

New housing at San Mateo train station

Five-story housing development approved at Caltrain parking lot

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A proposed five-story residential building at the San Mateo Hayward Park Caltrain Station parking lot site received Planning Commission approval, providing a housing boost near a desirable transit area.

“It’s pretty exciting when you can come in and take extremely valuable land and develop it into units for housing,” Planning Commission Vice Chair John Ebnetter said, praising the project for renovating an outdated parking lot. “There couldn’t be a better location in the city right on the train tracks.”

The development is one of the last pieces left east of the train station and north of State Route 92. All development parties are interested in putting more people near transit to increase ridership, ensure sustainability and reduce car use. Caltrain, which owns the land, views it as a way to develop ridership in an underutilized spot and to have fewer cars on the roads, while San Mateo covets it as a way to address its housing shortage.

“I feel it’s almost a bet on transit to put housing here,” Commissioner Martin Wiggins said. “I feel like a lot of good decisions are being made and looking to the future of what’s going to be sustainable long term.”

The 191-unit multi-family project at 401 Concar Drive will have 17 studios, 119 one-bedroom and 55 two-bedroom units on the second through fifth floors. Around 16 units will be for people in the very-low-income bracket and 12 for the moderate-income level. Residents would access the site off Concar Drive and the Hayward Park Caltrain station, which is immediately adjacent to the station. A surface parking lot will be to the rear north of the project frontage and will be private. The site has Concar Drive to the south, the Station Park Green mixed-use development to the northeast, and the Caltrain platform and railroad tracks to the west.

There are 92 parking spaces through a combination of a ground floor parking garage with 221 bicycle parking spots. The existing area provides 225 parking spaces available to Caltrain commuters who use the station and would be eliminated. Due to the loss, some have raised concerns about parking overflow and congestion on nearby streets. The city has asked for consideration of a shared parking program allowing up to 51 spaces to Caltrain users during business hours to mitigate the issue.

Commissioner Seema Patel expressed concern about air quality for homes close to the station near State Route 92 and El Camino Real and for parking losses for those commuting partially by car in the remainder of their trip by Caltrain, noting it could lead to people overcrowding parking at other San Mateo stations.

“We need to make Caltrain ridership easy for people who are farther than an easy walk or an easy bike ride from Caltrain stations,” Patel said.

However, applicant Sares Regis Group has said allowing Caltrain users to access the site was not feasible, citing logistical issues. Ken Busch of Sares Regis Group said it did not plan to reconsider the issue in a few years because it did not foresee empty parking spaces based on other properties it manages.

“It would be a real problem. It’s not an objective standard,” Busch said of having a shared parking program.

Commissioner Adam Nugent said while shared parking would be ideal, it did not appear feasible. He pointed out that a shared parking situation would be unwieldy for a developer to plan and manage.

“I understand why Caltrain does not include parking at this station. They are going to focus parking at stations that have greater frequency to accommodate that varied decision-making of riders,” Nugent said.

The Planning Commission approved the site plan and architectural review 4-0 at its Aug. 23 meeting, with Chair Margaret Williams absent.