

13. COMMUNITY DESIGN

CONTENTS

- A. INTRODUCTION293**
 - GUIDELINES AND STANDARDS..... 294
 - Streetscape*..... 294
 - Signage and Wayfinding* 295
 - Building Design and Quality* 296
- B. EXISTING CONDITIONS297**
 - 1. UNIQUE FEATURES 297
 - Streetscape*..... 297
 - Signage and Wayfinding* 298
 - Building Condition* 298
 - 2. ISSUES AFFECTING CLEARLAKE 299
 - Streetscape*..... 299
 - Signage and Wayfinding* 300
 - Building Condition* 301
- C. EMERGING DIRECTIONS302**
 - COMMUNITY FEEDBACK 302
 - CONCLUSIONS 303
- D. REFERENCES303**

A. INTRODUCTION

Community design and sense of place refer to the unique character and features of a city’s built environment and natural landscape. The Community Design Element of the General Plan has two main roles; it identifies existing conditions of Clearlake’s built environment and provides ways to preserve or enhance desirable community attributes by establishing a set of goals, policies and actions. This element provides additional direction for the prescriptions ascribed to uses in the Land Use Element. This additional direction includes not only the identification of Clearlake’s development pattern, form, and structure, but also, the unique characteristics of the City that together form its sense of place.

The Community Design Element also provides the basis for aesthetic regulation of all development and offers specific guidelines to enhance the sense of place and quality of life for Clearlake residents. These guidelines bring together the principles of the other elements in an overall set of policies to guide the form and appearance of Clearlake’s neighborhoods, streetscapes, and buildings.

Guidelines and Standards

Section 65303 of the State Government Code allows the addition of optional elements such as the Community Design Element into the General Plan. This element is developed closely with the prescriptive Land Use, Circulation, and Housing Elements. Additionally, the optional Health Element has strong influences on Clearlake’s Community Design policies, as studies have shown a significant correlation between public health and community design. The goals, objectives, policies, and programs in the Community Design Element are to be consistent with all other elements of the General Plan.

The Community Design Element also takes into consideration principles and objectives from the recent Lake County 2030 Blueprint Plan (2011) and design guidelines from the Clearlake Vision Task Force (2007). Based on these key documents, three priority areas have been identified as the basic criteria for community design standards in Clearlake. These priority areas are identified as streetscape; signage and wayfinding; and building design and quality.

Streetscape

There are three basic standards of a streetscape: the road, a pedestrian walkway, and lighting. Many other features that can, and should, be included in a streetscape benefit residents and the community alike. These features include street trees, bike lanes, traffic calming devices, street furniture such as benches and trashcans, and outdoor dining.

The Three Basics

In Clearlake, 43.8 percent of the centerline miles of roads are unpaved and 99.99 percent of parcels are without sidewalks. The 2009 Vision Task Force Report suggests that developers should be responsible for road frontage improvements or should pay into a road improvement fund in order to begin to “triage” this community-wide issue. The City’s unpaved roads create numerous safety issues, especially during rain events. The overwhelming response from community members when asked their likes, dislikes, and wishes for Clearlake was a need for paved roads. An absence of sidewalks also creates an unsafe pedestrian environment for residents as well as an unfriendly pedestrian environment for visitors. Limited street lighting in key commercial and residential areas also creates an unsafe and unfriendly nighttime pedestrian environment. Improved lighting does not imply increased light pollution, but involves implementing a lighting program for roads and pedestrian pathways, designed to protect views of the night sky and preserve the rural character of Clearlake.

Other Beneficial and Necessary Streetscape Elements

Street trees

Street trees add to the friendliness of a pedestrian environment by providing needed shade in summer months. While standard street tree placement is one tree for every fifty feet of property street frontage, that standard may be too strict for rural Clearlake. The Vision Task Force Report (2007) calls for the placement of trees to be regular enough to provide consistent shade without being placed at a set interval or at a set distance from the street (within 25 feet).

Allowing for a wide variety of street tree species would also be consistent with the rural character of Clearlake.

Bike lanes

Bike lanes or additional bike signage are necessary for providing safe routes for bicyclists. Bike lanes should be included in road design at the time of future paving. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) standard width for a Class 2 bike lane is 1.5 meters.

