

Downtown Oxnard Action Priorities



June 20, 2018



COMMUNITY PLANNING ASSISTANCE TEAM
AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION, CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

THE CPAT PROGRAM OF THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

The California Chapter of the American Planning Association (APA) created the Community Planning Assistance Team (CPAT) program in 2016 to provide pro bono planning assistance to financially constrained municipalities and community groups in California and Baja California. The program was initiated by the Planners Emeritus Network (PEN), an affiliate of the California Chapter, which recognizes experienced planners who have made significant contributions to the profession and to the communities they serve.

The CPAT program pairs expert planning professionals from throughout California with residents and other stakeholders from communities with limited resources to solve specific planning problems. It is an intensive one to four day effort. The volunteer professional planners receive no compensation, but the community is expected to cover direct costs for transportation, meals, and any required overnight accommodations.

The California CPAT program is modeled after the nation-wide Community Planning Assistance Team program sponsored by the national American Planning Association. That program was created in 1995, and has since assisted 30 communities. Four other state chapters of APA, in addition to California, have created CPAT programs for their state.

Municipalities or community groups may file applications for California's CPAT program through the California Chapter website: www.apacalifornia.org/ (click professional development/CPAT). APA California is eager to empower communities with limited resources to solve pressing planning problems and to gain the confidence necessary to develop and achieve a positive vision for their future.

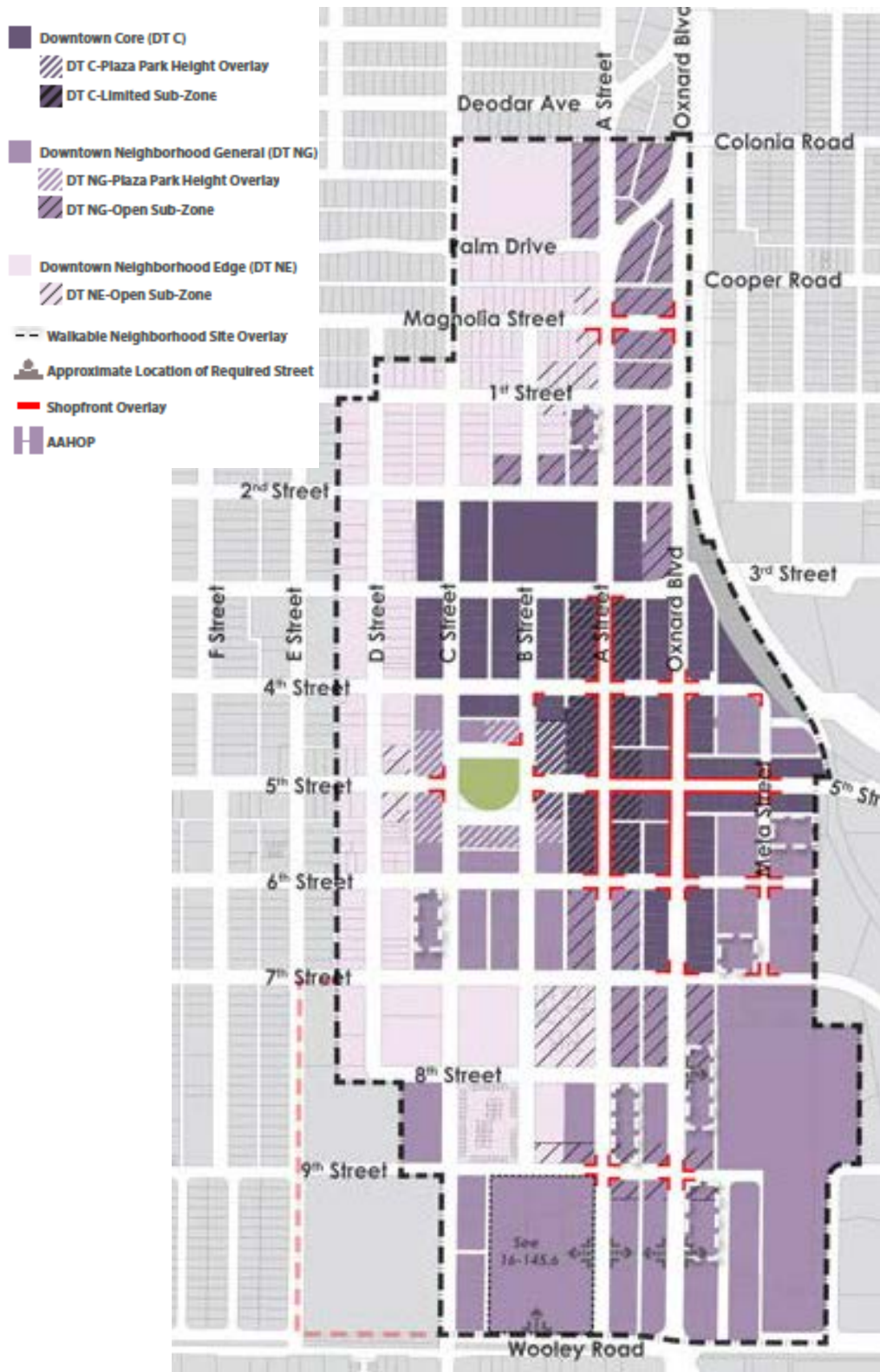
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FIGURE 1
DOWNTOWN REGULATING PLAN



