

From: [Sanderfer, Larissa](#)
To: [Downtown West Project](#)
Subject: Fw: comments on The Downtown West/Google Project's EIR, and more
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Subject: comments on The Downtown West/Google Project's EIR, and more

[External Email]

Hello,

Attached please find my public comments on The Downtown West/Google Project's EIR, along with comments on the Draft Amended Diridon Station Area Plan, the Diridon Integrated Station Concept, and more.

Please feel free to contact me if I can answer any questions.

Thank you,

~Larry Ames

ps: Teresa, could you forward my comments to the SJ Parks & Rec. Commissioners, please? Thnx!

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Dec. 7, 2020

James Han, Planning Downtown West/Google Project Manager
Larissa Sanderfer, Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services Project Manager
Shannon Hill, Environmental Project Manager
Jose Ruano, Diridon Station Area Plan Project Manager
Lori Severino, Diridon Station Area Advisory Group Project Manager

re: The Downtown West/Google Project;
The Downtown West/Google Project's EIR; and
Draft Amended Diridon Station Area Plan

Dear Project Managers,

I am writing regarding the planned developments in the vicinity of the Diridon Station, including CalTrain electrification, High Speed Rail (HSR), the Diridon Integrated Station Concept (DISC), the Diridon Station Area Plan (DSAP), and Google's proposal (the Downtown West Mixed Use Plan Draft EIR). I am writing in regard to all of them together because of their interconnectedness, and because I worry that not every plan is well integrated with one another and aware of the changing conditions and interfaces.

Even though I have participated in a number of meetings as a member of various groups or commissions, I am writing this on my own behalf as an individual member of the public. I have already made a number of these comments verbally in various public forums, but I repeat them here so as to have submitted them in written format.

Overall, I am generally very supportive these projects: the electrification of CalTrain, High Speed Rail coming to San José, the reconfigured Diridon Station with the elevated tracks, BART, and Google's plans to transform a faded part of the city into a dynamic and vibrant district.

That said, I do have a number of questions, comments, opinions, and concerns...

CalTrain electrification. I am very supportive. However, I'm concerned by the phasing: the electrification of the at-grade tracks is under construction now and is due to be completed in 2022. However, the planned raising of the tracks for the new Diridon Station is not even scheduled to begin construction until 2027. My fear is that "you" (by which I mean the various officials, consultants, planners, and governmental agencies) will say that all that money now being spent on electrifying the at-grade tracks would be wasted if the tracks are then raised, and that it'll be cheaper (and "good enough") to keep them as-is in their current at-grade configuration. When I asked about this at a recent meeting, I was assured that the "lost cost" – the stanchions and power cables – is but a small fraction of the total cost, and the majority of the investment (e.g., power stations and new rolling stock) can be reused. I raise this now because I've been burnt before by phrase, "it's cheaper to use the existing". Indeed, we've already been burnt when you and HSR decided to electrify the current Tamien-to-Diridon at-grade tracks rather than constructing the promised "aerial alignment" (which reduces the community impacts by keeping the tracks within the 280 and 87 freeway right-of-ways) – "because It's cheaper and

good enough.” What I’m looking for here is assurance that the elevated tracks and raised platform *will* proceed as now planned.

Elevated CalTrain Tracks.

Elevating the tracks near the Diridon Station will have a number benefits:

- It will allow grade-separation for Auzeais, which will avoid train-caused delays for the many residents in the new and planned high-density dwellings (Ohlone Towers, Monte Vista, etc.) as they head for the Bird Ave. freeway on-ramp.
- It will allow grade-separation (hopefully!) for West Virginia at Drake, so that the rather isolated Drake-Fuller neighborhood isn’t further isolated by the hundred-some trains a day that eventually will cross there.
- It will allow Park Avenue to be reconstructed, removing the psychological barrier caused by the current deep-dive undercrossing.
- It enables a reconfiguration of the Diridon Station, with shops, services, and attractions on the ground level and the train platforms above.
- It will allow a greatly improved east/west pedestrian and bicycle crossing at San Fernando.
- And it will allow an improvement to the Los Gatos Creek Trail at the recently replaced CalTrain bridge over the creek, which as now planned has the trail with minimal vertical clearance and barely above creek high-water.

