

Sonoma County Housing Advocacy Group



P. O. Box 3256
Santa Rosa, California 95402

e-mail: schag@pacbell.net
web: www.hagster.net

November 3, 2003
Via Facsimile

Santa Rosa City Council, c/o Hon. Sharon Wright, Mayor
Santa Rosa City Hall
100 Santa Rosa Avenue
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
Fax: (707) 543-3030

SMART Board of Directors
c/o Tim Smith, Co-Chair
Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
Santa Rosa, CA 95403
Fax: (707) 565-3378

Re: Santa Rosa Railroad Square SMART Property

Dear Clerk and Council Members, and Members of the SMART Board of Directors:

We are writing to you on behalf of the Sonoma County Housing Advocacy Group ["HAG"], which advocates for lower income housing development in communities in Sonoma County, and low income individuals who would very much like to be able to find housing they could afford to rent or own in this area.

We understand that the City of Santa Rosa is in negotiations with the Sonoma Marin Area Rapid Transit District ("SMART") over acquisition and development of real estate owned by SMART in the Railroad Square area of Santa Rosa (the "SMART Property"). We also understand that the City intends to include the SMART property and other parcels into a redevelopment area in order to develop and carry out an overall plan for future use of this area.

The City proposes to establish a tourist-oriented "food and wine" center on the SMART property, which would include areas for wine marketing, a 'farmers market,' and facilities for cooking classes to be offered by Santa Rosa Junior College. The proposed development has been advanced by the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce. It has apparently been adopted by City officials with little or no input from the public over how the area could best be developed. HAG has recently learned that the City's proposal provides for little or no residential development on the site.

The SMART property and adjoining sites could easily accommodate 200 or more units of housing affordable to a range of income groups, along with retail and other commercial uses. This is the kind of development which the City's General Plan envisions for the site. Moreover, mixed use development of the property (with a priority on high-density residential) is environmentally the most beneficial use – after the responsible entities have removed toxic contaminants and completed remediation of the sites.

Mixed-use development of these sites will help to revitalize the City's core on both sides of the freeway, and would hasten development of a light rail transit system that will further expand development in the center of the city. We understand that the “overriding goal” of SMART with respect to the development of the property is to “generat[e] ridership and revenue to support operations...” High density residential development of this site is certainly consistent with this goal.

On the other hand, the tourist-oriented wine and food center which the City is proposing will have the opposite effect. It will preclude residential development of the last large core site in the City, and will deprive a future light rail system of a significant user base. It will do little or nothing to encourage revitalization of the City core. This is directly contrary to the way that the General Plan provides that development should occur in this area.

While we do not object to allocating a small part of the site along 3rd Street for tourist-oriented uses like a wine center, the viability (and desirability) of this kind of facility is very questionable in light of past experience. Rohnert Park's Wine and Visitors center closed down completely two years ago despite considerable funding and support from the local wine industry and the City of Rohnert Park. That facility apparently never attracted more than a small fraction of the visitors that sponsors originally claimed it would bring. See Press Democrat, 12/23/2000. There is nothing in this new proposal to indicate why tourists would be any more willing to brave the traffic of downtown Santa Rosa to visit a ‘wine center’ than they were when it was located in Rohnert Park. Not only is this wine and food center likely to fail, it's likely to suck off several million of dollars of city funding in the process.

We also question the wisdom and viability of the "food" part of the City's proposal. Santa Rosa already has two long-established farmers markets. A third market will cut into the business of these two, but will not likely be able to capture enough business to be viable on its own. The area clearly doesn't need another farmers market -- it needs an Albertsons or Safeway so people in the neighborhood can do their shopping without having to drive several miles. A ground-floor supermarket would nicely complement residential development of the SMART property, and be a boon to the entire neighborhood.

The City's proposal includes an area for cooking classes which would be offered by the

Junior College. We understand the JC Board of Trustees have not agreed to this, and their concerns are well founded. Students who would be taking the cooking classes are also going to be taking other classes at the main campus. They would either have to be shuttled back and forth from the main campus to the Railroad Square location by the JC, or they would have to drive themselves or arrange their own transportation back and forth. Faculty and other staff would also have to commute back and forth – perhaps multiple times each day. The JC's existing (new) facility in the Brickyard Shopping Plaza is more accessible to the main campus, and can be easily expanded to accommodate more classroom space if the need arises. To locate a whole new cooking facility in Railroad Square would not serve the interests of either the students, the faculty the Junior College, or the community.

We also have environmental concerns about the City's proposal. It represents a potentially significant impact on traffic in and around the West 3rd Street area, and we would request that these potential impacts be evaluated before SMART agrees to lease or convey the property to the City, and before the City makes a determination about how the property will be developed. We would also request that the potential impacts of the City's proposal on on the following be analyzed:

- a. Analyze and establish where the employees who will fill the project's newly created jobs will live, and, in particular, whether this impact will be contained to downtown Santa Rosa, to Santa Rosa in general, or will impact other areas of Sonoma County.
- b. Analyze all environmental impacts of the housing need created by this project, including economic and social impacts that are a direct result of the construction of the project with inadequate housing for the jobs created.
- c. Evaluate whether this project will aggravate the jobs-housing balance in Santa Rosa.

We would request the City and SMART consider an Alternative Design for this property based on its development for high-density residential and commercial uses, containing at least 150 units of housing, at least 25% of which would be affordable to very low and low income households.

This and other sites along the railroad in the core area of Santa Rosa are known to have extensive toxic contamination. In formulating its proposed wine and food center, the City has not given adequate consideration to the risks and dangers from these toxics to workers involved in construction activities at the proposed center; to persons employed in the proposed center, to visitors and students in the center; to the surrounding neighborhoods; and to consumers and the public in general. We would request that the City and SMART evaluate and address the potential environmental impacts, and particularly the public health issues related to the widespread

contamination of these sites. Liability issues obviously should also be carefully weighed in determining the sites future use.

The development of brownfields – particularly railroad property – for mixed residential and commercial uses has been done with great success by other cities in recent years, most notably Portland, Seattle and San Francisco in the Mission Bay area. These cities have shown how sites like the SMART property can be remediated and developed for housing in ways that contribute to the health, welfare, and economic vitality of the entire community.

In closing, we urge the City to withdraw its misguided proposal to develop the Railroad Square property primarily for a tourist-oriented wine and food center. It is environmentally risky and unsound. It is egregiously inconsistent with the City's development policies set out in its General Plan. It will cause serious harm to efforts to revitalize the core of Santa Rosa with new housing and new businesses, and will harm long term efforts to develop a light rail transportation system along the 101 corridor. Should the City not withdraw its proposal, we urge the SMART Board to reject it.

If we can provide any additional information, or answer any questions, please feel free to contact us.

Yours truly,

Stephen Harper, Chair
David Grabill, General Counsel
Sonoma County Housing Advocacy Group

cc: Dr. Robert F. Agrella, President, Santa Rosa Junior College (fax 524-1722)
Steve Burke, Director, Director, Department of Housing and Redevelopment (fax 543 3317)
Wayne Goldberg, Director of Community Development (fax 542 3218)
Lillian Hames, SMART Project Director