DEMONSTRATES EXCELLENCE IN COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Smart Visioning: Realizing the Potential of South Downtown Tacoma

The Tacoma South Downtown Subarea Plan embodies the essence of smart visioning and innovative planning for smart growth. The Plan establishes an area-wide long-range plan for South Downtown Tacoma, along with a pre-development environmental impact statement (EIS) that addresses environmental and community issues while reducing developer uncertainty. The intent of the Plan is to provide a coordinated, action-based framework that promotes three primary goals:

- Create an equitable, walkable, transit-rich urban center in South Downtown
- Leverage the significant existing transit investments
- Accommodate significant population and employment growth to support regional sustainable development

Through this Subarea Plan and EIS, Tacoma became the first municipality in the State to implement “transit infill review,” a form of up-front SEPA that is intended to expedite transit-oriented development. Transit infill review was adopted in 2009 State legislation (RCW 43.21C.420).

The Planning Context

The City of Tacoma (pop. ~200,000) is the second-largest city in the Puget Sound region and the most important business center in the South Sound region. The Port of Tacoma is Washington State’s largest port, and SeaTac international airport is just a 25 minute drive north of the City. Downtown Tacoma is blessed with a broad range of assets to support sustainable urban growth, including world-class cultural and educational institutions, robust transit infrastructure and a spectacular natural setting. However, as in many other U.S. cities, Tacoma’s downtown went into decline during the mid-20th Century due to the decline of industrial businesses and increased suburbanization, resulting in stymied economic development.

Today in South Downtown, the relatively low density of people and jobs results in a drastic underutilization of the area’s infrastructure assets, most importantly the major transit investments that comprise the South Sound’s largest transit hub. From the regional perspective, if the business-as-usual scenario of limited growth in South Downtown continues, it will result in increased development pressure on farms and forests on the urban fringe, stimulating sprawling land use patterns known to have a host of negative environmental impacts. By focusing on economic development, the Plan is designed to support both local community goals, as well as regional sustainability goals. Key planning strategies include:

- Exploring the upper limits of population and job growth to maximize future potential
- Focusing analysis on the positive social and environmental benefits of development
- Coordinating City actions and investments to best leverage opportunities for private investment
- Reducing developer risk by establishing preapproval for State environmental review
- Taking an area-wide approach to address multiple problems at the same time, increasing value throughout downtown
- Recognizing how Tacoma’s ambitions align with and reinforce regional planning efforts

The South Downtown Subarea Plan is the first of three planning efforts the City is conducting for the Subareas that make up its Downtown Regional Growth Center as designated by the Puget Sound Regional Council. The South Downtown planning work has served as a model, and all three Plans will be coordinated to provide a comprehensive, unified roadmap for sustainable growth in downtown Tacoma. By mid-2014, Subarea Plans and EIS’s will have been adopted for all three Subareas. With this planning in place, the City of Tacoma will be poised to realize its vision of a future for downtown in which well-planned, ambitious redevelopment will deliver a broad range of social and environmental benefits at both the local and regional levels.
Community Planning Process

The Tacoma South Downtown Subarea Planning process took place over approximately two years, from December 2011 to December 2013, and represents the integration of input from a broad range of stakeholders and other interested parties:

- A *Monthly Steering Committee*, consisting of highly engaged South Downtown property and business owners, agency representatives, and community leaders provided valuable input and feedback for the Subarea Plan and EIS.

- A *Quarterly Working Group*, appointed by the City Council to provide a broader perspective, supplemented the Steering Committee. Working group members included representatives from City Utilities, Metro Parks, the Cross Cultural Collaborative, the Puyallup Tribe and Sound Transit.

- A *Subarea Plan Community Meeting* was held to outline the parameters of the project, discuss the increased density and alternatives, and describe the interrelated EIS process. The meeting gave the public an opportunity to engage, learn, and ask questions.

- An *EIS Scoping Meeting* provided an opportunity for agencies, organizations and the public to better understand the scope of the proposed Subarea Plan and to present testimony regarding alternatives and environmental issues to be evaluated in the EIS.

- Thirty people were asked to participate in 75-minute *stakeholder interview sessions* to share their concerns, hopes, issues and visions for the South Downtown Subarea.

- A 47-question *public opinion survey*, created to capture the opinions of members of the public interested in the South Downtown Subarea Plan & EIS Project and made available on the City of Tacoma’s website, garnered 95 responses.

**EIS Notice Provision and Community Outreach**

Creating the Subarea Plan in conjunction with a Transit Infill Review EIS provided the opportunity for broadened public outreach. Per the 2009 State Environmental Policy Act, Transit Infill Review requires extensive mailed notice and up-front public participation provisions. Outreach efforts included providing project updates and overviews of the Plan and EIS to neighborhood councils, interested parties, monthly meetings with the Steering Committee, quarterly meetings with a Council-resolution-formed Working Group, periodic stakeholder meetings, and business group outreach. Participants were encouraged to voice concerns, provide suggestions, and discuss issues throughout the entire process.

