

Central SoMa Open House

Meeting Summary

March 25, 2015

Welcome to the Central SoMa Open House. This packet contains a summary of the policies that will be presented this evening. It is intended to complement the poster boards that will be on display.

The topics included in this packet include:

- Preserving Existing Buildings
- Design Controls for New Buildings – Bulk
- Design Controls for New Buildings – Ground Floors
- Environmental Sustainability

For more information on these policies, go to the “Plan Refinement” section of the Central SoMa website (<http://centralsoma.sfplanning.org>).

Preserving Existing Buildings

Vision

The vision of the Central SoMa Plan is to retain and protect significant historic resources as well as maintain the rich diversity and character of the built environment.

Background

The proposed implementation strategies of the Central SoMa Plan are based on best practices already in place in San Francisco informed by extensive documentation of the history of Central SoMa through such efforts as:

- The Downtown Plan (adopted in 1985),
- The SoMa Historic Context Statement and South of Market Historic Resources Survey (adopted in 2010);
- The Transit Center Historic Context Statement and Transit Center Survey (adopted in 2008), and the
- Central SoMa Historic Context Statement and Central SoMa Historic Resources Survey (expected to be adopted in Spring of 2015).

All of this documentation is available on the Planning Department's webpage.

Proposed Implementation Strategy

To implement the vision of retaining and protecting significant historic resources as well as maintaining the rich diversity and character of the built environment, the Planning Department is proposing to adopt the following strategies:

- Designating buildings at the local level for the preservation of significant historic resources:
 - To prevent demolition or insensitive alterations of the significant historic and cultural resources, the City will “designate” significant buildings through use of Article 10 of the Planning Code (see map provided at the open house and/or on our website)
 - To prevent demolition or insensitive alterations of significant architectural resources, the City will “designate” significant buildings through use of Article 11 of the Planning Code, including to buildings within the existing downtown (“C-3” Districts) and expanding this strategy into Central SoMa (see map provided at the open house and/or on our website)
 - A newly identified California-Register eligible district, the Mint-Mission District, will be proposed for inclusion in Article 11 of the Planning Code at a Conservation District to protect the architectural character of buildings adjacent and in proximity to the Old Mint.
- Supporting the economic viability of historic buildings by incentivizing their preservation and adaptive reuse by:

- Expanding the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program into the parts of Central SoMa that are not already zoned as downtown “C-3”;
- Continuing to make them easier to tenant by providing a number of special exemptions from the Planning Code and enabling them to use the California Historic Building Code; and
- Continuing to encourage the use of tax break programs for existing buildings, such as the Mills Act, federal tax credits, and façade easements.
- Creating incentives to maintain existing buildings that contribute to the overall visual character of the area by
 - Prohibiting consolidation of parcels outside the downtown (C-3 Districts) that:
 - Contain one or more historic buildings or neighborhood character-enhancing building and
 - Have a frontage that could potentially be merged that is less than 200 feet along a public right-of-way (see map provided at the open house and/or on our website); and
 - Encouraging retention of existing building characteristics by allowing developments that preserve existing buildings to count the square footage maintained against the development’s Transferable Development Right (TDR) requirement.

Design Controls for New Buildings – Bulk

Vision

The vision of the Central SoMa Plan is to support substantial density while maintaining significant light, air, and sun access to the streets.

Background

Bulk is the concept of the horizontal dimensions of a building (as opposed to height, which measures its vertical dimensions). In the Central SoMa Plan Area, the City already uses many ways to control the bulk of buildings, including:

- Bulk controls that apply to all buildings. These include requiring room for residential units to receive light and air, and requiring rear yards).
- Bulk controls that apply to long buildings, including requiring mass reduction on longer buildings, and requiring that some buildings to be broken into smaller pieces to support the creation of new alleys.
- Bulk controls that apply to narrow streets and alleys. SoMa’s alleys are typically 35-feet wide. On such alleys there are existing setback requirements at approximately 35-45 feet, and these are the most stringent on the south side of “east-west” alleys. These controls are effective but may preclude alternative designs that allow the same amount of light and air to the street but are architecturally superior. Additionally, the stringent controls are not in place on the south side of “north-south” alleys – which, due to the tilt of SoMa’s street grid, are nearly the same angle (47 degrees) as the “east-west” alleys (43 degrees)
- Bulk controls that apply above a certain height. In many districts, there are bulk limits that set maximum building lengths and diagonals and floor size limitations that kick in above a certain height (which varies by height district). Typically, these apply in areas that are zoned for over 85 feet in height. These controls do not take into account which side of a street that buildings are on.

