

# San Francisco Balboa Park BART Station

San Francisco, CA



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## Context

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The busiest BART station outside of downtown San Francisco is Balboa Park. The station opened in 1973 as part of BART's San Francisco line extension. Located at the intersection of a diversity of neighborhoods, the station is divided by the Interstate 280 freeway from a busy commercial corridor and a college with an on campus enrollment of 20,000 students each semester. Though highly utilized as a transit stop, the station is dark, isolated and unsafe. The station holds tremendous untapped potential as a warm, inviting hub to a vibrant local transit-oriented community.

In recognition of this potential, the City of San Francisco identified the Balboa Park Station Area as one of three pilot neighborhoods for the

Better Neighborhoods Program, a pillar of the Citywide Action Plan, enacted in the late nineteen nineties in response to a major housing development boom. The community planning process for the Balboa Park Station Area Plan began in 1998. In 2002 a draft plan was released. Delayed by funding deficits, the Draft Environmental Impact Report was published in 2007. The Planning Department expects to present the plan before the Planning Commission in late 2008 and before the Board of Supervisors for Plan adoption in early 2009.

The existing conditions of the station area are challenging. The station is squeezed between a Muni rail yard, a large office administrative building, a surface parking lot for Muni employees and the Interstate 280 freeway. The main campus for City College of San Francisco sits directly across the freeway. The college parking lot is owned by the public utilities department as a land reserve and constitutes one of the largest remaining undeveloped site in San Francisco. Adjacent to City College is Ocean Avenue, a commercial strip with a hodgepodge of local eateries, auto oriented retail and empty parking lots struggling to find an identity.



## Recommendations

The Balboa Park Station Area Plan is subdivided into four areas; Ocean Avenue, Balboa Reservoir, City College and the Transit Station. There are four stated goals:

1. Improve the area's public realm
2. Create transit-oriented development
3. Make the transit experience safer and more enjoyable
4. Improve the economic vitality of the Ocean Avenue Neighborhood Commercial District.

([http://www.sfgov.org/site/planning\\_index.asp?id=25246](http://www.sfgov.org/site/planning_index.asp?id=25246))

Since City College plans their campus somewhat independent of the City, the panel was asked to focus on the other three of the Balboa Park Station Area Plan's four subareas.

**Recommendation 1: Address the conflicting uses at Ocean Avenue and Phelan Avenue to strengthen the neighborhood commercial district.**

The Phelan loop bus depot stands at the prominent northwest corner of the two streets, providing a place for Muni busses to idle between routes and drivers to take

breaks. The depot is an eyesore and creates significant bus traffic at a key intersection marking the entrance to both City College and the Ocean Avenue commercial corridor. At this location, the bus depot violates all four goals of the Balboa Park Station Area Plan. City College is making a significant investment in Phelan Avenue with an expanded campus and pedestrian orientation. The bus depot, however, is a physical and visual barrier at a strategic location that acts as a gateway to both the college campus and the commercial district.

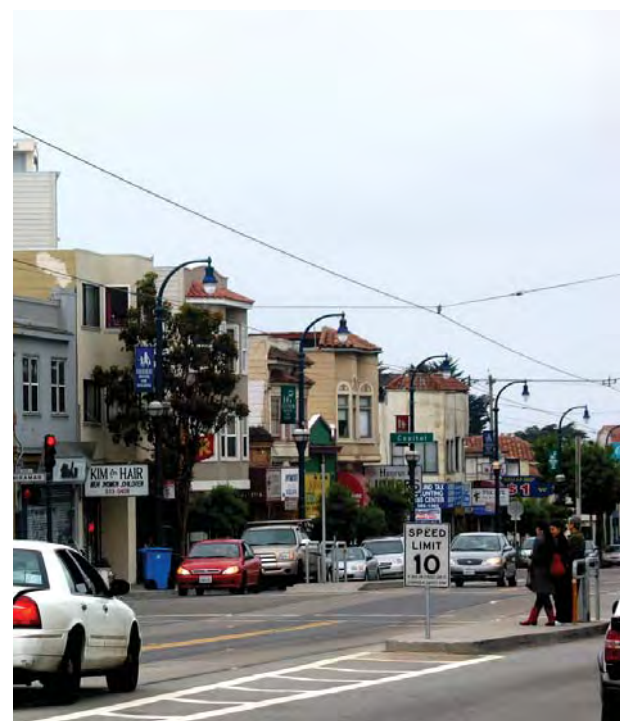
The Ocean Avenue commercial corridor begins at Phelan and stretches 11 blocks west. There is a lack of pedestrian connections, and some of the retail is auto-oriented with surface parking lots. The street has a long history as a commercial strip and some of its historic character is worth preserving. Scale sensitive development with ground floor retail along Ocean Avenue is critical to maintain continuity and activity along the street. The proposed Avalon Bay project, when built, will make progress towards knitting together Ocean Avenue.

