

CITY OF LARKSPUR  
Staff Report

**DATE:** July 18, 2001  
**TO:** City Council  
**FROM:** Robert J. Pendoley, Consulting Planner  
**SUBJECT:** Draft Central Larkspur Specific Plan

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**ACTION REQUESTED**

Forward draft Specific Plan to Planning Commission for preparation of EIR and public hearings

**REFERENCE**

Specific Plan Work Program

**FISCAL IMPACT**

The estimated cost of completing the Environmental Impact Report is \$70,000. The 2000-01 budget provides a \$25,000 appropriation for this part of the project. If needed, the additional estimated \$45,000 can be appropriated at the mid-year budget review.

**ENVIRONMENTAL STATUS**

An Environmental Impact Report is required

**BACKGROUND**

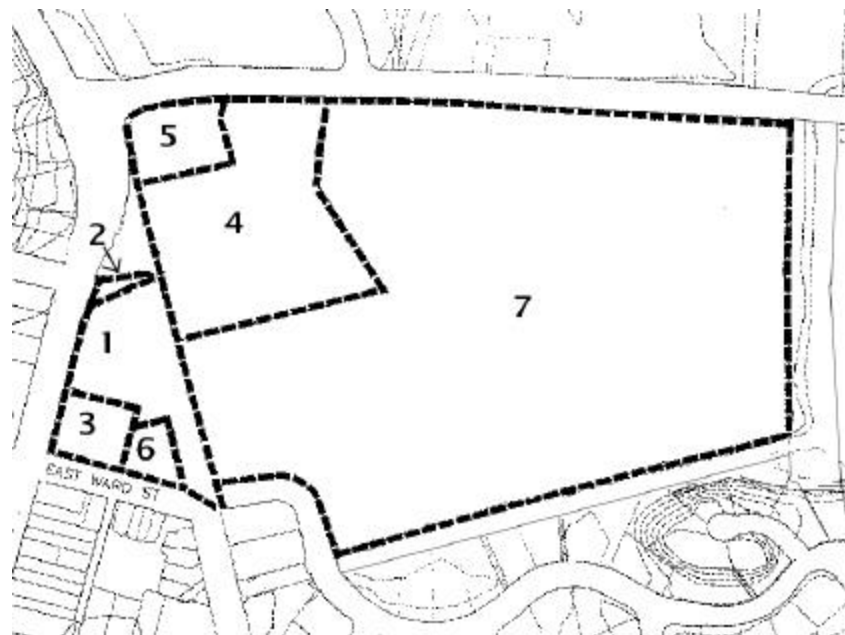
In July, 1999, the City Council appointed a 19-member advisory committee to oversee preparation of the Central Larkspur Specific Plan, or CLASP. The CLASP Committee met 24 times over the next 22 months. On June 5, 2001 the Committee completed its work by voting to endorse the plan and recommend that the City Council forward it to the Planning Commission for an EIR and public hearings.

Committee members worked tirelessly throughout the process. There were rarely more than one or two voting members absent. Meetings frequently went late into the evening and sometimes involved several sessions in a month. The Committee was "hands-on" and proactive; members did more than just react to staff and consultant recommendations. For example, the members expanded the alternative concept plans initially proposed by the consultants to include two others generated by the Committee. The Committee's alternatives spanned the range of views that were heard throughout the process. One concept was for very low-density development on the Niven property – 40 homes and four acres of play fields. The other Committee-initiated alternative was for 105 homes.

The final vote on the draft plan (with thirteen members eligible to vote) was ten in favor and three opposed. Two members – Maryjane Dunstan and Judy Saffran -- voted against the plan because they felt the single-family homes would be too large and that the plan would not adequately assure that the affordable units will be built. Ms. Saffran and Ms. Dunstan also stated that the plan does not go far enough to integrate the affordable units into the rest of the project. Debora Busse voted against endorsing the plan because she felt it would permit too much development, especially in terms of traffic impacts.