Source: Sargent Town Planning, *Oxnard Downtown Zones & Design Guidelines*, April 6, 2018, p.13.

INTRODUCTION

Downtown Oxnard is currently experiencing underutilization by the City's residents and lack of strong real estate investment. This is not due to the lack of planning efforts, as the City of Oxnard has conducted numerous planning studies targeting the revitalization of its Downtown. For example, the Downtown Vision Plan created in October 2016 included a number of concepts and implementation actions. While this plan was never officially adopted by the City Council, it has served as a de facto framework for subsequent planning efforts.

The City is currently seeking to implement several aspects of these earlier concepts in an effort to spur economic growth in the area, but is in need of focusing these efforts due to the wide-ranging nature of the plans and strategies that have been put forward to date. Many proposed initiatives appear promising, including ways to facilitate the development of market rate housing, streamlining of zoning processes, and the development of a modern zoning code and urban design plan, but the City seeks assistance with the specification of implementation priorities.

The implementation priorities are intended to guide the actions to be taken by the City in order to maximize the effectiveness of limited resources it currently has at hand, with an eye toward developing more stable ongoing resources. The CPAT Team was asked by the City of Oxnard to provide assistance with this prioritization, as well as for any additional recommendations that would serve to spur the revitalization of the downtown area.

THE PROCESS

Upon accepting the City of Oxnard's application for assistance, the CPAT members planned a series of meetings and workshops over one day on April 9th, 2018, where the team met with key City planning and economic development staff, as well as prominent downtown community members, in order to learn which issues the various stakeholder groups considered to be the most important. Prior to the meeting, the CPAT members reviewed several relevant documents provided by City staff, and also conducted basic research into the demographic trends within the City of Oxnard and Ventura County in preparation for the workshop.

The one-day activities included:

- An introductory meeting and field tour with Claudia Pedroso, Downtown Revitalization Manager, and other City staff
- A discussion of downtown's ongoing planning efforts focusing on lessons learned with City staff and their urban design consultant, David Sargent, Sargent Town Planning
- A working lunch with City staff
- A meeting with Downtown Oxnard Improvement District Members, including Executive Board member Abel Magana, and Roy Prince, Downtown Design Review Committee (DDRC) and the Oxnard Renaissance Newsletter Editor

- A meeting with Roger Poirier, Oxnard Community Planning Group, and Gary Blum, Downtown Oxnard Merchants Association (DOMA)
- A CPAT working session to develop preliminary findings and recommendations
- A wrap-up working dinner with City staff to review preliminary findings and recommendations

The final step in the process was for the CPAT members to prepare a Downtown Recommended Action Priorities report within several weeks for submittal to City staff.