Some concerns and issues:

- The elevating of the tracks will require the replacement of the San Carlos St. Bridge. This bridge is old and (in my opinion) worn out and substandard: no great loss. However, I have seen little mention of it in any of the meetings. Also, care is needed in its design so that it itself doesn’t create an uncrossable barrier for the Los Gatos Creek Trail.
- How will the new train tracks cross I-280? – the logistics will be challenging! Allow me to recommend building the new bridge somewhat to the west of the current tracks, (1) so that service on the old tracks is not disrupted during construction, and (2) to make for a smoother ride on the new tracks by “smoothing the arc”. (The current track curves near Bird Ave, straightens out when crossing I-280, and then is curved again at Auzeais, giving a “jerky” ride.) However, such a smoothed curve might require the taking of a property or two on West Virginia and/or Gregory St., which I don’t recall being discussed.

Opportunities:

- Once the train service has shifted to the new bridge, the old bridge could be converted into a bike/ped bridge, creating a trail connecting the Gardner neighborhood to the Hannah-Gregory neighborhood and on to the Diridon Station.
- The current at-grade tracks north of Auzeais would make a great “commuter’s trail” connecting the Los Gatos Creek Trail (LGCT) directly to the Diridon Station, freeing the downstream portion of the creek trail to be more pastoral and recreational. I am pleased to see that this LGCT – Diridon spur is shown in some of the presentations. Some questions: (1) How would this spur trail cross Park Ave. if the street is regraded? And (2) how would the spur trail access the station? – could there be a cyclists’ entrance at the south end?

Also: What about the Vasona Spur?

- Elevated or left at-grade? It only carries maybe one train a week, often late at night, but even so, I doubt that you'd want to leave it at-grade, with diesel engines pulling freight past (or through?) the station's ground-level shops.
- A challenge is that the Vasona spur is on the west side of the main tracks, whereas the freight track is on the east side so as to better access the Milpitas(?) Wye. I understand that there are two alternatives: (1) construct an elaborate freeway-like undercrossing/onramp to get the Vasona tracks over to the east side, or (2) just come in on the west side and then "sneak across" the mainline over to the east. I support this latter approach as it is much simpler and cheaper, and I think it is viable because of the late-hour of the infrequent crossing – but it may require adjusting the height of the electrified train's power cables and/or limiting the maximum height of the Vasona's fully-loaded freight cars.
- Would the Vasona Spur be elevated at Race/Parkmoor, and, if so, can the traffic-delaying Light-Rail/freight train signals now there be removed from the intersection?
- Would this spur line bridge over I-280 also need to be replaced?

Diridon Station Design:

- The publicly presented station concept designs show elevated platforms to reach the elevated train tracks, with escalators to get passengers to and from the platform. But how does the station accommodate bicyclists? Bike lockers are great for those who bike to the station, park their bikes, and then ride the train. But CalTrain currently operates a very popular bike-compatible commuter service with multiple bike-cars, each capable of carrying dozens of bikes, allowing cyclists to bike to the station, keep their bikes with them on the train, and then easily complete their trips by bike to their final destinations. How do these users access the trains? Standard escalators are not suitable for carrying bikes, and an elevator would not have the capacity to handle the peak demand: there needs to be ramps, comparable to those now in the current station. Alternatively, there could be specialized escalators, comparable to those in some stores that carry shopping carts.
- The current Diridon Station building is a Historic structure. Parts of the building (e.g., HVAC, plumbing, electrical, restrooms) may be in need of renovation or replacement, but the building's façade and main-hall interior ceiling are definitely worth preserving. Can the critical portions of the building be preserved in-place while accommodating the widened track footprint, or will it be necessary to physically move the building?
- To accommodate the increased usage, the new Diridon Station is going to be larger than the existing historic structure, but the old building can be preserved and incorporated into new building. The Oslo (Norway) Central Terminal is a perfect example; local, smaller-scale examples here include the Golden Arches McDonalds (on Almaden near Curtner) and the Willow St. Pizza (just east of Lincoln).
- All great train stations need a great Entrance Plaza: again for an example see the Oslo Station. An Entrance Plaza is the station's "front door", its focal point, enabling it to handle large crowds, both for the daily commute and for special occasion arrivals. The Entrance Plaza also invites folks to walk out and venture into town. The grand entrance is obvious in our current Diridon Station building, but which one of the three or four entrances planned for the new building is the Main entrance? Santa Clara west, Santa Clara east, San Fernando east? The multiple

entrances may be convenient, but they don't concentrate the area's excitement and vibrancy. (They can also confuse infrequent users: "I'll meet you at the train station"—but which entrance? You'll need a "Meeting Point" designated somewhere, as is done in some airports.)