The Central Larkspur Specific Plan sets guidelines for development that reflect elements of Larkspur’s traditional neighborhoods such as Baltimore Park and Downtown. For example, this new neighborhood would have a variety of housing types and sizes. The draft plan calls for predominantly low-density development, but includes pockets of medium and high density. A traditional neighborhood park is included. As in the older neighborhoods, residents would be able to walk to schools, shopping and public transportation. Green space would define the public pathways, and the creek would be protected and integrated into the neighborhood. Development would be required to provide a variety of public amenities.

The draft plan is comprehensive, covering land use, transportation, utilities, design and implementation, as well as the City Council’s goals and principles developed by the Committee. This staff report focuses primarily on the land use recommendations as an introduction to the plan.



**Figure 1.** Parcel Identification

Parcel	Current Use	Area in acres
1	Nazari — commercial	1.44
2	City-Larkspur Plaza entrance drive	0.05
3	City parking lot	0.45
4	Larkspur Plaza Shopping Center	2.21
5	Gas station	0.57

*Parcel 1* – The Nazari property is planned for mixed-use development with retail on the ground floor on Magnolia Avenue, and a combination of commercial office and/or housing on the remainder of the property. The preferred use is a small hotel or a B and B. A “boutique” hotel would be ideal for this property because it would be a low traffic generator, it would support Downtown businesses and there is a need for upscale visitor accommodations in the area. A small hotel or B and B would also make a modest contribution to the City’s Transient Occupancy Tax.

The plan recommends that railroad buildings be restored, and that they should be available for reuse in the full range of businesses allowed by the zoning ordinance. By restricting the allowed lot coverage to 40%, a privately owned, publicly accessible plaza could be built around the railroad buildings. The Nazari property would retain the .8 FAR allowed by the General Plan with a potential of approximately 50,000 square feet of mixed-use development.

*Parcel 2* – This small (2,220 square feet) City-owned property includes an easement for the Albertson’s driveway. The driveway should be realigned to a more efficient configuration. This would free up a portion of the property that could be sold or traded to the Nazari property.

*Parcel 3* – The Committee identified three options for the City-owned parking lot at the corner of Ward Street and Magnolia Avenue. The preferred option is to retain the parking lot and reconfigure it for more spaces. The parking lot could also be landscaped so that it can be used occasionally as a plaza for community events. A second option (in order of preference) is to trade or sell the property for a portion of Parcel 1 that would be used for a new library. A third option would be to sell the property and use the proceeds to build a larger public parking lot in a nearby location.

*Parcel 4* – The draft plan does not anticipate significant changes in the current uses of the Albertson’s property. The General Plan would allow the grocery store to expand by 4,500 square feet. The specific plan includes design guidelines to assure that expansion would not conflict with other properties in the area and that good pedestrian linkages could be provided.

*Parcel 5* – The plan recognizes that the gas station is an important neighborhood service and recommends that it be kept.

*Parcel 6* – No changes are proposed for the American Legion property. In the event the Legion should decide to sell the property in the future, it could be redeveloped with a commercial use or up to five residential units.

*Parcel 7* – Up to 85 homes would be permitted on the Niven property. The recommended housing mix is

?? 23 to 33 cottage homes, ranging from 1,000 to 1,700 square feet at a density of 8.5 units per acre. The majority of these homes would be less than 1,500 square feet.

?? 25 to 35 single family homes. At least 25% of these homes would be less than 3,000 square feet.

?? 27 affordable multifamily units. The plan proposes that 1.2 to 1.5 acres be made available for purchase by a nonprofit housing sponsor or developer for a minimum of 16 months following approval of the tentative map (the present option holder on the Niven property suggested this policy). If the purchase is not exercised, the developer would have the right to construct an additional 12 cottage units and would be required to provide 10% of the total number of units in the project as affordables.

If the 27 affordables are built, the total number of market rate homes would be 58 or less. If the large affordable project is not built, the maximum number of homes that could be on the property would be 70, of which 63 would be market rate.

The plan would also permit up to 4000 square feet of retail on Parcel 7, a small neighborhood park and a public parking lot.