OVERVIEW OF DOWNTOWN PLANNING EFFORTS

As discussed above, there have been numerous planning initiatives targeting downtown Oxnard in recent years, with the Downtown Vision Plan as one of the most comprehensive. The Downtown Vision Plan, which was prepared in 2016 by the Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU) California Chapter, provides a conceptual framework for the revitalization of the downtown area. Although never adopted, it has served as a guiding document leading to recent efforts. The plan is structured around eight “Big Ideas” that emerged from a charrette organized by the CNU that include:

1. Transform Oxnard Boulevard into a public space that serves as a gateway into the downtown area;
2. Reaffirm “A Street” as the main, internal north-south street of the downtown;
3. Enhance bicycle connectivity with Colonia Road;
4. Complete the 1993 master plan for Plaza Park;
5. Promote infill development around Plaza Park;
6. Establish a downtown arts hub;
7. Employ a form-based code for downtown infill development;
8. Develop a downtown parking strategy. The plan also suggests implementation strategies, including innovative funding mechanisms and downtown redevelopment efforts for City owned properties in a post-redevelopment agency environment

In response to the vision plan, City staff proposed a Three-Year Implementation Plan in December 2016, including regulatory retooling, land use and parking management, public reinvestment, business induced programs, an arts hub, and property disposition. In January 2017, City staff proposed a Capital Improvements Plan with 14 key projects identified; subsequently, Development Services requested funding for specific elements of the Three Year Implementation Plan and Capital Improvements Program.

In April 2018, the City also produced the City of Oxnard Downtown Arts Hub Implementation Matrix. The Arts Hub plan is a five-year business plan that includes strategies, phased budget, resource management, goals, impact on the economy and creative partnerships to transform Downtown Oxnard into an arts, cultural and entertainment destination.

One aspect of the Downtown Vision Plan that is in the process of being implemented is the adoption of a form-based code for the downtown area. A draft of new design guidelines and development standards has been prepared by the firm of Sargent Town Planning, and is currently undergoing review by City staff. These guidelines provide direction for the design of buildings, appurtenances and site elements within Downtown Oxnard, and define three urban development types in the area, which are identified as:

- Downtown Core
- Downtown Neighborhood General
- Downtown Neighborhood Edge

The Downtown Core refers to the mixed-use areas along A Street, 5th Street and Oxnard Boulevard and the Civic Center along 3rd Street with active commercial ground floor and/or office uses and housing uses above. The Downtown Neighborhood General designation surrounds the core throughout most of the downtown, and consists primarily of housing in medium to large buildings with smaller retail and service uses at some corners. The Downtown Neighborhood Edge is immediately adjacent to existing neighborhoods, primarily along the western and northern edges that are within small to medium sized buildings.

The City is also in the process of developing a parking management plan for the downtown area. While not yet finalized, salient features of the plan include a parking in-lieu fee for developers, the introduction of more parking meters to regulate prime street parking, and the establishment of a parking management district where parking standards may be modified to encourage private investment, particularly around the Oxnard Transit Center and Plaza Park.

Additional planning efforts include the Oxnard Corridor Community Transportation Improvement Plan (OCCTIP). Although this plan does not focus exclusively on Downtown, it promotes Downtown's connectivity with the surrounding communities, and promotes Downtown Oxnard as a destination with a distinct identity. The plan itself has three main elements, the first of which is a Complete Streets Element. The Complete Streets Element seeks to assure that all transportation modes are viable options for traversing the corridor, including driving, walking, bicycling, and transit ridership. Bicycle lanes, multi-use paths, sidewalks and crosswalks were identified as recommended improvements.

The second element is Conceptual Street Designs and Alignments, which comprises a series of projects that recommend a necessary shift in alignment along selected corridor sections to provide for additional space for full transit use service. The third element is entitled "Options", and presents alternatives to the first two elements that were considered during the development of OCCTIP.