Proposed Implementation Strategy

To implement the vision of supporting substantial density while maintaining significant light, air, and sun access to the streets, the Planning Department is proposing to adopt the following strategies:

- Maintain existing controls in the downtown “C-3” portion of the Plan Area, which is already subject to strict bulk controls appropriate for that area.
- For mid-rise development (i.e., buildings between 85 to 160 feet), buildings will be required to:
 - Create a “streetwall” by requiring buildings to have a 15 foot setback along every property line starting at 85 feet in height.

- Substantially reduce what is visible from the street. Individual buildings will have architectural flexibility on how to achieve this goal, as long as they meet targets set by the City.
- For high-rise development (i.e., buildings over 160 feet), buildings will be required to:
 - Create a “streetwall” by requiring buildings to have a 15 foot setback along every property line starting at 85 feet in height.
 - Ensure thinner towers than in downtown. The maximum floor size will be 15,000 square feet for office uses, and residential and hotel uses could not exceed 12,000 square feet. The maximum length of any side of a tower will be 150 feet.
 - Keep towers separated. Towers could not be any closer than 115 feet (the width of street plus required setbacks) unless they had substantially smaller floor sizes.
- Along alleys and small Streets the Plan proposes to:
 - Ensure sun access to the north side of the street by requiring development on the south side to step back at a 45 degree angle from the street (in keeping with current Planning Code requirements). This requirement will be extended to the south side of “north-south” alleys in addition to “east-west” alleys.
 - Ensure light and air to the south side of the street by requiring that development on the north side of small streets and alleys buildings to substantially reduce what is visible from the street. Individual buildings will have architectural flexibility on how to achieve this goal, as long as they meet targets set by the City.

Design Controls for New Buildings – Ground Floors

Vision

The vision of the Central SoMa Plan is to provide a safe, accessible, and attractive walking environment for all streets of the Plan Area by requiring that the ground floor of new buildings successfully engage with the street and outside world.

Background

From an urban design perspective, the most important part of a building is the ground floor where it intersects with the street. Most people never actually go inside or experience the vast majority of the buildings they encounter. But in walking our city streets every day, they constantly judge (often subconsciously) how the ground floors of buildings shape their experience.

In the past, the City did not regulate the design of ground floors. In many cases, this led to buildings that ignored any association with the street, creating the kinds of undesirable conditions that people on foot tend to avoid, such as blank facades or parking entrances that cross busy sidewalks. In recent years, the City has enacted numerous regulations to improve the interaction between the ground floor of buildings and their surrounding areas, leading to safer and more active streets. These regulations include that:

- All buildings must be lined with active uses on the ground floor,
- Uses like parking cannot be placed along the street, and back-of-house functions like utilities are encouraged to go underground or off the street,
- Any residential uses at the ground level must be primarily accessible from the sidewalk (such as walk-up units),
- Parking and loading entrances must be narrow and, wherever possible, consolidated,
- Parking and loading entrances should be placed to minimize conflict with pedestrians, transit and bicycle routes – such as less-traveled alleys,
- Non-residential spaces should maximize visibility with transparent windows and doorways, and
- Ground floor spaces should be at least 14 feet high to create gracious and inviting retail spaces.

The result of these proposals is that recently constructed buildings tend to have a net positive benefit on street life, increasing both the safety and dynamism of the pedestrian environment. However, there are still instances in which the requirement for “active” uses does not translate into a successful pedestrian experience. The most obvious example is new office development, which is considered an “active” use, but whose limited engagement with the street can create a very poor pedestrian environment.

Proposed Implementation Strategy

To implement the vision of providing a safe, accessible, and attractive walking environment for all streets of the Plan Area, the Planning Department is proposing to adopt all of the following strategies (in addition to the already required, listed above):

- Office uses (except for lobbies) will not be permitted at the street level.
- The requirement for active commercial and/or community-serving uses shall be extended on 4th Street from Bryant north to Folsom Street, and from Folsom Street west to 6th Street.
- The new privately-owned public open spaces (POPOS) required by the Plan will need to be lined with active commercial and/or community serving uses.
- Commercial buildings will be required to have at least 0.5 FAR (that is, a space equivalent to half of their lot size) of on-site light industrial, arts, and/or community facilities.
- The ban on new curb cuts to access off-street parking shall be extended to cover all of Folsom, Brannan, Townsend, Second, 3rd, 4th, and 6th Streets within the Plan Area (as well as the south side of Howard Street if it continues to be a one-way street). Additionally, a Conditional Use Permit would be required for new curb cuts along Harrison, Bryant, and Fifth Streets, as well as Howard if it becomes a two-way Street.
- Sidewalks will be widened throughout the plan area, signalized mid-block crossings will be added along most major streets, new alleys will be created through large development sites, and a substantial amount of open space will be added.