Traffic calming

Traffic calming devices lower traffic speeds. They also provide opportunities for beautification of roads and commercial areas by providing space for vegetation in bulbouts, medians, and roundabouts.

Street furniture

People go where there are places to sit and where there are other people. Thus, providing benches and encouraging outdoor dining can improve Clearlake's design. In order to attract visitors and residents to downtown Clearlake, the basic improvements to Clearlake's streetscape must be made. Once the Downtown area is capable of attracting visitors, seating should be provided to maintain presence and provide opportunity for social interaction. Trash cans and other furnishings, such as bollards, add to a friendly pedestrian environment.

Signage and Wayfinding

Signage and wayfinding are tools that can promote and guide economic and social activity in Clearlake. A comprehensive signage plan can enhance the area's connectivity and contribute to the visual character and culture of the community. However, signage that overwhelms the surrounding physical aesthetic or threatens public health and safety should be avoided. Proper signage will be part of Clearlake's design strategy. Therefore, an assessment of the appropriateness and functionality of signage, according to location, should be identified and conveyed in a set of Community Design Guidelines and other implementation policies.

Types of Uses

The Lake County Zoning Ordinance identifies numerous types of signage that reflect purpose, style, form, and location. Directional signs and landmarks help to orient residents and visitors in the physical environment and to navigate from place to place with ease. Commercial signage provides businesses adequate identification, direction, and advertisement. Signs can alert residents of danger, as well as provide residents with important information. Signs will be utilized to encourage positive behavior and organization in the City of Clearlake, as well as to promote economic and social activities.

Existing Standards and Regulations

Signage standards detailed in the Lake County Zoning Ordinance are inherently flexible, in order to safeguard the First Amendment right to Freedom of Speech and encourage creativity. In general, signage should be architecturally compatible with the style, composition, materials, colors, size, and details of buildings and other nearby signs. Above all, signage must convey a message in a clear, direct way in order to be effective. It will be important for the City of

Clearlake to review current signage guidelines permitted in the zoning ordinance in order to encourage signage improvements.

Building Design and Quality

Types of Uses

Clearlake's land use development pattern can generally be identified by assessing the built environment. Recent efforts to enhance the Downtown Lakeshore Corridor have identified several design strategies to address walking, cycling, transit, parking, street beautification, lake access, and local business revitalization. Priority is given to demarcate appropriate building uses along the Downtown corridor in order to support local businesses and promote tourism in Clearlake. Following the extensive assessment of Downtown needs, similar efforts need to be undertaken for Clearlake's various neighborhood areas. Existing building uses, vacant lots, compatibility and adequacy of uses should be assessed to meet current and future residential needs.

Heights and setbacks

The City Zoning Ordinance currently allows a maximum building height of 35 feet in the Downtown area. This translates to three story high buildings which may not be compatible with the small, resort town atmosphere the community identifies with. Newer commercial areas in the southeast and northwest parts of the City have large retail centers located inset from parking plazas, discouraging pedestrian scale activity. Residential areas consist of buildings of various shapes, orientation, height, and setbacks. These discrepancies among residential buildings pose a challenge to create a clear sense of place and create neighborhood cohesion within the local community. It is vital to review current building standards allowed in Clearlake's Municipal Code and identify opportunities for improvement in terms of building height, setback, and lot orientation.

Form and Quality

The majority of Clearlake buildings are residential homes, with some built on subdivisions established in the 1920s. The City flourished as a destination resort getaway from nearby cities in the 1960s, with many lakefront motels and tourist businesses located along Lakeshore Drive. Many choose to live in Clearlake for the natural landscape, idyllic lifestyle, and seasonal vacations. A majority of the housing stock and commercial buildings are more than 30 years old. Older homes are typically modular and many are in need of improvements. The recent economic downturn may have increased building vacancy, foreclosures, and abandonment. In an effort to promote safer, inclusive and active neighborhoods, the City will need to review and update the building and development guidelines to encourage more street level activity, building quality control, and building rehabilitation measures.

Neighborhood Character and Land Siting

Neighborhood character is defined as the way people identify with the particular characteristics or attributes of an area. It is usually related to visual aesthetics such as notable building structures, building design or orientation, and overall development pattern or density.