Finally, the recently commissioned Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) High Quality Transit Area (HQTA) grant focuses on the area surrounding the transit center which has minimal housing and general office development, as well as a minimal professional and administrative job base. This grant has the opportunity to facilitate vibrant, transit oriented jobs-housing balance with a needed mix of employment and housing densities and pricing. However, going forward, it will be necessary to ensure coordination and consistency between the SCAG grant and other ongoing downtown initiatives, such as the urban design guidelines being prepared by Sargent Town Planning.

KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

During the review of background materials, as well as during the meetings and workshops, the CPAT members identified several key issues that our recommendations seek to address:

Limited Funding Sources, Both for Immediate Use and Over the Long-Term

- The City has about \$ 4.73 million remaining from the sum it received from the Downtown Settlement Fund, after the dissolution of redevelopment, as the Oversight Board recently approved \$570,000 for the purchase of three (3) successor agency properties. While this at first seems to be a substantial amount, it is clearly insufficient to meet the many competing demands for Downtown revitalization initiatives. The danger is that these limited funds will be doled out to many small improvements, leaving insufficient resources to undertake a major catalytic project.

Unsuccessful Attempts to Develop Key Vacant Parcels of Land

- The parcels owned by the redevelopment successor agency are ideally located; however, to date, the City has had no success in attracting experienced developers to these sites. While there are many factors for lack of success, it appears that the market rents cannot support successful, market rate development without a substantial public subsidy; however, currently the City is in the process of acquiring the properties which will enhance its ability to negotiate with potential developers.

Need for Market Rate Housing

- The majority of housing in or near downtown is not attractive to middle and upper income families. More market rate housing, in addition to affordable housing, needs to be promoted in order to bring in diverse household segments with adequate spending power to support more commercial development, as well as to increase property values in the neighborhood.

Complex and Uncertain Development Approval Processes

- The current development approval process has been described as cumbersome and time consuming. Such a process leads to increased cost and risk for a private developer, making development opportunities in Downtown Oxnard less attractive than development opportunities elsewhere.

Missed Opportunity to Leverage the Existing Multimodal Oxnard Transit Center for Transit-Oriented Development

- The existing transit center presents long-term economic development opportunities for the downtown that need to be realized. Vacant parcels of land and dilapidated buildings now separate the transit center from the heart of Downtown.

Multiple Competing Community Stakeholders

- There is a wide ranging group of community stakeholders, such as property owners, business owners, residents, the Downtown Oxnard Improvement District, the Downtown Design Review Committee, the Oxnard Community Planning Group, and the Downtown Oxnard Merchants Association that need to be better coordinated in order to make revitalization a unified effort. There is also the need for the City to engage in additional outreach with local entrepreneurs and to encourage them to expand existing businesses or to bring start-up enterprises into the downtown area.

Lack of a Positive Identity for Downtown

- Downtown Oxnard has no unique identity or “brand” which sets it apart from the downtowns of adjacent communities and from nearby commercial centers. While the older buildings in Oxnard’s historic core have the potential to add to the neighborhood’s character, many are in need of repairs and upgrades to make them more attractive and seismically safer.

Need to Enhance Plaza Park

- Downtown’s major public amenity, Plaza Park, is becoming increasingly worn and unattractive, thus reducing the opportunity for this major public space to stimulate surrounding private economic development. As the Downtown’s primary open public space, it could also serve as a key feature in promoting the Downtown’s brand; there is also the need to enhance the park’s physical features in order to better integrate it with existing and future downtown development, and to make it a more attractive and accessible destination.

Incomplete Bicycle and Pedestrian Infrastructure

- While the downtown area is very walkable, there is still room for improvement, such as the need to complete the bicycle and pedestrian master plan that connects the downtown to adjacent neighborhoods and promotes alternative modes of non-automobile transportation.

Inadequate Downtown Wayfinding

- Travelers along Oxnard Boulevard can drive right by Downtown without even recognizing its existence. There is inadequate signage and other visual cues to attract drivers to turn off and visit Downtown.