Cumulatively, all of these improvements will greatly enhance the experience for people walking throughout the Central SoMa Plan Area.

Environmental Sustainability

Vision

The vision of the Central SoMa Plan is for Central SoMa to become the first “regenerative neighborhood” in San Francisco – a place where urban development returns more to the environment than it takes.

Background

Community Engagement, Research, and Analysis Specific to Central SoMa

To help create a neighborhood-specific environmental sustainability strategy for Central SoMa, there have been a number of recent and ongoing efforts. Foremost was the work of the Central SoMa Eco-District Taskforce, comprised of approximately 30 members representing a diversity of neighborhood groups, utility providers, developers and property managers, design and construction professionals, city agencies and staff. Throughout 2013, the Taskforce engaged for a series of meetings, tours and brainstorming sessions on how best to create an “Eco-District” in the Central SoMa Plan Area. The Taskforce developed a series of recommendations and potential implementation strategies that have formed the basis for much of the Planning Department’s subsequent work on environmental sustainability. The Taskforce’s Recommendation Report can be found on the Central SoMa website.

Existing and Projected Conditions

Central SoMa’s current environmental performance is typical of a dense urban area. Per capital emissions of greenhouse gas (GHG) are lower than elsewhere, because there are fewer auto trips and because large buildings tend to use less energy and water per square foot than smaller ones. However, there is much room for improvement, as existing energy use is mostly from non-renewable resources, existing buildings tend to be energy and water inefficient, and there is very little vegetation and habitat. Increased neighborhood density is expected to increase demands for energy and water, and will produce additional waste.

In addition, the predicted impacts of climate change will seriously challenge the area. Central SoMa has many low-lying areas (particularly in the southwest part of the Plan Area) that may be prone to flooding from sea level rise and the increased frequency of extreme storms. As global temperatures rise, the entire neighborhood is expected to see more frequent extreme heat events. The statewide drought and population growth will strain our water supply even further.

Existing Goals and Strategies

San Francisco is a national and international leader in environmental policy and regulation, setting bold citywide sustainability targets and implementing regulations.

For greenhouse gases, the City has established targets to reduce emissions substantially below 1990 levels, including 20% by 2012 (which has been achieved and surpassed), 25% by 2017, 40% by 2025 and 80% by 2050. To help meet these targets, the City has implemented a suite of strategies requiring more efficient use of energy in existing and new buildings, greater use of renewable resources for new buildings, and travel demand management strategies to shift trips from automobiles to walking, biking, and transit.

For water, the State has established a goal of 20% reduction in per capita water use by 2020. San Francisco's has already achieved this target, through requirements and incentives for water efficiency systems in new buildings, water-efficient landscaping, and on-site storm water capture and recycling.

For solid waste, the City of San Francisco has made great progress in diverting waste from landfills. Through its recycling and composting programs, San Francisco successfully achieved the state-mandated 50% landfill diversion by 2000 and the locally-mandated 75% landfill diversion by 2010. The City has set a zero waste target by 2020. The City hopes to meet this ambitious goal by requiring residents to separate their refuse into recyclable, compostable and trash.

In terms of habitat and wildlife, the City has very limited targets and programs, and most of which have been established in the last couple of years. New programs include strategies to increase street trees citywide, creating "green connections" that link habitat between neighborhoods, and requiring that new buildings be designed to minimize bird collisions.

Proposed Implementation Strategy

To implement the vision of a neighborhood that is truly "regenerative" will require implementing existing requirements in new developments, which alone would greatly enhance Central SoMa's environmental performance. The Plan also proposes to implement higher sustainability targets in key areas. In some instances (such as water conservation and habitat creation), these are reasonable targets given the known and projected conditions in Central SoMa. In other cases (such as reduction of carbon emissions and local generation of power), these targets may be aspirational given the challenges of implementing policies in a dense urban environment and/or regulations at the state and federal level. However, the City hopes that this vision can serve as a motivating factor for innovation and positive change.