**Strategic Synthesis of Broad Public Participation**

Although completed within the 2010-2012 timeframe, the South Downtown Subarea Plan draws from broad public participation in many related efforts over a longer period of time. This project is strategically framed to build upon the work presented in the following plans, studies, and reports:

- PSRC’s VISION 2040, 2008
- PSRC’s Transportation 2040, 2010
- Tacoma Comprehensive Plan
- Tacoma Municipal Code
- Tacoma Climate Action Plan, 2008
- Tacoma Mobility Master Plan, 2010
- Tacoma Pedestrian and Bicycle Design Guidelines, 2010
- Tacoma Complete Street Design Guidelines - Mixed-Use Centers, 2009 and Residential Streets, 2009
- Identifying Redevelopable Lands, Application of a Land Value Potential (LVP) approach in Urban Centers, Pierce County, 2009
- Tacoma Affordable Housing Policy Advisory Group Report, 2010
- Metro Parks Tacoma Strategic Parks & Program Services Plan, 2006
- Tacoma Link Expansion Stakeholder Group Final Report, 2011
- ULI Technical Assistance Panel Recommendations, 2011
- FY2013 Brownfields Assessment Coalition Grant Application - 2012
- Tacoma Dome District Development Strategy - 2008
- Tacoma Dome Area Plan Update - 2001
- Tacoma Dome Area Plan - 1995
- Tacoma Dome Transit Station Trail Linkage Study - 2009
- Brewery District Development Concept Study - 2010
- Thea Foss Waterway Design and Development Plan - 2006
- Tideflats Area Transportation Study - 2011
- Thea Foss Waterway Development Alternatives Plan EIS - 1995
- University of Washington Tacoma Campus Master Plan Update - 2008
- Foss Waterway Master Redevelopment Strategy - 2011 Update
The State of Washington’s Growth Management Act (GMA) requires municipalities to plan for accommodating growth, and grants counties, in consultation with cities, the authority to assign growth allocations for population and employment. Within Tacoma, GMA goals are best served by maximizing accommodation of the growth allocations within the downtown core, where there is plentiful development capacity, a concentration of employment, and significant infrastructure, including a regional transit hub. Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) has designated downtown Tacoma as a Regional Growth Center, defined as an area in which “housing, employment, shopping and other activities are in close proximity,” and at which population and job growth should be focused.

Planning for Maximum Growth in South Downtown

The primary goal of the Subarea Plan is to encourage and guide redevelopment that will accommodate significant population and employment growth in South Downtown. A key component of the integrated Subarea Plan and EIS is an assessment of the maximum potential for accommodating growth in South Downtown. Planning for growth scenarios that include these upper limits maximizes the potential of South Downtown Tacoma to contribute to the realization of a sustainable region in accordance with GMA goals.

Growth metrics for proposed buildout scenarios in South Downtown were based on the 2030 growth allocations for population and employment established by PSRC and Pierce County for the City of Tacoma, in accordance with the GMA. The 2030 allocations for the City are 78,600 new residents (39% increase over 2008), and 64,200 new jobs (57% increase over 2008). The City has proposed that 60 percent of the residential population growth, and 70 percent of the employment growth, will occur in the Downtown Tacoma Regional Growth Center. In turn, half of that growth has been assigned to South Downtown, yielding an allocation of 23,580 people and 22,470 jobs.

The EIS growth alternatives that inform the Subarea Plan were chosen to test levels of growth that exceed previous expectations, and reflect the kind of dense urban center that South Downtown could ultimately become given its robust infrastructure and wealth of urban assets. The maximum buildout target is 30 million square feet of new development, corresponding to 30,000 new residents and 40,000 new jobs, which exceeds the PSRC allocations.

The Subarea Planning process led to a re-examination of growth allocations for downtown, as well as for Tacoma’s other Regional growth center and its designated mixed-use centers.

Regional Transit Priority

Funded through a Federal Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, the Subarea Plan is grounded in the GMA and regional sustainable development goals to contain sprawl and to focus growth in targeted urban centers. The EIS analysis that informs the Subarea Plan includes regional travel demand modeling of redevelopment that predicts a reduction in per capita vehicle-miles traveled and a significant mode-shift away from single-occupant vehicles. The Subarea Plan and EIS also emphasize other regional benefits of development in South Downtown, such as cleaner air, reduction of polluted stormwater runoff, and preservation of farms and forests.

The South Downtown Subarea Plan and EIS were completed as one of three demonstration projects for the PSRC Growing Transit Communities (GTC) Partnership. The goals and recommended actions of the Subarea Plan strongly support the GTC Partnership’s main goals of attracting more of the region’s residential and employment growth near high-capacity transit, providing housing choices affordable to a full range of incomes near high-capacity transit, and increasing access to opportunity for existing and future community members in transit communities.
SERVES AS AN INNOVATIVE PLANNING MODEL FOR OTHER COMMUNITIES

The South Downtown Subarea Plan represents an efficient and integrative approach to comprehensive planning. The Subarea Plan presents a concise, targeted set of smart growth strategies that are action-based and catalyst-driven.