## **ANALYSIS**

The Committee recognized it would be necessary to make tradeoffs to arrive at a plan that balances the goals set by the City Council and that responds to the divergent concerns raised by the community. Important issues and trade-offs in the plan are discussed below.

### *Housing density*

The specific plan would allow the Niven property to develop at an aggregate density of 5 units per acre. Within this overall range the Committee has recommended a mix of densities in order to promote a pedestrian friendly neighborhood, to reflect the mix of housing in downtown and other nearby neighborhoods, and to maximize the opportunities for affordable housing. A compact development pattern would help to make space available for parkland, creek buffers and other important amenities. Mixing density is a tradeoff that helps to balance goals for the project.

### *Traffic*

The proposed plan would increase overall traffic volumes in the area, but, with one exception, all of the affected intersections would perform better than the standard set by the General Plan (the intersection of King and Magnolia already fails the City's standard, and would continue to do so. This could be mitigated with a traffic signal). This would be largely due to the overall mix and density of uses recommended by the Committee and intersection improvements that are already included in the City's capital improvement plan.

Committee members did consider a more intense alternative. This concept could have provided more housing, and traffic would have been greater, although still within the General Plan standard. Committee members, including the staunchest housing advocates, decided against this alternative on the grounds that there needed to be a tradeoff between housing and the total volume of traffic in order to maintain quality of life and to win support for the plan.

### *Design character*

CLASP would continue the General Plan and Downtown Specific Plan policies that allow properties on Magnolia Avenue to develop at a .8 Floor Area Ratio. As a trade-off for this relatively intense development potential, the CLASP Committee would require strict design controls to assure that Magnolia Avenue remains a place where people want to walk. For example, while buildings on the Nazari property could be permitted to go to three stories, most of the third story would have to be setback at least 15 feet from the front of the building. This would allow a new building to use the FAR given by the General Plan, but keep the visual scale compatible with other buildings on Magnolia Avenue.

One effect of a compact development pattern on the Niven property is that single-family lots and homes could be relatively large. As a trade-off, the draft specific plan recommends a series of design standards that will vary lot sizes and street-frontage widths to provide a greater range of home sizes and a more diverse appearance. Proposed design techniques include detached garages at the side or rear of the home, front porches, and shared driveways to break up the lot pattern.

### *Connections*

The draft specific plan favors pedestrians over cars. The proposed road pattern discourages through traffic on both existing neighborhood streets and on the planned residential streets inside the project area. The plan outlines a system of pedestrian paths and bikeways in the project area that link to Downtown, Larkspur Plaza, schools, parks, public transit stops and the nearby neighborhoods. Through traffic for walkers and bicycles will be convenient and attractive.

### *Environmental protection*

The first phase of the planning process was an assessment of environmental issues. The most sensitive natural resource in the project area is the creek at the eastern and southern boundaries of specific plan. The California Department of Fish and Game sometimes accepts a 25-foot setback from the top of creek banks as an adequate protection measure. The EIR biologist for the specific plan and the planning consultant recommended a 50-foot setback to maintain the habitat and protect animal species in the stream and associated wetland. The Friends of Corte Madera Creek urged the Committee to hold development on the Niven property 100 feet from the top of bank.

The Committee chose an overall *average* setback of 75 feet with a minimum setback of 50 feet. The Committee wanted to assure that wetland resources would be protected, but also recognized the need to leave room to achieve their housing objectives. The Committee recognized that they could trade higher density for an increased creek setback and still accomplish their housing goals.

