

Diridon Station Area Advisory Group (SAAG)
City of San José, California
c/o Lori Severino
cc: Lee Wilcox and Kim Walesh
via email, sent Oct. 14, 2018

Dear Ms. Severino,

At the Oct. 10th Diridon Station Area Advisory Group (SAAG) meeting, the public was invited to submit written comments. I have attended many of the SAAG meetings, as well as several of the subcommittee meetings and even a couple of the walking tours, and I have given verbal comment at a number of them. (I even coauthored a [guest editorial](#) on the topic in the Mercury News.) However, I realized that I hadn't yet given any formal written comment, so, here goes. Note: much of this is a just a repeat of my past verbal comments. Also, I'm pleased that many of the points are already in the draft outline: my mentioning of them here is to give a sign of my support.

Overall, I am quite pleased with the proposal and the progress. I believe that Google will make an excellent "prime mover" for the Diridon Station Area. I also note that the Diridon Station Area is extensive, and that, while Google will most likely not be the only agent involved in developing the area, it will definitely help set the tone.

The Diridon Station Area development should be high-density, vibrant, sustainable, open and accessible, enjoyable, connected, environmentally "green", and a welcome addition to San José.

In no particular order (other than roughly that of my Oct. 10 verbal comments), here are some thoughts and suggestions:

Daylight the Los Gatos Creek!

I am so pleased to hear the SAAG committee, Google executives, and the public all give a high priority to freeing the Los Gatos Creek from its culvert under the Montgomery/Park Ave intersection. With Google coming to Diridon and the area's revitalization, we have a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to rectify an environmental injustice and restore a creek that was buried a half-century ago just so cars could more quickly turn right. A re-created creek channel will enhance the stream and also create an acre of new riparian (streamside) habitat. Additionally, it will enable the continuation of the Los Gatos Creek Trail, a grade-separated off-street path allowing bike, pedestrian, and other non-motorized access to the Diridon Station and the Google complex without impacting (or being impacted by) vehicular traffic.

Create a "River Walk" ...

... but do it "San José style"! San Antonio Texas is properly famous for their River Walk, but theirs is about as natural as "the Pirates Ride" at Disneyland. We in San José can create a River Walk that is an exciting attraction and yet also "wild at heart", with a lush natural area that supports our native salmon and beaver. We have an opportunity to enhance the Los Gatos Creek in the Diridon area, improve the riparian habitat, and develop a system of trails and paths along the outer edges with trailside amenities such as sidewalk cafes and bistros. The creek can support both nature and also a vibrant recreational

and entertainment district along its outer periphery. The trails and paths should be convenient for both thru-traffic bicycle commuters and visitors strolling amongst the trailside shops and attractions.

Historic Preservation

The Diridon Station is a classic 1930s train station that is well worth preserving. Streets, pathways, and plazas can help enhance the building by preserving “sight-lines”. The needed additions to the building should be in a manner that preserves, enhances, and emphasizes the original building.

In addition, there are a number of other interesting structures in the area. While they might not all be officially classified as “historic” (for example, the brick building between Autumn and Montgomery), they nonetheless can add “character” and “texture” to the area: perhaps a brick wall could be incorporated into a new building here, and an old neon sign can add color to a plaza there.

And the Willow Glen Trestle, which I mentioned at a subcommittee working group meeting, is still standing – and hopefully will continue to do so. It is but a mile from Diridon and connects the Los Gatos Creek Trail to the Three Creeks Trail. If the future Googlers in San José are anything like us “mad scientists” that worked at Palo Alto’s Advanced Technology Center, they too would enjoy a lunchtime run or bike ride out over interesting and historic structures to sidewalk cafes (in Willow Glen in this case) to help jog their creative thought processes.

Build at high density

The area around Diridon is the best place in San José for high density, thanks to the wealth of transportation alternatives. Yes, space is needed for greenery, plazas, walkways and gardens – for the mental health of the residents, visitors, and workers – but don’t waste space on surface parking lots or low-density buildings. This is not the place for warehouses or data centers!

Buildings should be tall (but not so tall as to impact the nearby SJC Airport!), but they should not all be of the same height, color, texture, or shape: please make this a visually >interesting< place. Also: provide appropriate setbacks and step-backs so as to not cast perpetual shadows on the creeks and parks: nature (including people!) needs to be able to see the sun at least part of the day.

The emphasis in this area should be on employment and commerce, as well as transportation and entertainment. Residential is appropriate, as it adds to the area’s nightlife, but don’t have this area be primarily residential. As I’ve said at more than one meeting, San José has a structural budget deficit because of its jobs/housing imbalance: San José is a “bedroom community” with only about 0.8 jobs per employed resident. Yes, the area overall has a housing shortage, especially in affordable units, but Diridon is not the place to build all of them! The entire area could be filled with housing and we’d still have a shortage, and many of the residents would then get on BART or CalTrain and go to jobs in Oakland or San Francisco, giving those cities the tax revenue while leaving San José to pay for the needed police, parks, and libraries. Instead, let’s concentrate on employment and build housing in the surrounding areas (in the urban villages and in nearby towns) and have the employees commute in via CalTrain, Light Rail, bus, and BART. For transit to be useful, it has to connect housing and employment: very few people go from house to house by transit, or from business to business.

the length of a light-rail boarding platform and then awkward crosswalks on to San Fernando. If the corridor were enhanced so as to encourage usage, it could “draw” people into town. (And the walkway goes both ways: it’s also a way to draw students from SJSU and the downtown employees over to Diridon for transit and also for lunchtime or evening entertainment.)