Carbon Neutrality

The Central SoMa Plan aspires to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Meeting this goal will require removal of carbon from the atmosphere by creating projects within and outside the district to offset Central SoMa's carbon emissions, such as renewable or district energy projects, tree planting, and carbon offset programs. It may also require implementation of as-yet developed technologies.

Meeting this goal will also require a proactive shift in the types of energy consumed by the district. The Central SoMa Plan therefore proposes a target that 100% of the energy consumed by buildings be generated from renewable resources by 2030. This goal can be met through a combination on-site renewable generation and procurement of energy from renewable GHG-free sources. To help ensure this goal is met, and to help provide local resiliency against disaster, the Plan also proposes that 50% of this renewable energy demand be generated within the Plan Area, through rooftop solar or other means. The Department recognizes that meeting these goals will likely require the creation and widespread adoption of new technologies in the larger marketplace (such as electric vehicles). If such technologies become available sooner, the timeframe for reaching carbon neutrality should be moved up.

To achieve the Plan's energy and climate goals, the Planning Department envisions developing a "Central SoMa Energy Plan" that identifies a clear path for implementation, developed in consultation with other City agencies and the private sector. The Energy Plan would include comprehensive strategies to make existing buildings more energy efficient, build green energy infrastructure in the neighborhood, and enable sharing of energy between buildings.

More Intelligent Use of Water

The Central SoMa Plan is currently working with the SF Public Utilities Commission to explore aspirational water targets in the area, including reducing potable water use in existing and new buildings through efficiency and re-use, and exploring the potential feasibility of creating a low- to zero- wastewater district.

Implementing water goals will require both the public and private sector to adopt water efficiency technologies and systems, which are already in place in many San Francisco buildings. These technologies will become even more imperative if projected water shortages lead to increased prices.

The Planning Department envisions developing a "Central SoMa Water Plan" that identifies a clear path for implementing greater water efficiency and recycling goals, developed in consultation with other City agencies and the private sector. The Water Plan would include comprehensive strategies to make existing buildings more water efficient, to diversify the water supply, and to explore the possibility of a low- to zero-wastewater district.

Habitat Creation & Ecosystem Function

Over the last century, the urbanization of SoMa has resulted in the virtual disappearance of the area's indigenous ecosystems and habitat. While it's not practical to reconstruct the area's original habitat, the Central SoMa Plan envisions a neighborhood where locally-appropriate flora and fauna thrive in abundance. To create such an environment, the Plan proposes the following targets and accompanying implementation strategies:

- Double Central SoMa's tree canopy by 2025. Implementing this target will be achieved through the Planning Code's existing street tree requirements and additional public and private investment in trees in open spaces.
- Double Central SoMa's overall vegetated area by 2025. Implementing this strategy will require additional habitat along sidewalks and in open spaces, and landscaping on the roofs of new and existing buildings.
- Double Central SoMa' permeable surfaces by 2025. This target could be met through the same greening strategies discussed above, as well as the increased use of permeable paving surfaces.

All of these strategies should also increase the quality of Central SoMa habitats through requirements that open spaces, streets, and roofs be landscaped with locally-appropriate plant species.

To achieve the Plan's habitat goals, the Planning Department envisions developing a "Central SoMa Habitat Plan" that identifies a clear path for implementation. This Habitat Plan would be developed in consultation with other City agencies and the private sector. The Habitat Plan would include comprehensive strategies to integrate the built and natural environment in Central SoMa, including strategies to create wildlife habitat, conserve water, reduce urban heat island impacts, and connect residents to local nature to engender a deeper sense of ecoliteracy and stewardship.

Sustainable Implementation

For most aspects of the Central SoMa Plan, there is a known path to implementation. For example, buildings proposed under newly adopted zoning controls will be reviewed and entitled through existing processes and regulations. By contrast, the sustainability targets in the plan are unprecedented, and so the plan calls for the formation of an "eco-district," an entity that will have dedicated funding and staff tasked with ensuring the plan meets environmental goals. Its responsibilities will likely include the ongoing coordination between multiple public and private entities, and development of new policies, regulations, and technologies that will make it possible to reach the Plan's targets. As discussed above, the City is currently researching the best way to create, fund, and organize such an implementation entity.