**Integrated Plan and EIS**

The integration of the Subarea Plan with the Non-project EIS can serve as a model to other communities desiring to achieve better alignment between comprehensive planning objectives and goals for targeted growth. The non-project EIS eliminates the need for subsequent environmental review associated with project-specific development proposals that comply with the Subarea Plan’s development regulations.

**Vertical Alignment**

The objectives and policies of the Tacoma South Downtown Subarea Plan are well aligned with, and strongly supported by, an abundance of existing plans policies at the Federal, State, regional, and local levels. These plans and policies have been put in place to foster precisely the kind of outcome that is sought by the South Downtown Subarea Plan: a vibrant, walkable, mixed-use community that provides a robust range of housing, transportation, employment, and recreation choices. The Subarea plan also works specifically to provide a case-based review and improved interagency understanding of smart growth measures.

**Catalyst-driven**

The launching of catalyst development projects is one of most important and immediate objectives of the Subarea Plan. Because the risk assumed by the first new development project in an unproven market area is typically relatively high, the successful launching of a catalyst project calls for targeted strategies that reduce developer risk. The Subarea Plan presents a planned action toolkit for catalyzing economic development, including strategies for promoting catalyst projects and identification of the most promising catalyst sites within the South Downtown Subarea.

**Targeted Public Investment**

In order to support catalytic development, the Subarea Plan seeks to accelerate private investment in downtown through a series of coordinated public improvement actions, such as necessary utility improvements, open space planning, and priority transportation investments. The Subarea Plan identifies specific areas in which development is likely to occur if strategic public investments were made to catalyze change. By proactively anticipating and providing the key elements needed for future development, the plan seeks to lay the groundwork for achieving its vision for growth and investment targeted in South Downtown.
Working Washington, Working Tacoma

The concept of the Subarea Plan is in complete alignment with the objectives of the Working Washington Agenda, in particular goals of spurring job growth through a multi-faceted approach of expanding educational opportunity, and making climate-friendly transportation investments.

Setting the Table for Development

The primary goal of the South Downtown Subarea Plan & EIS is to promote economic development in order to realize the Vision for South Downtown Tacoma as a thriving, equitable urban center that offers a rich spectrum of opportunities to live, work, learn, and play.

Historically, lack of economic development has been the chief impediment to sustainable growth as well as the most significant root cause of adverse impacts to the community and the environment in South Downtown Tacoma. The Subarea Plan is motivated by the belief that innovative interventions will help South Downtown to achieve its tremendous potential for job creation through economic development. The City of Tacoma envisions a future for South Downtown Tacoma in which well-planned, ambitious redevelopment will deliver a broad range of equitable social and environmental benefits at both the local and regional scales, creating and sustaining a thriving economic climate for downtown Tacoma.

Promoting Economic Development Through Up-front SEPA1 Review

The critical ingredient that planning can help deliver to stimulate economic development is the creation of local conditions that attract private investment. Risk is a critical factor in private development, and a central strategy of this planning effort is an area-wide environmental review, known as “upfront SEPA,” or a “non-project EIS.”

The non-project EIS analyzes cumulative environmental impact and mitigation analysis for the entire Subarea, rather than piecepiecianalysis on a project-by-project basis, eliminating the need for subsequent environmental review associated with project-specific development proposals that comply with the Subarea Plan’s development regulations. As such, the non-project EIS provides developer certainty and predictability, thereby streamlining the environmental review process and furthering the goals of SEPA and the GMA.

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1 SEPA is the State Environmental Policy Act (Chapter 43.21C RCW). Regulations that implement SEPA are called the SEPA Rules (Chapter 197-11 WAC).

Catalyst opportunities in Downtown Tacoma’s Dome District

Phased Mitigation to Promote Redevelopment

The approach to mitigation in the Subarea Plan & EIS is grounded in the premise that redevelopment will maximize net benefits for the greater community. Thus the goal was to establish policies and regulations that provide sound mitigation but that do not create encumbrances that could jeopardize the viability of redevelopment. In many cases, adequate mitigation is already provided by existing policies and regulations at the federal, regional, County and City levels that are designed to support and encourage smart growth. For example, Tacoma’s new Mobility Master Plan codifies the City’s intention to provide pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure that will help mitigate the impact of car traffic on road networks.

Partnership with University of Washington-Tacoma

The South Downtown Subarea Plan was funded in part by a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, which supports locally-led collaborative efforts to determine how best to target housing, economic and workforce development, and infrastructure investments to create more jobs and regional economic activity. The City of Tacoma worked in partnership with the University of Washington - Tacoma (UW-T) to address these goals through the preparation and implementation of the South Downtown Subarea Plan and Non-project EIS.

Recognizing the catalytic power embodied by the UW-T, the Subarea Plan specifically supports the institution’s continued growth and development of the campus by identifying opportunities for partnership in the provision of housing and services.