### *Community amenities*

The Committee considered a range of community amenities for inclusion in the specific plan:

- ?? **Neighborhood park** – the Committee included five possible locations for a park, although none is shown on the General Plan. The Committee felt that a park would enhance the quality of this new neighborhood and, depending on the location, could serve as a bridge to other neighborhoods.
- ?? **Community center and play fields** –the Committee studied a five-acre playfield and community center in its alternatives analysis, but ultimately decided against the idea. The CLASP Committee acknowledged that the 2050 Committee had found that additional community recreation facilities are not justified in light of the joint City/School district facility at Hall Middle School. The Committee also felt that the trade-off in terms of lost housing would not be acceptable.
- ?? **Police station** – the Committee examined possible sites for a new police station, based on the 2050 Committee’s finding that a new headquarters building is needed. The CLASP Committee did not find a suitable location in the project area.
- ?? **Additional Downtown parking** – The CLASP Committee incorporated the Downtown Parking Plan recommendation for a 50- to 100-space public parking lot on the Niven property. The Committee felt that the trade-off of housing opportunity for public parking would help to support Downtown’s economic vitality.
- ?? **Railroad plaza** – the Committee balanced the need to preserve the historic railroad station buildings and the city’s limited financial resources. The draft plan recommends a privately owned, publicly accessible plaza, around the railroad buildings. Requiring that the buildings not be moved, allowing a substantial Floor Area Ratio (consistent with the General Plan and today’s zoning) and limiting lot coverage will make a modest plaza feasible.
- ?? **Library options** – The Committee’s preferences for the Nazari property and the city parking lot are for a mixed-use project on Nazari featuring a small hotel, and to refurbish the parking lot to get more spaces. However, the Committee was willing to consider trade-offs to accommodate the 2050 Committee’s recommendation that the library be moved. The draft specific plans includes a concept that would trade the parking lot for the north end of the Nazari property. A second trade-off would allow the library to be built on the parking lot property. In either case the public parking would have to be replaced.

### *Historic preservation*

The plan would protect the historic railroad buildings. Policies in the plan require that it be restored and preserved in its original design, and that the buildings be kept in their historic location. It is also significant that the plan would adopt the U.S. Secretary of Interior’s guidelines for new construction in historic areas. This would assure that the historic context of Magnolia Avenue is preserved and enhanced.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The adoption process for specific plans is the same as the process used to adopt the General Plan: public hearings at the Planning Commission, followed by public hearings at the City Council. The plan may be approved as recommended by the advisory committee; the Commission and/or City Council may modify the proposed plan; or the plan can be rejected.

CLASP is a “project” as defined by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and must go through the environmental review process before the proposed or modified specific plan can be adopted. In this case, the City Council decided at the beginning of the process that an Environmental Impact Report would be prepared.

The first step in the CEQA process is for the Planning Commission to conduct a public hearing to “scope” the EIR. Although the City Council has already determined that a full EIR will be prepared, a scoping hearing is still required to identify points for emphasis. The scoping hearing can also be used to determine the alternatives that should be analyzed in the EIR. CEQA requires that the EIR assess the impact of alternatives to the project (including a “no project” alternative). Typically, EIRs assess at least one larger and one smaller alternative. In this case it will also be important to assess alternatives with different mixes of land uses.

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission hold a workshop before the scoping hearing to study the draft specific plan. This will help the Commission at the scoping hearing, especially as they develop alternatives for the EIR. The attached timeline would schedule a workshop in August. If this schedule were followed, the Commission could conduct its scoping hearing in September, and public hearings on the EIR could begin in February. This schedule would avoid hearings during the summer vacation and winter holiday periods. Staff requests Council comment on the draft time line.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the City Council forward the draft Central Larkspur Specific Plan along with your comments to the Planning Commission. Staff also asks the Council provide direction on the recommended timeline, including the suggestion for a Planning Commission workshop in August.

## ***Central Larkspur Specific Plan***

### Suggested Timeline EIR and Plan Adoption

<b>Event</b>	<b>Month</b>
Planning Commission workshop	August
Planning Commission scoping hearing	September
Draft EIR prepared	September to December
Draft EIR circulated	December to January (45 days)
Planning Commission public hearing, draft EIR	February*
Draft Final EIR prepared	February
Planning Commission public hearing, draft final EIR	March
Planning Commission public hearing, Specific Plan	March*
City Council hearings begin on draft Final EIR and CLASP	May

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\* More than one meeting may be needed to finish this work. Additional meetings will affect the schedule.