Clearlake is characterized by mainly low-density development with some eclectic buildings which contribute to its small town charm. With the exception of some areas, most of the buildings in Clearlake are well sited along natural grades that maximize vantage views of the lake, creek, and mountains. Newer multi-family residential developments have been developed in cluster settings with sustainable landscaping. It is evident that the City has progressive visions for new developments to be environmentally sensitive to the local landscape. These ambitions shall be identified and made clear in the Community Design Element's goals, objectives, policies, and programs.

B. EXISTING CONDITIONS

1. Unique Features

Clearlake residents are attracted to the slow pace and rural character of the City. As the community developed, strict zoning codes and building requirements were relaxed to support the City's rural character (City of Clearlake, 1983). As a result, the current condition of Clearlake's community design aesthetic is quite varied. The following section identifies what Clearlake residents stated they liked or would like preserved in their community with regards to streetscape, signage and wayfinding, and building form and quality.

Streetscape

Clearlake residents like the family-oriented, 'know your neighbor' social fabric that exists in the community. Streetscape design helps facilitate these connections between community members. Residents like the low level of traffic and congestion on their streets, deeming the streets safer for various types of users. During site visits to Clearlake, the planning team found some children playing on calm residential streets. The street in the neighborhood was paved, had sidewalks and street trees to provide shade. These features attribute to the friendly, safe, and slow-paced lifestyle that the community values.

Children play on residential street, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Survey, 2012

Signage and Wayfinding

Clearlake residents like signage and wayfinding landmarks that exemplify the unique charm and character of the community. Signs, such as the dramatic 'Motel' sign on Lakeshore Drive or the public mural in the IGA grocery store parking area, act as directional or wayfinding tools for the locals and visitors. They each mark their location in a unique way, contributing to an overall shared sense of place for community members.

Motel sign, Lakeshore Drive



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Mural, IGA parking lot, Lakeshore Drive



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Building Condition

The majority of buildings in Clearlake are residential homes. Community members appreciate family-friendly housing styles, which are typically single-family homes. Residents want to see the small town character preserved in the building aesthetics.

Well maintained single family home, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

2. Issues Affecting Clearlake

While they appreciate the small town atmosphere and beautiful surrounding landscape, community members mentioned several issues which they believe negatively affect the City and community. Neighborhood safety is a major concern. One main safety concern is limited animal control. Roaming dogs and cats around the residential areas place a threat to children's safety. The increase of vagrants and transients in the City has also affected the security of the community. Safe living standards are compromised in some residential areas, such as the Avenues, where trash is not properly managed and many homes are in poor condition.

Streetscape

Aside from the Downtown, street conditions in Clearlake are generally poor. Most of the streets do not have sidewalks, marked crossings for pedestrians, or bicycle lane markings for cyclists. Further, insufficient trees along local streets and public spaces discourage pedestrian activity. Many neighborhoods, streets, and public spaces in Clearlake have no street lighting. The Downtown corridor also has inadequate lighting for businesses, especially during winter months.

Cyclist rides on road shoulder, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Poor road condition in Clearlake



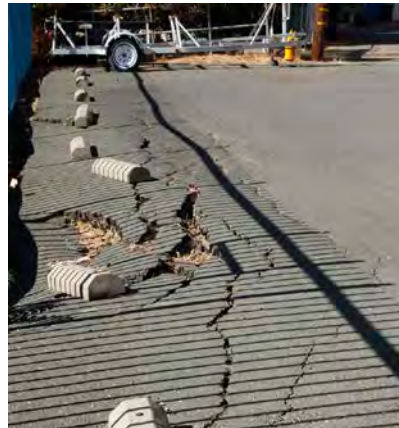
Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

No sidewalks or street lighting, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Poorly maintained roads in Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Signage and Wayfinding