- Are the station design efforts being coordinated with Google? You want to have the streets and parks in their project line up with the Entrance Plaza and with the newly planned entrances.
- I haven't seen much discussion of BART: it will have a major station of its own near Diridon: will it be inside the new train station or adjacent to it? Will there be a public plaza by the BART entrance to help aggregate travelers approaching BART and disperse those departing? (I don't see any nearby plazas or other open spaces in any of the various plans.)
- Sorry to have to ask, but... Will the new building be able to handle anticipated possible future security measures? Our new SJC airport terminal, for example, does the job quite well, but I've seen older buildings with grand entrance staircases all fenced off and the public forced to go through a side door entrance to pass through a metal detector; other places I've seen buildings with several entrances, but only one remains unbaricaded due to enhanced security measures.

Speaking of the SJC Airport: be sure to have a quick and convenient connection from Diridon to our local airport.

- It's important for the airport: If people can't easily get to SJC, they'll just stay on the HSR (or take the electrified CalTrain) to get to SFO, or else they'll take BART to go to OAK. Either way, it would likely be easier and less expensive than having to exit the Diridon Station and flag down a cab to take them to our local airport.
- It's important for the Diridon area: Visitors coming via HSR from LA or the Central Valley are likely to need a rental car for when they arrive: if it's convenient to jump over to SJC, they can get a rental car there and we don't have to waste the valuable land here by the station duplicating the nearby rental car facilities. Likewise, Bay Area residents catching HSR for business or pleasure trips to southern California might not be able to avoid driving to Diridon: why not have them use the long-term parking lots at SJC rather than wasting land here?

Los Gatos Creek Trail:

The Los Gatos Creek Trail is an important part of the regional trail network, serving bicyclists, joggers, walkers, young and old, recreationally and transportationally. It will be a contributing component of the Diridon transportation web, providing a non-automobile alternative means for accessing or traversing the area. I am glad that Google is prioritizing the trail in their project.

Starting at the south and heading north, some points:

- I support the current plans to extend the trail northward from its current San Carlos St. endpoint by remaining on the west side and crossing beneath the recently rebuilt CalTrain bridge at San Carlos and the creek, and then continuing downstream on the west side past what has been the fire training center. Unfortunately, the CalTrain bridge is lower and thicker than had been promised and so the trail both will have minimal vertical clearance *and* will occasionally flood, but this trail alignment is too critical to forego. When CalTrain elevates the tracks for the new Diridon Station, the trail can be reconstructed to better avoid flooding. In the interim, as this is an important transportation corridor, a process needs to be established to indicate temporary detours when flooding is likely, and also to clean up mud and silt after a flood so that the trail

can be quickly reopened. The Town of Mountain View has dealt with a similar situation with the Stevens Creek Trail at US-101: perhaps they can share pointers.

- When the train tracks are elevated, a spur trail can branch off from the main Los Gatos Creek Trail and carry Diridon-bound commuters directly to the Station, thereby reducing the load on the creekside trail. If Park Avenue is not regraded during track elevation, the current train bridge can be reconfigured for trail use; if Park Ave. is regraded, please provide a safe trail crossing (e.g., an overpass, or at least a signalized crossing).
- Also develop a trail on the east side of the creek from Auzerais to Bird, as Google has proposed. While this alignment is not as convenient as the west-side trail, it still can serve as a detour during the rainy season. As there likely are fewer bicycle commuters during inclement weather, the detour traffic is probably relatively light, and so this alternative alignment probably doesn't need to be designed to carry as many trail users as the main trail.
- Current plans are for the west-side trail to come up to Bird Ave./Montgomery and then follow the sidewalk north to Park Avenue. Please widen the sidewalk into a proper trail, and also provide a smooth transition from Creekside to roadside trail: don't repeat the mistake we made with the Three Creeks Trail where it abruptly jogs onto a narrow sidewalk at Bird Ave.
- I am truly sad that we are not taking advantage of this project construction to "right a prior wrong" and "daylight" the Los Gatos Creek, freeing it from its culverts under the Montgomery/Park intersection. While it would involve a significant amount of earth-moving, the amount is probably small compared to that involved in regrading Park Ave. at the railroad bridge. One of the advantages of daylighting the creek was that it would have provided the opportunity for safe trail crossing of both Park and Montgomery. Lacking that, it becomes more important to provide safe and convenient crossings of both Park and Montgomery so that the trail can continue to its junction with the Guadalupe and can carry trail users northward to Alviso and beyond. If it is not practical to provide trail under-crossings, would it be feasible to have overcrossings? (It'd be important to design such a crossing for ease-of-use: a crossing with hairpin turns is likely to be more of an impediment than a benefit...)
- I very much support the city's dream of acquiring properties between Autumn and the Creek for both trail continuity and for natural parkland.
- There's more to designing a good bike trail than simply drawing a continuous line on a map: please work with the cycling community when designing the trails so as to avoid common mistakes such as sharp bends or blind curves.
- Be sure the trail is sized to accommodate the anticipated usage: just like highways in town are wider than rural roads, the trail here near the Diridon Station will be carrying more trail-users than those segments out by the edge of town. It may be desirable to have multiple trails to help separate the usages: narrower winding trails nearer the creek for pedestrians quietly admiring nature and the scenery, and wider/smooth trails for joggers and commuter cyclists.