Safety and Homelessness

- It was often noted that the downtown has struggled with criminal activities, especially drug use and vandalism; also, addressing the shelter and service issues for the downtown homeless population is critical whether it includes shelters/services within the downtown or located outside the downtown area.

RECOMMENDED ACTION PRIORITIES

Following are the Community Planning Assistance Team's recommended action priorities to stimulate the revitalization of Downtown Oxnard. The first nine recommendations are deemed of highest priority, critical to the success of the revitalization effort. They include an organizational structure to manage Downtown revitalization, a focus on a major catalytic project to stimulate broader private investment, providing a unique identity for Downtown, implementing urban design guidelines, leveraging the Oxnard Transit Center for adjacent development, proposed funding mechanisms, and incentives for investment in existing and new businesses.

The City departments which play a role in the revitalization of Downtown must work together as a team, led by the Downtown Revitalization Manager under the direction of the City Manager.

- Individual department heads and managers must work as a team when it comes to Downtown revitalization; a necessary combined effort makes their roles larger than just the roles of managing their separate departments. The City of Oxnard has established, as a city-wide priority, the revitalization of its historic Downtown, and has created the position of Downtown Revitalization Manager to lead that effort. The Assistant City Manager should establish a Downtown Revitalization Working Group and appoint the Downtown Revitalization Manager as its chair. Membership should include at least the Economic Development Director, the Planning Director, and the Cultural and Community Services Director; others may be added as appropriate. The Working Group should create goals and priorities for Downtown revitalization, and then diligently and enthusiastically work together as a team to achieve them. Key functions of the team would include preparing an annual Downtown Capital Improvements Program; prioritizing expenditures; coordinating with property owners, business owners, residents, and other stakeholders; and developing and maintaining an active marketing program.

The Downtown Revitalization Working Group should focus on development of one or two catalytic projects on the City-owned sites around Plaza Park (preferably Plaza Park North).

- An immediate success is necessary to build public confidence in Downtown and to demonstrate to the development community that development in the Downtown is economically viable. The, as yet, unadopted urban design code for the downtown, prepared by the firm of Sargent Town Planning, should be used as design guidelines, with the project permitted through a development agreement. An experienced economic consultant should be hired to prepare a pro forma for the development to determine the necessary amount and form of subsidy before the property is offered for bid and sold to a selected developer; they could also assist in the negotiation process.

The bulk of the remaining funds for downtown revitalization of about \$4.73 million should be used to support the catalytic projects.

- It is tempting to use the remaining funds for obvious needs that are quick and easy to implement, but such use will gradually diminish the account until sufficient financial resources are not remaining to support the key catalytic projects discussed above; however, there may be focused, highly visible and low-cost projects that can show immediate change and should be considered, particularly if they will use only a small portion of the current budget until longer-term funding can be established.

An ongoing funding source should be set up exclusively for downtown revitalization efforts from a portion of the post-redevelopment property tax increment flowback to the General Fund.

- Post-redevelopment legislation – such as an Enhanced Infrastructure Financing District – has not been seen as sufficient to generate ongoing bonding capacity for downtown infill development. Therefore, as a high priority, it is recommended that a significant portion of the City’s flowback share of the property tax increment that was previously directed to the former redevelopment agency should be set aside on an ongoing basis for Downtown revitalization efforts. Priorities for the expenditure of these funds should be set by the Downtown Revitalization Working Group with approval by the City Council as part of the City’s annual Capital Improvements Program. Projects for consideration could include currently discussed needs, such as public parking and infrastructure, establishing an ongoing building façade improvement program, improving pedestrian walkways and bicycle connections, designing and implementing a Downtown directional signage or wayfinding program, and implementing components of the Downtown Arts Hub Implementation Matrix.

A simple and attractive wayfinding program should be implemented to lead visitors into the Downtown area from a “gateway” location along Oxnard Boulevard and continuing along 5th Street to Plaza Park.

