



CITY OF SARATOGA

13777 FRUITVALE AVENUE • SARATOGA, CALIFORNIA 95070 • (408) 868-1200

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Mary-Lynne Bernald

Kookie Fitzsimmons

Rishi Kumar

Tina Walia

Yan Zhao

Incorporated October 22, 1956

July 7, 2021

Therese McMillan
ABAG/MTC Executive Director
Bay Area Metro Center
375 Beale Street
San Francisco, CA 94105

Subject: Plan Bay Area 2050 Draft Environmental Impact Report

Dear Ms. McMillan,

On behalf of the Saratoga City Council, I want to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Plan Bay Area 2050 Draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR). Plan Bay Area 2050 is intended to serve as the guiding plan for addressing projected economic, environmental, housing, and transportation needs of the counties and cities in the San Francisco Bay Area, including the City of Saratoga. By setting transportation investment priorities and related policies, this plan will have significant impacts throughout the Bay Area, especially to smaller communities that are already built out and have little capacity to respond in any practical way to major changes in surrounding land uses. And of course, it will influence allocation of grant funds for projects such as road improvements, set the framework for public transportation funding, and inform Regional Housing Needs Allocations (RHNA). Each of these will have tremendous impacts on communities throughout the Bay Area region.

Plan Bay Area 2050 predicts the San Francisco Bay Area population will reach 10 million over the next 30 years, and it outlines strategies for the addition of new housing while preserving existing housing stock and increasing housing density. The City of Saratoga is already seeing the impact of this strategy in its 2023 to 2031 RHNA as we are expected to plan for the addition of more than 1,700 new homes in a community that is largely built out. Roughly half of Saratoga is in the Wildland Urban Interface area and at high risk for wildfires. Saratoga's downtown business district, a location most cities plan for higher density mixed use housing, is in a Very High Fire Hazard Zone and Wildland

Urban Interface area. Saratoga is not alone in this. Many communities along the Bay Area hills will face a similar challenge in planning for the future housing needs projected in Plan Bay Area 2050.

The Draft EIR acknowledges that wildfire risks will be exacerbated by implementation of Plan Bay Area 2050, and it identifies several mitigation measures, such as educating the public and enforcing defensible space requirements. However, the Draft EIR states the intensified risk of wildland fires will be a significant and unavoidable impact even after implementation of mitigation measures. The proposed mitigation measures are already being used throughout California, yet every year California's fire season gets worse with new record-breaking wildfires. Increasing the number of people exposed to extreme fire risk in a fire-prone region while simultaneously increasing our population is irresponsible at best.

The Draft EIR also notes there will be adverse impacts to the performance of critical public services, such as fire and law enforcement, because of the growth proposed in Plan Bay Area 2050. The Draft EIR also identifies these impacts as unavoidable. While the Draft EIR suggests that local agencies can attempt to mitigate negative outcomes by assessing service impacts through the normal environmental review process and requiring developers to plan for future service needs, the State legislature is placing increasing restrictions on local governments' ability to take such measures. Laws like Senate Bill 35, which requires ministerial approval of qualifying housing projects within 60 to 90 days, are exempt from environmental review. Other laws prohibit imposition of new fees and development standards that could limit the intensity of housing development even if needed to address the significant impacts identified in the Draft EIR. In 2020, the City of Saratoga received its first Senate Bill 35 project to convert a shopping center into a 90-unit townhome development that will include only 9 affordable units. Though these laws may be well-intentioned, projects like this do very little to address the affordable housing crisis. Instead, they benefit developers and property owners while stripping away our ability to properly review and address service needs, particularly those that keep our residents safe.

Earlier this month, Santa Clara Valley Water declared a water shortage emergency and instituted a mandatory 15% reduction in water use compared to 2019. Nearly all of California is experiencing extreme drought conditions. With approximately 50% of Santa Clara County's water supply coming from outside the County, Santa Clara County is extremely sensitive to drought conditions locally as well as elsewhere in the State. Our current drought conditions are far from unusual. California experiences droughts regularly, with the longest drought in California history running from 2011 to 2017. As [reported](#) in the *San Jose Mercury News*, a recent study of this year's runoff from the Sierra indicates that due to climate change past hydrology models are no longer reliable. The Draft EIR for Plan Bay Area 2050 states that even after mitigation measures are implemented, water supplies will be insufficient. Calling this a significant and

unavoidable impact is accurate but does not begin to address the problem. How can we move forward with Plan Bay Area 2050 in good conscience knowing this?

