

Planning Commission Staff Report

October 8, 2020

Subject: Eastern Gateway Study Update

Staff Recommendation

This is an informational item, intended to provide an update to the Planning Commission regarding the Eastern Gateway Study. No action must be taken at this time.

Project Background

On November 5, 2019, the City Council authorized submittal of an SB2 Planning Grant Program Application (Resolution 19-111). This grant was offered by the State of California for planning activities that could accelerate the production of housing. Benicia was eligible for \$160,000 of non-competitive funding from this grant program.

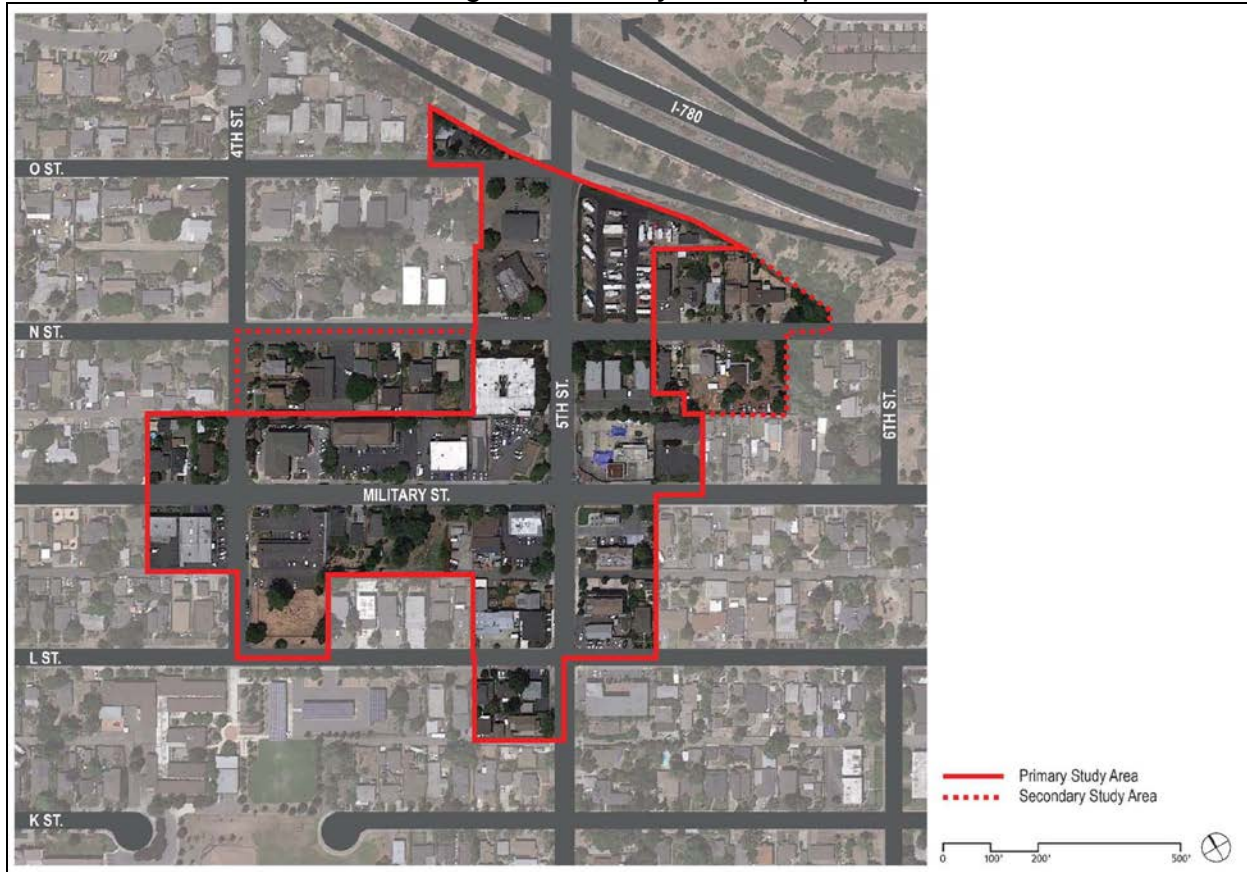
As approved by the City Council, Benicia's SB2 application proposed to implement a new mixed use zone of approximately 13.5 acres around the intersection of Military East and East Fifth. In this area multi-family development could be permitted "by-right" if it complies with the objective design standards developed through the course of the planning study.

The City of Benicia was awarded \$160,000 for this planning work in February 2020. The Community Development Department then released a Request for Proposals from qualified consultants and interviewed three applicants. Ben Noble was selected as the most qualified consultant to execute the project and the City Council approved the consultant agreement with Ben Noble for technical planning services relating to the creation of the new mixed use zone on May 19, 2020.