- Travelers on Oxnard Boulevard can pass right by Downtown without even recognizing its unique recreational and cultural features and its expanding dining venues. A simple and clearly readable system of directional signs could help encourage both existing residents and newcomers to turn into and explore Downtown. Effective wayfinding systems often are part of a “branding program” created for marketing efforts and to establish a recognizable and fresh identity. Oxnard should consider establishing such a branding program to distinguish itself and the historic Downtown from surrounding municipalities and commercial centers.

All proposed development projects within the designated Downtown area which are consistent with an adopted design code, based on the Sargent Town Planning's Downtown Standards and Design Guidelines, should be permitted by right (administrative permit) with design review by a professional architect on contract to the City to expedite the approval process.

- Commercial developers value certainty in the local approval process. Limiting discretionary review in the approval process to only design review by a professional architect, or team of architects, will make development processing in the designated Downtown area more expeditious and attractive to the development community. Where critical deviations from the design guidelines are proposed, advisory input from the Downtown Design Review Committee (DDRC) should be sought.

The SCAG High Quality Transit Area plan should be primarily focused on the area in the immediate vicinity of the intermodal transit center and should not be inconsistent with the pending Downtown Standards and Design Guidelines.

- The original intent of the SCAG study was to focus on the area east of Oxnard Boulevard and this should remain its primary focus. However, since the SCAG study will also include a Complete Street Design for the downtown, the SCAG and Sargent studies need to be coordinated for consistency with the Vision Plan. This area is clearly underdeveloped, and significant opportunities exist for multi-family residential, retail and office development that would not negatively impact existing, low density residential areas. Such development would also be an opportunity to improve the jobs-housing balance, providing a range of residential densities and more professional and business oriented office development. Because this area is on the eastern periphery, and not in the center of Downtown, mixed uses in all buildings, including dining and retail, is not considered as critical; commercial uses could be permitted on the ground floor, but not required.

The Downtown Revitalization Working Group should create a package of short-term incentives that would support all existing and new businesses within the designated Downtown area, such as the elimination of business license taxes for three years, relaxation of some parking requirements, waiver of development impact fees, and administrative review and approval of alcoholic beverage sales with food service.

- Significant commercial development has been occurring in Oxnard outside of the Downtown area, particularly along the U.S. Highway 101 corridor, while businesses in the Downtown have struggled and vacant parcels have remained undeveloped. A package of incentives is considered necessary for Downtown to remain competitive and attract new businesses to locate in downtown, as well as encourage existing businesses to expand.

The City should consider amending development controls on two blocks of A Street between 4th and 6th Streets, and two blocks of 5th Street, between B Street and Oxnard Boulevard, to permit only retail, restaurant (including with alcohol beverage sales), and personal services on the ground floor, leaving all other existing ground floor uses as legal, nonconforming uses.

- Downtown streets lack pedestrian activity when retail, restaurant and personal services uses are replaced with offices and other less active uses. A small area along A Street and Fifth Street within one block of their intersection could be rezoned to permit only active ground floor uses with existing uses allowed to remain until they redevelop.

SUPPORTIVE ACTION PRIORITIES

The following eight recommendations are supportive of Downtown revitalization, and are either already ongoing or should be promoted when the opportunity and resources arise to implement them.