San Francisco is home to model neighborhood commercial districts including Fillmore Street and Union Street, but Ocean Avenue is an unproven development district and has attracted little interest from builders. The panel believes development exactions that highly sought areas of the City such as SOMA can command are not appropriate for the Ocean Avenue area. In particular, the Plan's proposal of removing minimum parking requirements and using the standard City below market rate unit mix of 15% may make projects more feasible along Ocean.

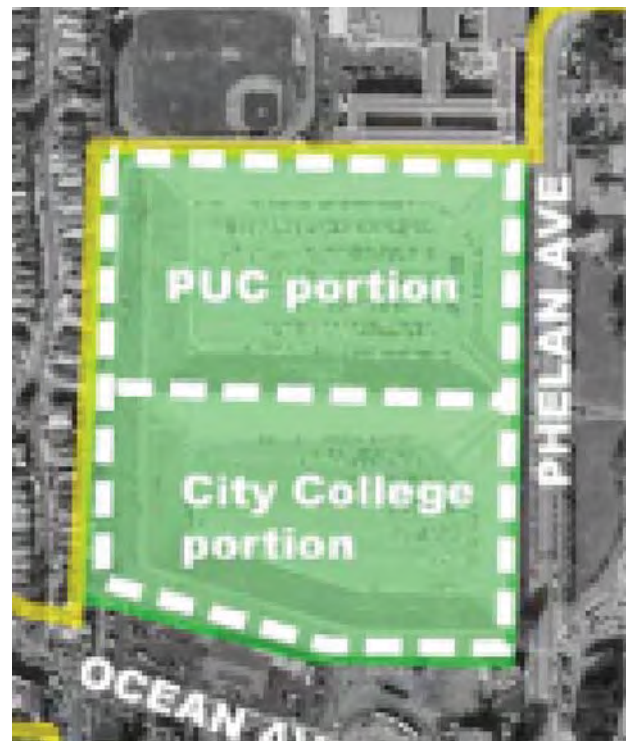
San Francisco needs affordable housing in all its neighborhoods, including in the Balboa Park Station Area. Although a site adjacent to the bus depot has been identified for mixed-use development with affordable housing, the air pollution and noise generated by idling buses may be incompatible with housing on this site. The City should consider other uses here or work with Muni to relocate the bus holding area.

**Recommendation 2: Create incentives for the PUC to open up the Balboa Reservoir to development.**

The Balboa Reservoir is located on the west side of Phelan Avenue and represents one of the largest remaining undeveloped sites in San Francisco. The reservoir, which has never contained water, is approximately 25 acres in size, and forms an unpleasant void in the neighborhood. In 1991, the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (PUC) transferred control over the east basin to City College, while retaining ownership of the west basin. The college is developing the east basin for expanded campus facilities and underground parking.



*Ocean Avenue*



*reservoir site*

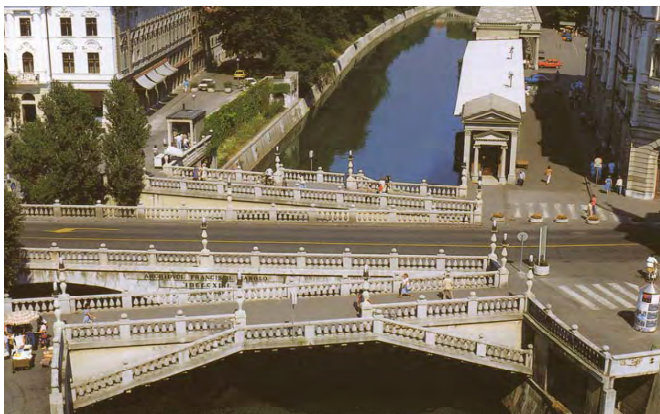


*City's plan to deck over the freeway*

While the City's plan contemplates future housing or parks on the site, the panel has identified two major issues that need to be addressed. First, the PUC has little incentive to sell the land and will probably continue to hold the land unless prompted otherwise. A rough calculation suggests that the PUC site is worth around \$25,000,000. If the PUC were able to retain the earnings from the land sale, they may be willing sellers.