Security

I’m saddened that this topic has to be discussed, but it is part of the times we live in: the new and expanded Diridon Station will need to be designed with security in mind. It can be done unobtrusively if considered in-advance, or it can be awkward and ugly if done after-the-fact. (I’m thinking of the grand buildings in Washington DC that were designed to be entered by broad marble stairways, but now instead everyone has to enter thru a small side doorway in behind so that they can be passed thru a metal detector.) Streets can be configured to preclude someone in a truck getting “a running start” at a building, and planters and bollards along walkways and entranceways can help protect against deliberate collisions. Landscaping can be arranged and maintained to avoid hiding places.



Sustainability

I believe Google will have this topic well covered, with well-designed, energy-efficient buildings. I’d like to add that buildings should be designed to be “bird-safe”: avoid large glass windows, especially when adjacent to the creek corridors or other flyways. Design roofs, roads, and other surfaces to accommodate rain runoff (in case it ever does rain here again!): don’t have the runoff rush directly into the creeks (which could aggravate flash-flooding downstream), but instead direct it so it can percolate into the ground. In addition, “green” includes the above-mentioned green open spaces (parks, landscaping, and plazas) and restored riparian corridors. Use drought-tolerant native plants where practical: they are sustainable and also help support our native butterflies, wildlife, and migratory birds.

Design the area to be convenient: have the necessary supporting services nearby. It doesn’t help to have housing and employment within easy walking distance of one-another if one first has to get in a car and drive the children off somewhere for school or daycare. There should also be a nearby laundry, pharmacy / “dime-store”, and grocery store. The services should be in place for the first residents.

Become a vibrant attraction

Design the area to be attractive, fun, and inviting! Don’t build an array of repetitive rectangular office cubes, but instead go for variety: in height, size, shape, color, texture, spacing; use existing historic structures as cues to add character. Design venues to encourage street life: sidewalk cafes along walkways and river walks. Design for a mix of uses and a mix of residents: have people live here to enjoy

the amenities after hours: don't be like the financial district in SF that's deserted at night, and also don't be a boring bedroom community that "rolls up the sidewalk at 5 PM". This doesn't have to be "24/7" or "the town that never sleeps" – this is not Las Vegas! – but it should be able to support late-night (and early morning) arrivals (or departures) on HSR (and also the connected nearby SJC). It should also be the "go-to" place for the night-life following events at the SAP Arena, Downtown, and even SJSU and Levi's Stadium: visitors will want to celebrate a sports victory before catching CalTrain or BART back home.

Enhance San José

Google will have a profound impact on San José: it can take measures to make those impacts positive:

- Google can help mitigate the impacts on affordable housing: it is planning on employing a lot of people who will all need somewhere to live. I'm glad Google is locating near transit, but there still needs to be housing somewhere for everyone, including janitors and clerical support. Additionally, there'll be cooks and waiters, bus drivers, mechanics, school teachers, doctors and nurses, sales clerks, administrators, and more, for all the employees at Google and their families: they too will have to live somewhere.
- Regarding "gentrification": change is inevitable; improvement is good; it's just the displacement that is not. Google should work with San José and the surrounding cities to assure that enough housing is built and in time, and that it includes an appropriate mix of affordable units.
- Help mitigate transportation impacts: besides train and bus, encourage bike use: convenient safe lockers or other storage; complete the Los Gatos Creek Trail; and also support San José in constructing "complete streets" and "bike boulevards". Perhaps Google can help San José construct safe crossings of US-101 over to the somewhat more affordable East Side.
- Have transportation available for employees who biked or took the train into work and then suddenly had to run an errand or handle an emergency during the day.
- Plan for the future. Autonomous vehicles and electric cars are likely coming: will there be a place where they can go dock and recharge when not in use? Will there be adequate power?
- Hopefully, Google will be around for many years: future employees may now be going to school. Perhaps Google can help with the schools, maybe by supporting specialized technical classes or afterschool activities (e.g., the robot lab or the coding club).

In the past, often the largest and greatest businesses would support their home towns by supporting their communities: supporting the arts, supporting the libraries and parks, and showing off their success by helping to make their towns the best around: think of Rockefeller, Getty, Carnegie, Ford, etc. I'm hoping Google will want to emulate this custom of home-town philanthropic support.

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This has been a somewhat rambling written compilation of my "public comments" that I've given at the various meetings. (I can't believe I have 5 pages of comments from just a half-dozen 2-minute talks!) I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want Google to become a welcome addition to San José, and for it to help shape the Diridon Station Area and all of San José for the best.

~Larry Ames,

long-time (and nearly "historic") San José resident, retired "mad scientist", and a park / creek / bike / community advocate.