- The City should complete the implementation of the Downtown Parking Management Plan, including modification or elimination of parking requirements for some smaller uses and in-lieu parking fees for other uses where parcel sizes are not conducive to meeting parking standards.
- The complete streets program along Oxnard Boulevard should continue to be implemented, including bicycle lanes to link Downtown to its adjacent neighborhoods and to the waterfront.
- The Downtown Revitalization Manager should meet on a regular basis with downtown business representatives from the PBID and DOMA to ensure that all groups concerned with the success of Downtown pursue goals in common with those adopted by the Downtown Revitalization Working Group, and to develop ongoing feedback as to the success of the Economic Development Plan.
- The City should encourage California State University Channel Islands to develop student housing in the Downtown area and work with the University staff to implement such a program; the University may also want to consider a facility for ongoing education in the Downtown area.
- The City should continue the planning and implementation of a Downtown high speed internet system linked with cafes, coffee shops and office buildings that attract both business and non-business users.
- The special events and festivals which attract people to Downtown should be strengthened, expanded and marketed to residents of Oxnard and surrounding communities; this could begin by implementing the identified programs and events in the five year Arts Hub Plan to have greater economic impact on the downtown area. Nationwide studies show that the arts and culture industry generates sizable economic benefits in terms of jobs, revenues and spurring new development.
- Small playgrounds should be developed in the vicinity south of the intersection of 5th and Meta Streets that could be attractive to households with children living in or near Downtown.
- Shelter facilities for the homeless individuals and families, with necessary services, should be developed by the City, or a non-profit housing corporation, to provide an alternative for those who currently live on the Downtown streets and in the parks; depending upon land opportunities and the location of existing facilities, these shelters and services could be both in and outside of the downtown area.

- There are a number of outside grant and loan funding sources that can assist in the implementation of initiatives focused on sustainable transportation, including transit oriented development, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, and multimodal projects. These funding sources can be used to supplement the future funding allocation to downtown revitalization efforts by the City, and include revenue sources provided through the Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) at the regional level, the California Strategic Growth Council's Sustainable Communities Planning Grants and Incentives Program Awards, and other initiatives, such as the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) Program at the federal level.

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2. City of Oxnard Cultural and Community Services Department, *Downtown Arts Hub Implementation Matrix*, April 2018
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4. City of Oxnard, *DRAFT Downtown Arts Hub: Five Year Business Plan*, March 2018
5. Congress for the New Urbanism California Chapter, *Downtown Oxnard Vision Plan*, October 2016
6. Gruen Associates, *Oxnard Transit Center Transit Oriented Development Plan*, 2018
7. Pedroso, Claudia, *Letter to CPAT Team Re: CPAT for Downtown Oxnard*, April 2018
8. Sargent Town Planning, *Oxnard Downtown Zones and Design Guidelines*, April 2018
9. Oxnard Renaissance Newsletter, OxnardRenaissance.org, editions from April 20, 2018 through May 10, 2018
10. California State University, Channel Islands, Small Business Institute (SBI) Program has provided management consulting services to downtown Oxnard merchants
11. SCORE Ventura County offers ongoing business workshops and produces an annual business resource expo at the Oxnard Performing Arts and Convention Center

PARTICIPANTS

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MEET THE CPAT TEAM



Stanley R. Hoffman, FAICP (Team Leader)

Stan has over thirty-five years of experience in planning and urban economics. His fields of interest include economic and demographic analysis, land use projections, fiscal and financial studies, annexations, real estate market research and computer-based financial modeling. Since establishing Stanley R. Hoffman Associates in Los Angeles in 1981, Stan has specialized in fiscal and economic impact studies and market feasibility studies for residential, office and major retail shopping centers.



Robert Paternoster, FAICP

Bob has over 45 years of professional planning experience, primarily in a managerial capacity. His approach is action-oriented and strategic. He has served as Planning Director in Pittsburgh, PA, Director of Planning & Building in Long Beach, CA, and Community Development Director in Sunnyvale, CA. He was in charge of the planning and development of Long Beach's Queensway Bay Project, including the Aquarium of the Pacific.



Ken Gutierrez, AICP

Ken has 38 years of professional planning experience, including 8 years as the Planning Director for the City of Riverside. In this position, he oversaw an unprecedented period of development activity, and also led the development of Riverside's award-winning General Plan 2025 Program. Additionally, he has developed and taught courses in planning principles and general plans at the University of California, Riverside since 2007.



Matt Winegar, AICP

Matt has 40 years of experience in the California planning community. The bulk of Matt's career was devoted to the City of Oxnard, where he served as the City's Development Services Director for over 20 years. He directed the department through a time of unprecedented growth, helping to lead three general plan updates. He also led the effort to prepare the City's Hazard Mitigation and Emergency Response Plan.