Lakeshore Drive is the main commercial corridor in Clearlake; however, it lacks prominence in business identity, good building aesthetics, and signage. Overall, Lakeshore Drive would benefit from increased directional signage for motorists. Lakeshore Drive, the town gateway, is left unmarked for motorists approaching the main intersection from Highway 53. The only directional signage is small and there is limited information to attract and direct motorists into the town. Other existing signs around the town are also small, not strategically located, and poorly maintained. Due to Clearlake's relaxed zoning and building standards, many buildings were constructed decades ago along prime lakefront parcels. These buildings have now become a barrier to the lake, with many community members citing limited lake access as their top frustration. The sparse areas designated for public lake access are not clearly marked and lit, making them hard to locate, especially for visitors. Street safety depends on adequate markings and signage. Most of Clearlake's streets are not striped with lane markings, pedestrian crossings, or cyclist lanes. Absences of sidewalks and pedestrian priority signage exacerbate pedestrian safety hazards, especially near school districts. There are several locations where bus stops are inconspicuously located on road shoulders without adequate safety markings, signage, or shelter.

Few indicators of local identity, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Public lake access is unclear or hidden



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Main City sign on Highway 53, small and inefficiently placed



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Example of restricted lake access, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Bus stop without shelter or bench



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

No sidewalk or pedestrian crossing near school



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Building Condition

One of the priority community concerns is the status of aging houses found in many residential neighborhoods. Historically, a majority of buildings and homes in Clearlake were built in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, some of these homes are approximately 50 years old and are in need of severe upgrading. These include a large portion of mobile homes. There are also problems with code enforcement, resulting in illegal trash dumping, unsafe building habitation, or graffiti on abandoned buildings. Relaxed enforcement of zoning codes resulted in private development of lakefront property, which limits lake access from Lakeshore Drive. The problem is exacerbated, however, as the recent economic downturn lowered business activity along Lakeshore drive and resulted in building vacancies and poor building maintenance of lakefront property. Overall, the community expresses strong desires to upgrade the aesthetics of existing buildings, in particular, replacing old mobile homes with better quality stick built homes that will appreciate over time.

Poorly maintained house, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Abandoned building with graffiti, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Private lake front properties create barriers to the lake, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

Private deck overlooking Clear Lake, Clearlake



Cal Poly Land Use Inventory, 2012

C. EMERGING DIRECTIONS

Community Feedback

During Community Meeting Two, community members were asked three preference questions, concerning Community Design in Clearlake. The first question asked participants to identify the amenities they would like to see on Lakeshore Drive and other commercial streets in the City. The response revealed preferences for all types of amenities, but the most preferred amenities were sidewalks, street trees, pedestrian lighting, and directional signage. Community members further noted that the preferred lighting type would protect the night sky. Other community members indicated that the combination of no sidewalks, few bike lanes, and inadequate transit creates a safety issue for the senior and disabled populations to get around in the City.

One of the major goals identified in the Clearlake Vision Task Force Report is to better protect Clearlake's native oak trees. This will require cluster development to conserve areas with a dense tree canopy or areas with specimen oaks and other native trees. New development could also be required to provide on-site mitigation if oak tree removal is necessary. Community members identified Clearlake's oaks as a major contributing factor to the scenic quality of the City.

The second question asked was “Which type of street would you like in your neighborhood?” This question received a clear response from community members, with nobody expressing preference for the existing roads/streetscapes and most preferring a neighborhood streetscape with sidewalks and landscaping. Community members also added that some type of educational or outreach program should be created, to encourage neighbors to better maintain their properties and not dump trash onto vacant lots or into the public right-of-way.

The final community design question asked community members to rank architectural styles for neighborhood building design. This question revealed a significantly high preference for the Craftsman architectural style. The Craftsman style appeared in the United States at the end of the 19th century, continued into the 1930’s and is still popular today. The Craftsman style which developed as a reaction to the overly ornate Victorian style is known for simplicity of form, presence of natural materials, and the use of handicraft. This appreciation for local materials and a rural, down-to-earth feel “resonates,” in the words of community members, thus this choice of architectural style seems to be consistent with the community’s sense of place and identity.

Conclusions

Community identity and sense of place can be strengthened by developing core design guidelines that support and contribute to the goals of other elements of a General Plan. In order to achieve these community goals, the following prompts have been identified for the development of the Community Design Element:

- Where are the priority areas for revitalization?
- What types of architectural design and street design are appropriate for Clearlake?
- What kind of design guidelines and policies can enhance Clearlake’s strengths?

D. REFERENCES

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