The second challenge that must be addressed on the reservoir site is the integration of a development here with surrounding neighborhoods. Unless a specific plan is developed, the site is in danger of becoming effectively landlocked, sandwiched behind City College to the east, Riordan High School and the Westwood Park residential neighborhood to the north, and the Ocean Avenue Neighborhood Commercial District to the south. The panel recommends the formation of a task force comprised of government and private stakeholders to develop a specific plan for the reservoir site. The plan should prioritize circulation and visibility elements. Without attention paid to future ingress and egress to the site, the development potential may be substantially impaired.

**Recommendation 3: Rethink building a deck over the Interstate 280 freeway.**



*example of separated pedestrian walkways*

The City's current plan contemplates building a deck over the Interstate 280 freeway between Geneva Avenue and Ocean Avenue to integrate neighborhoods on both sides and create additional space for development. While the panel sees value in this proposal, it is extremely expensive and will be highly difficult to fund. As an interim step, the City should consider widening both existing overpasses and constructing separate pedestrian-only walkways. Well-designed pedestrian bridges would promote connectivity across the freeway at a significantly lower cost.

**Recommendation 4: Redesign the transit station and open up the surrounding areas for redevelopment in order to create a new transit oriented neighborhood.**

The Balboa Park BART Station has strengths that make it a natural candidate for TOD. The BART station is the busiest outside of downtown San Francisco and is only a 15 minute ride away from the central City. With eight bus lines and three light rail lines, significant multimodal transportation infrastructure is already in place. At the same time the station can be described as ugly, dangerous and difficult to navigate.

San Francisco must work to remove visual barriers at the station area. Though Balboa Park is an intermodal hub served by BART, bus and light rail, its platforms are in some cases blocks apart and the pedestrian experience is unintuitive. The station is dark, featuring empty concrete walls and visual barriers. The City should work with BART and Muni to redesign the station into a warm and inviting place. Integrating the boarding stations for the various transit systems, providing clear signage and installing public seating would also make the station more inviting for transit patrons. The station entrances are presently dark and dingy; the future design should incorporate light and should remove the current blank, empty concrete walls.



*existing conditions at Balboa Park station*

There are several sites totaling over 455,000 square feet of potentially developable land adjacent to the station that are underutilized and poised for more intensive use, including a Muni rail yard and administrative building with a site area of approximately 250,000 square feet. Directly to the south of the station and across Geneva Avenue is the 80,000 square foot upper yard, currently used as a Muni employee parking lot and BART drop off. The historic Geneva Office Building stands southeast of the BART Station on approximately 125,000 square feet. These sites have premium transit access, but building here will be very challenging. Current uses would have to be removed or relocated and the public agencies that own these sites have little incentive to take on that burden. When first developed as a streetcar station and yard in 1918, the surrounding area was undeveloped. Today Balboa Park Station is at the heart of one of the most diverse



*examples of bright and well-designed transit stations*





*opportunity sites around station*

cross-sections of San Francisco. The surrounding area is no longer appropriate for rail yards, maintenance facilities and surface parking. Serious consideration should be given to relocating these uses to free up these critical sites for development.

## Conclusion

San Francisco should be commended for selecting and prioritizing the Balboa Park station area in its Better Neighborhoods initiative. Few places exist in the Bay Area with such frequent transit service and such vast and varied potential for infill development. With this potential for transformation, however, comes a high level of complexity, created by the numerous public agencies who hold stake in the station area. Each of these stakeholders, from the PUC to City College and Muni, has their own agenda and goals. Possibly the most important role that the Planning Department can play in improving the Balboa Park station area is that of convening these various interests and facilitating a collaborative process for moving forward. If the City continues to facilitate a thoughtful and open planning process now, the panel feels that Balboa Park can be transformed into a well integrated, inviting and unique neighborhood center.

# Best Practice Case Studies

Four Best Practice cities presented their TOD strategies at the TOD MarketPlace. Each of these cities has recently launched or completed a successful TOD project and can provide model practices and lessons learned for other Bay Area cities.

