

December 16, 2013

Mayor and City Councilmembers
City of San Jose
200 East Santa Clara Street
San Jose, CA 95113

Honorable Mayor and City Council:

The San Jose City Council recently directed staff to introduce language into the North San Jose Urban Design Guidelines that softens the city’s commitment to their implementation and, we believe, exacerbates a climate of uncertainty about their standing and about the city’s expectations of new development. Council has also directed staff to consider revisions to the guidelines. These proposed changes are in addition to significant financial incentives are intended to attract employment uses to the area.

SPUR believes that San Jose should strengthen, not weaken, its commitment to urban design. The 2040 General Plan is unequivocal in making San Jose’s transformation into a more livable, walkable, and transit-oriented city a cornerstone of its economic development strategy.

Changing the character of the city will require a sustained commitment to better urban design. If new growth and development are going to improve the city, they will have to meet some basic physical planning principles. Buildings should meet the sidewalk. Parking should be tucked away. Pedestrians shouldn’t have to walk around massive, isolated developments. Multi-building campuses can be well-integrated into surrounding districts if their site plans are designed to engage with adjacent streets, open spaces, and transit facilities. This is the function of urban design.

If urban design standards are maintained, each individual development project fills in a pattern of blocks and streets, provides services and amenities, and creates activity on streets and public spaces. This attracts more companies, workers and residents, creating a virtuous cycle. Isolated and inward-facing suburban developments undercut this process. High-quality design not only contributes directly to the city’s transformation, it also catalyzes more well-designed projects by lending credibility to the vision and certainty that it will be implemented.

“Employment First” and “Great Places” can and should be mutually-reinforcing goals. We believe that the proposed changes to the North San Jose Urban Design Guidelines will be counter-productive for the ‘jobs first’ goals of the North San Jose Area Development Policy over the long haul. San Jose needs to work to build a long-term competitive advantage so that it will be perceived as a value-added location for businesses. The economic value of walkable urban places is well established.

SPUR’s new report “Getting to Great Places” makes the case for the value of better urban design and recommends how San Jose can achieve it. It examines the considerable impediments to implementing the General Plan’s “Great Places” agenda and includes numerous recommendations to improve the design quality of new development in San Jose without sacrificing job growth.

We are available at any time to present this work to the City Council and to work with city staff to help ensure that any further revisions to the Guidelines support both the city’s placemaking and economic development goals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Benjamin Grant", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Benjamin Grant
Public Realm + Urban Design Program Manager