Overall Development:

There has been discussion at some meetings about the amount of housing in the Diridon area. I feel that the area should be primarily commercial, and I feel that Google is a great match for the location. As repeatedly stated at the General Plan Update ("Envision 2040") meetings, San José is "bedroom community" with more housing than jobs. San José needs tax revenue from businesses to reduce its structural budget deficit. I feel that we do want to have some residents in the area, so as to avoid it

becoming an after-hours ghost town. But we don't want too much housing in the area, as the residents quite likely will hop on BART or CalTrain for jobs in Oakland and San Francisco, giving those cities the tax revenue while San José is stuck paying for the needed infrastructure (parks, libraries, police, etc.)

Parks:

People need parks, both for physical health *and* for mental health. Parks are for residents, and also for workers who may need to get outdoors midday and clear their minds.

San José doesn't require park land dedication for new employment projects (I feel it should), but it does require it for new residential developments, requiring parkland (or equivalent cash fees) at the rate of 3 acres per 1,000 new residents. Google's plan is for 4,000 new units, which is roughly 8,000 new residents (depending on unit size), which works out to roughly 24 A of additional parkland needed. It's not practical to provide all of that within the 80 A footprint of Google's project. However, the need for parkland does exist, and can be met by collecting the in-lieu fees for the missing parks and then building parks in nearby neighborhoods like St. Leo, Shasta/Hanchett Park, Auzerais-Josefa, and Gardner.

Google's presentation talks about a total of 15 A of park and open space, but Google agrees that much of that is "project sponsor-owned open space" that doesn't count towards the 24 A requirement: only the 4.8 A of city-dedicated open space counts.

Google's park plans includes 4.1 A of Privately-Owned Public Open Spaces (POPOS). Several questions:

- Who maintains the sites?
- Who controls access, determining who is allowed to enter and who must leave?
- What are the hours of access? How are the times determined, can they change, and who changes them?
- Will POPOS public access be assured by means of a conservation easement? Would such a conservation easement "have teeth", or would it be all too easily circumvented?
- What happens to the POPOS if there's a change of owners? I wish Google a long and healthy existence – but I thought Netscape, Yahoo, Atari, Sun, IBM, and Lockheed would all be here forever, too. I would much prefer public open space to be city-dedicated parks.

Google's "15 acres" also counts the area within outdoor restaurants: they're nice, but shouldn't be counted as public open space; nor should walkways between buildings, rainwater runoff mitigation sites, or riparian setbacks. I appreciate Google's desire to design a green and open project, but I also feel it's a little misleading to count anything not paved over as "open space", even if they assure us that they're not trying to claim park credit for it.

I appreciate Google's concept for more "urban-based experiences" at their parks nearer the Diridon Station and more "nature-based experiences" further away and/or nearer the Los Gatos Creek. But even the "urban" parks need some nature: they shouldn't be all pavement and hardscape, but should also have trees for shade and landscaping to help refresh the soul.

Comments and questions on specific Google parks:

- Los Gatos Creek Connector (by Auzerais): What will be the impacts when CalTrain elevates the tracks? Will parkland be lost in case an additional track is needed when HSR arrives? Will parkland be lost when the San Carlos St. Bridge is replaced to accommodate the elevated CalTrain and/or HSR? As noted earlier, the trail through here will provide a suitable detour when floodwaters close the main trail at the current CalTrain undercrossing.
- The Meander: this proposal appears quite intriguing: a vibrant pedestrian walkway filled with activity. It is technically an “open space” in the sense that it’s not a building, but to me it seems more of a pedestrian corridor than a park. It shouldn’t count as parkland, and it is not being claimed as such, but showing it on the parkland diagrams may seem to be somewhat misleading to us in the public.
- Social Heart: is there an inviting connection between it and the entrance to Diridon? – it would seem like a natural connection. (Be sure to connect to wherever the currently-planned Entrance Plaza is located, and be alert to any future design changes.)
- Gateway to SJ (on Santa Clara): a park to provide a view down The Alameda, and to be viewed from The Alameda. This park will also be the “front door” to Arena Green and the planned icon. I am concerned that there appears to be little coordination between Google and Urban Confluence Silicon Valley, sponsors of the icon at Arena Green: if it is to be as important and popular as has been promised, I would hope for perhaps a little more attention to “viewsheds” and accessways. But of course, like the Diridon Station, this too is “a moving target”, with details such as design and location very much still TBD. And perhaps the “Los Gatos Creek East” open space will suffice as a view corridor.
- St. James Triangle: I recall that this area was pitched as a quiet escape: special measures may be needed to block the noise of a hundred-some trains a day passing along the western edge on elevated tracks.
- North Montgomery Pocket: This is a water runoff mitigation site? It doesn’t count as parkland, but it may still be a green (and marshy?) retreat best appreciated from the periphery.
- Northend Park: This park will be quite isolated until the CalTrain tracks are elevated, after which it will be accessible by Lenzen and will be appreciated by residents of the nearby park-deficient Shasta/Hanchett Park neighborhood.

I’m also glad that Google is respecting the riparian corridor and that a decent setback is provided. This is to be a natural habitat with minimal public disturbance: an open space but not a recreational resource: it doesn’t count as park, nor is it being claimed as such; I point that out for the record so that the appropriate amount of park in-lieu fees can be collected to help fund actual parks in adjacent nexus-connected neighborhoods.

I’m glad that Google is working to preserve historic and other old buildings: they add character to an area. That said, I question why Google wants to preserve the old warehouses on the east side of Autumn, including (I believe) “Building 9” and “Building 12”? These buildings extend to well within the riparian corridor: this is an opportunity to remove them and restore a critical habitat. Google has been using one of the buildings for public meetings, but they’ve just been using the front portion near the street: they could remove the unused add-on extension in the back without a loss and also enhance the riparian corridor. I suppose some of these buildings can add to the “gritty” character of the area, but

why not just keep the façades, remove the back portions of the buildings, and widen the corridor. Please don't keep them just to "remodel": don't use them as justification for constructing new buildings too close to the creek by claiming that they're rebuilt old buildings on their existing footprints.

Miscellaneous:

A few additional points:

- Google, don't forget about your western façade: you will be the "welcome to San José" view for people arriving by train. Please "put on a good face".
- The city is talking about building a new Community Center in the Diridon area. Why? The city already has several dozen centers, but is only able to operate about a dozen (roughly one per council district), and has had to close or "reuse" (i.e., hand over operation of) the rest. Indeed, the city already has a newly built center about a half mile away at Gardner that's presently unused: let's spend our time and resources using what we have.
- I'll echo the sentiments of others: this is going to be an exciting project, and promised "community benefits" will help ease the pain of squeezing such a large project into an established community. But "mitigation" is not "community benefits": mitigation is what must be done to make up for damages caused; community benefits are "above and beyond" to make for a better project.

As I wrote in an op-ed to the Mercury News three years ago, "Welcome, Google! Your project at Diridon Station will affect the surrounding neighborhoods and shape our entire city for years to come. It will be truly transformative."

I recognize that there are many pieces to this puzzle – CalTrain electrification, elevated CalTrain, High Speed Rail, BART, Light Rail, the connector to SJC–San José Airport, the Future Icon at Arena Green, the Los Gatos Creek Trail, the creek itself, nearby neighborhoods, and the city of San José, as well as Google – and we're asking you to assemble this puzzle while the pieces are all shifting shapes.

The Diridon Station Area / Google complex needs an overall project manager to coordinate and make sure that the interfaces between the different components all fit. I hope my comments may help point out some of these interconnects.

As soon as I email this, I'm sure I'll think of some additional points that I wish I had made. This is the Holiday season, and we all are distracted by it (and also by Covid, and the political season, and...). I'm sorry, but I haven't had as much time as I'd like to check through all the documentation, and so I apologize in advance if specific issues I've raised have already been addressed somewhere. But I also didn't want to miss the opportunity to provide public comment by missing the deadline.

I live just over a mile away from Diridon, and I regularly use the area now, both recreationally and as transportation. I look forward to it becoming a truly useful and vibrant destination!

~Larry Ames

longtime resident / trail and park advocate / environmentalist / community activist.

cc: Nicolle Burnham, San José Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services (PRNS)
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