## *Mission Bay, San Francisco*

A fundamental principal of the Catellus project at Mission Bay was the notion that TOD is more than proximity to transit; it includes walkability, lasting value, and access to jobs, culture, and useful amenities. The project is 6,054 housing units, more than 30% of which are affordable, street-level retail, the SF Giants Ballpark, commercial/office space, and the UCSF Medical Center. The developers worked with the City on the Muni light rail extension to the site and included high-quality bicycle facilities. They were careful to place homes, jobs, civic uses, shopping, entertainment, parks, and other amenities in close proximity to transit stations and transit-loading. Almost everything on the site is within one quarter mile of a transit stop. Catellus identified four lessons learned from this major TOD project:

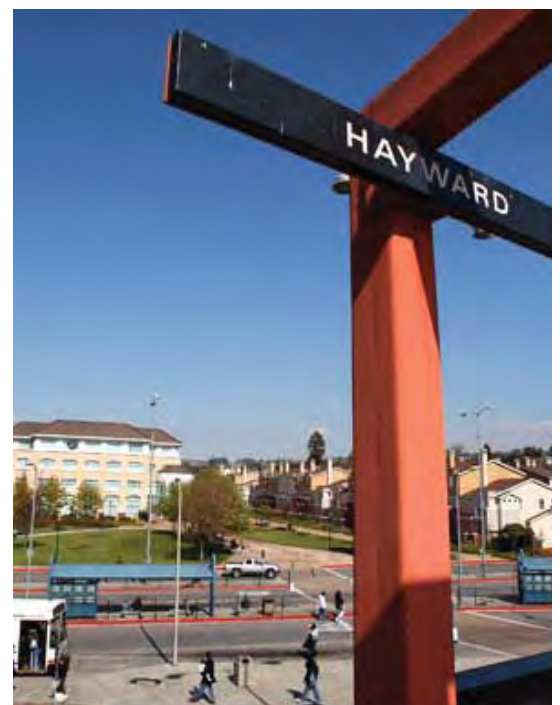
1. Be flexible.
2. Have on-site developer share in responsibility of encouraging transit use.
3. Anticipate longer timeline for TOD implementation.
4. TOD effectiveness relies on efficiency and ease of transit use.



## *Hayward, CA*

Since the mid-90s, Hayward has worked to increase housing and retail downtown in order to revitalize the area and increase tax revenue. The City's first efforts began with seven major housing projects totaling roughly 800 units. All of the units are located within walking distance of the Hayward BART station. A new City Hall was completed in 1998 and serves to anchor all of these projects. A Peet's Coffee and a bank are currently being built downtown, further strengthening the area.

One of the most important sites in the Hayward TOD plan is downtown directly across from Buffalo Bills brewery. The new project will serve as a local and regional destination, with eight restaurants and a 12-screen theatre. The combination of public and private investment in the downtown continues to attract the attention of new investors. An upscale restaurant, another 600+ unit multi-family project, and a new school are all in the works downtown. The City's is currently making plans for a TOD on three surface parking lots surrounding the South Hayward BART station.





## *Emeryville, CA*

TOD in Emeryville is unique in that the City operates one of the most successful small shuttle services in the country, connecting MacArthur BART with job centers and shopping destinations throughout the City. Emeryville also boasts the 8th busiest Amtrak station in the U.S. Building in Emeryville is complicated due to the toxic legacy of the City's manufacturing past. Of the 385 acres of land currently zoned industrial/commercial, 55% have known contamination and 41% are considered underutilized. Nevertheless, the redevelopment program in Emeryville has resulted in 2,290 residential units, 719 of which are affordable, 3.6 million SF of office, 800,000 square feet of retail, 488 hotel rooms, and 8,400 new jobs. Emeryville currently has plans for a mixed-use office project on a lot next to their Amtrak station. The City believes that people will be able to commute to the site using the Emery Go-Round and the bicycle network, and will use Amtrak to make occasional work trips. The City is also working to develop a multi-use trail connecting Berkeley to the Bay Trail. The trail is an amenity that attracts new residents and serves as an important part of the City's transportation system.



## *Windsor, CA*

Although it is a small and relatively young local government (incorporated in 1992), Windsor has embraced the principles and design goals of New Urbanism, TOD, and smart growth. The Town has a TOD Strategy that focuses on connectivity, mobility, economy, energy, and livability. In 2007, Windsor completed the renovation of its intermodal transit station downtown, which will be served by future Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART) trains. Windsor is developing lots around that station with mixed-use residential projects. Sonoma County Transit also runs buses along Old Redwood Highway, where motor courts and rural lots are intermixed with residential subdivision, shopping centers, and heavy commercial uses. The Town is working to redevelop those lots in a way that stimulates economic development downtown, promotes walkability, and provides affordable housing. Windsor also created a plan for reducing its greenhouse gas emissions, which includes adding more compact, transit-oriented development.



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