In addition to concerns related to safety and access to water, Plan Bay Area 2050 fails to fully account for changes resulting from COVID-19. The Draft EIR notes that the Regional Growth Forecast and associated revenue forecasts were adjusted to reflect weaker economic conditions due to COVID-19. Yet, the plan does not address workplace trends that have started to emerge as a result of the pandemic. For example, major employers, such as Oracle and Hewlett-Packard, have relocated out of the Bay Area. Other employers are exploring more flexible work models that allow employees to work remotely. Facebook, for example, introduced new policies that allow employees to work remotely from any location. Google has announced a hybrid plan that includes a combination of in office and remote working. These changes could result in a fundamental shift for the Bay Area, such as where employees choose to live, demands for public transportation, and unexpected traffic conditions. Since these unanticipated and unprecedented trends are still unfolding, it seems impossible that Plan Bay Area 2050 could accurately account for future environmental, housing, and transportation needs over the next 30 years.

The City of Saratoga is incorrectly identified in the draft Plan Bay Area 2050 as being in a Transit-Rich Area (TRA), “areas near rail, ferry, or frequent bus service that were not already identified as a PDA. Specifically, these are areas where at least 50 percent of the area is within ½ mile of either an existing rail station or ferry terminal (with bus or rail service), a bus stop with peak service frequency of 15 minutes or less, or a planned rail station or planner ferry terminal (with bus rail service)”. Currently, there are no bus routes within the City limits with peak service frequency of 15 minutes or less. Public transportation options in Saratoga consist of only 5 bus lines that serve only a small part of the City, with varying service on weekdays of every 20 to 60 minutes. Clearly, Saratoga is far from any reasonable interpretation of Transit-Rich.

Plan Bay Area 2050 also calls for greater density of commercial development in Transit-Rich Areas to encourage jobs near public transit. Even if Saratoga met the criteria for a Transit-Rich Area, the current circumstances make the policy goal impossible to achieve here. Saratoga has only a small amount of land suitable for commercial development. Given the demands of the housing laws, much of this is under consideration for development as housing. The City is being forced to consider reducing the limited commercial job producing development that it has to accommodate the new housing required by the State, leading to longer commutes and personal trips for current and future residents.

This issue is further compounded by the contradictory goal of Plan Bay Area 2050 to convert existing retail and office spaces into housing to accommodate projected housing needs as well as growing State legislative pressure to covert commercial spaces into housing. Saratoga’s commercial space is already extremely limited, especially after 80,000

square feet of retail and office space was lost to a Senate Bill 35 project. Replacing commercial space with residential development in a community where there is little commercial development to begin with pushes housing further away from jobs and requires residents to travel further for essentials, such as grocery stores, dry cleaning, or other everyday services. With hardly any public transportation options in Saratoga, this forces residents into their cars, and that ultimately increases emissions and traffic. This is counterproductive to the City's efforts thus far and future goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The strategies contemplated by the plan for Saratoga place an undue burden on those that cannot drive to access resources and services. For example, older adults that can no longer drive or those with disabilities. Ultimately, the conversion of commercial spaces into residential developments will displace some of the most vulnerable members of our community. The Draft EIR goes so far as to acknowledge that one of the impacts is substantial displacement of existing people or housing. Even with the implementation of mitigation measures, this outcome is unavoidable according to the Draft EIR. This calls into question the integrity of Plan Bay Area 2050. The Plan Bay Area 2050 goal to "make the Bay Area more equitable for all residents" is profoundly incompatible with strategies that will displace those who already live here.

We firmly stand behind the goal of Plan Bay Area 2050 to "ensure by the year 2050 that the Bay Area is affordable, connected, diverse, healthy and vibrant for all." However, Plan Bay Area 2050 as it is drafted will not achieve the desired outcome. The current draft of Plan Bay Area 2050 fails to acknowledge emerging changes, and the strategies within the plan create unacceptable outcomes that cannot be mitigated. We urge you to reconsider Plan Bay Area 2050 and seek out solutions that truly promote equity and resiliency.

Sincerely,



Yan Zhao, Mayor
City of Saratoga