develops the Lower Arsenal for cultural-heritage tourism and economic development.

- Supporting private property owners in meeting both economic development and historic preservation goals. Unlike the Presidio, this area is privately owned. Low rents in the area often make renovations economically infeasible.
- Addressing structural defects in the foundations of many historic buildings. For example, the price tag for retrofitting the foundations of four buildings may exceed \$1 million.
- Identifying an appropriate and economically viable use for the Commanding Officer's Building.

To address these issues and challenges, participants identified the following strategies:

- Purchase the property and create a natural heritage area to protect the Lower Arsenal. The Carquinez Strait Preservation Trust (CSPT) is currently reviewing the feasibility of this option.
- Provide incentives to private owners to rehabilitate and reuse historic buildings. Funding sources may include tax credits, Mills Act funds, bonds and improvement districts.
- Seek external funds and grants for preservation.
- Allow economic activity in the Lower Arsenal including artist work-live units and retail mixed use to activate the area and generate revenue.
- Create a marketing program for the rehabilitated Commanding Officer's Building.
- Conduct a survey of properties that may be 50 years or older for potential designation as historic resources on the National Register.
- Explore the feasibility of a land-swap to protect the hillsides.
- Pursue partnerships with organizations and agencies that share similar goals for preservation.
- Identify appropriate models and best practices that are applicable to the Lower Arsenal. Examples may include the Presidio, Cannery Row, etc.
- Other strategies to revitalize the Lower Arsenal suggested by community members include:
 - Publishing a book on 'The Arsenal' to attract tourists;
 - Dramatizing the late-1800's era setting with costumes on weekends; and
 - Building an aquarium on the fringe of the historic area.

B. Residential / Industrial Use Compatibility

Many participants expressed concern for public health and safety of residents who may live close to industries if residential uses were allowed on the Lower Arsenal. Other participants, many of whom rent or own residential units in the area highlighted current and future demand for affordable and flexible living space for artists and entrepreneurs.

Participants identified the following challenges associated with residential and industrial use compatibility:

- Polluting industrial uses in the area pose significant risk to public health and safety especially for children. Hazards include coke dust, unexploded military ordinance, diesel emissions, soil contamination, odors and noise, among others.
- Residential uses are inconsistent with the General Plan description for this area and will affect the viability of adjacent industrial operations over time.
- Buildings in the Lower Arsenal were never intended to be used for residential purposes.

Other participants identified the following benefits of including residential uses in the Lower Arsenal:

- Work-live units provide an affordable and flexible space that allows residents to live next to where they work. Demand for these units is high as evidenced by low vacancy rates in existing units. The Housing Element identifies this area for additional housing development.
- These units provide space that supports non-traditional lifestyles that suit many households and individuals. No other area in the City provides such space. The space is compatible with the type of uses that attract artists and entrepreneurs.
- People living in the historic district can bring life to the area and contribute to the economic vitality of all uses on the Lower Arsenal. Market trends suggest that this area is difficult to develop profitably for any one use.
- Residents living in the Lower Arsenal are likely to become active in improving the quality of the area over time.

While there was no consensus on whether residential uses would be appropriate in the area, participants identified the following conditions that may lead to a working arrangement on this issue:

- **Define work-live.** Define what percentage of work and live space constitutes each category. While live-work is more suitable for commercial areas, work-live may be suitable in industrial areas. In the Lower Arsenal, work-live units that exclude families and sensitive populations may be appropriate south of Adam Street.
- **Restrict sensitive populations.** To the extent feasible and practical, restrict sensitive and vulnerable populations from inhabiting work-live units close to industrial uses such as young children and the elderly.
- **Include buffers and open space.** Physical separation, landscaping and transitional uses can mitigate the impacts of locating residential units close to industrial uses in the Lower Arsenal.
- **Ensure full disclosure and transparency.** The City should require developers and owners to provide full disclosure of potential health impacts of environmental toxins and contaminants in the area, and full disclosure of information with respect to the nature of ongoing industrial operations.
- **Include protections for existing industry.** Allowing new residential uses in the area should not threaten or undermine the viability of existing industrial uses.
- **Ensure toxic remediation.** Buildings and sites must be remediated to appropriate levels for residential use.
- **Provide alternative access to site.** Providing alternative emergency access routes to the site will improve safety conditions.

Participants provided the following observations regarding residential and industrial use compatibility:

- The City of Benicia General Plan identifies the Lower Arsenal as a target area for economic development opportunities.
- Some industrial uses in the area are 24-hour operations that may have significant impacts on adjacent residential uses.
- The cost of remediating sites to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards may be prohibitive to residential development in rehabilitated buildings.
- Level of concern for public health should be balanced with the need to provide affordable and flexible living options.
- High density residential uses already exist on the Lower Arsenal.

- Existing residents have not complained about environmental quality. In addition, workers in the Lower Arsenal are exposed to environmental contaminants as well.
- Pollution is not restricted to the Lower Arsenal.
- This is a great opportunity to develop non-industrial uses on the Lower Arsenal.
- Projects in the Lower Arsenal should promote social, economic and environmental sustainability.
- The Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) does not address AB 32 and SB 375 and the potential cumulative impacts of environmental hazards.
- Work-live should emphasize green businesses.

Next Steps

Mayor Patterson and Mr. Knox thanked the participants for attending the workshop and closed the meeting. Mr. Knox outlined the following next steps:

- Community input from this workshop will be recorded in a meeting summary.
- The summary will be presented to the City Council for review and further discussion.

Appendix

The following materials are attached to the meeting summary:

- Meeting Agenda
- Wall-Graphic
- Comment Cards, Letters and Emails