The project has since come to be known as the Eastern Gateway Study because East Fifth Street is the easternmost gateway to downtown Benicia. In order to create a new mixed use zone that could accommodate by-right multi-family housing development, subject to objective standards, both the Benicia Zoning Ordinance and the Benicia General Plan will need to be amended. Additionally, these amendments must also be considered pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act.

Project Overview

Figure 1 – Study Area Map



The Eastern Gateway Study is comprised of two parts, the Primary Study Area and the Secondary Study Area. The Primary Study Area mostly follows the Military East and East Fifth corridors and contains commercially zoned properties. The Secondary Study Area includes properties that are mostly developed with single-family residences or duplexes.

The Study has been broken down into the following steps:

1. Project Initiation – This step included existing conditions research, the assembly of a stakeholder group, a stakeholder group meeting, and a community workshop.
2. Issues and Options – This step will include the synthesis of a list of issues and policy options to be addressed in the proposed text amendment. This list will be shared with the stakeholder group and at a second community workshop where the public may provide feedback.
3. Draft Zoning Ordinance and General Plan Amendments – This step includes drafting the amendments and making them available for public review and comment.
4. Environmental Review – The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) regulates the intensity and scope of environmental review for planning studies

such as the Eastern Gateway Study. The majority of this work will be completed concurrently with Step 3.

5. Adoption – This step includes hearings with the Planning Commission and City Council where elected and appointed officials will consider adoption of the new regulations developed through the course of the Eastern Gateway Study.

All work associated with this project must be completed by the end of February 2022. Step 1 is now complete. It is anticipated that Step 2 will be complete in February 2021, Steps 3 and 4 will be complete in Summer of 2021, and Step 5 will take place in Winter 2021/2022.

Project Initiation

Existing Conditions Research

Subconsultant Terry Bottomley prepared maps of existing conditions (Attachment 2) in the study area, which will be used throughout the project. They include site context, parcel configuration, floor area ratio, variation in existing development, existing land use and general plan designations, public right-of-way, pedestrian improvements, and existing street parking conditions.

Assembly of Stakeholder Group

The City has assembled a stakeholder group of 14 individuals who represent the interests of study area residents, property owners, and business owners. This group also includes a local architect, affordable housing advocates, and representatives of the Benicia Community Action Council, the Benicia Housing Authority, the Benicia Family Resource Center, the Benicia Chamber of Commerce, and the Benicia Historical Society. The purpose of the Stakeholder Group is to have a diverse and representative group that will provide detailed feedback throughout the 18-month-long study.

The first stakeholder group meeting took place in August 2020. All of the materials provided to the group, and a summary of the feedback received at the meeting, are available on the project webpage, www.ci.benicia.ca.us/easterngateway.

First Community Workshop

On September 23, 2020 the Community Development Department hosted a self-guided walking tour of the Eastern Gateway Study, which included a welcome center at the Benicia Community Center, just south of the Study Area. All participants were asked to wear face coverings and maintain physical distance. Complimentary face coverings were provided at the welcome center to ensure proper public health procedures.

At the welcome center, residents and business owners stopped by to pick up a self-guided walking tour pamphlet (Attachment 3) and ask questions of staff and project consultants. This provided an opportunity for socially distanced discussion where the City could provide project information and answer participants' questions. Approximately 50-60 people attended the workshop, and most attendees arrived at the welcome center on foot, indicating that they reside in or near the study area.

In advance of the meeting, public information was provided via multiple outlets including a press release, mailed postcards, social media, City of Benicia This Week, and announcements at the Planning Commission, Historic Preservation Review Commission, and Solano Association of Realtors Monthly Meeting. Staff distributed flyers and walked the “secondary study area” neighborhoods on East N Street to inform residents of the event. Five project-related videos were also posted to YouTube in advance of the meeting.

To accommodate participation from all residents, the walking tour pamphlet, survey questions, and five detailed YouTube videos about the project were all posted to the project webpage. We are still encouraging the community to learn more about the Eastern Gateway Study and provide feedback by October 9, 2020.

California Environmental Quality Act

It is anticipated that an Initial Study will be prepared under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) in order for the City to adequately consider the potential environmental impacts presented by the proposed zoning text amendment and general plan text amendment. Staff will adhere to all required noticing, public review timelines, and public hearings under CEQA. This work will begin when the text amendments are drafted, in early 2021.

Attachments:

1. City Council Resolution 19-111
2. Existing Conditions Maps
3. Self-Guided Walking Tour Pamphlet

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