

January 6, 2004

Members, The Davis City Council
23 Russell Blvd. Davis, CA 95616

Dear Council Members:

I write to suggest an action that might help resolve the current R1/R2 debate regarding the Old North area. That action is to have planning specialists develop an analysis of the consequences of each scheme at "build-out." Cast as a brief essay, some details of why and how this might be done are given just below.

Many thanks for your time and attention. Cordially, John Lofland

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Resolving the Old North R-1/R-2 Zoning Debate: Specifying Features at Build-Out

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The current debate over R-1 versus R-2 zoning for the Old North seems to me to lack specificity.

For example, arguments for and against R-1 and R-2 include pleas (1) to preserve neighborhood character, (2) to enhance infill or densification, (3) to increase variety, and (4) to add flexibility in developing properties.

Arguments at this level of abstraction are, to me, hollow. To favor any of these four is like favoring food or sex. Every sensible person favors all of them. Favoring is, therefore, not the question.

Instead, there are several questions about any of these abstractions. These include: what kind, how much, when, and where? Even good things have contextual and content limits.

Features at Build-Out.

So, what then? One way to proceed is to become more specific about likely long-term consequences (or features) of each zoning. Developing such a list for both R-1 and R-2 zoning, we can assess which set seems more viable and likely not to exceed the reasonable "carrying capacity" of the Old North.

I suggest these projections/extrapolations take the form of answering the following

kinds of quantitative and qualitative questions.

I. At build-out under each zoning, what are the (1) likely and (2) maximum number of:

1. residents?
2. dwelling units?
3. bedrooms?
4. cars owned and kept in the neighborhood?
5. off-street parking places?
6. on-street parking places?

II. Regarding non-resident use, what are the likely and maximum number of:

1. business and other non-residential establishments?
2. people employed in the area (with and without cars) coming into the area each day?
3. patrons of for-profit and non-profit organizations arriving each day and for how long?
4. out-of-neighborhood shopper-driven autos in the area for varying period of time?
5. autos stored on the streets?
6. downtown employee autos parked free on Old North streets?

III. What are the likely and maximum number of:

1. dwellings in excessive shade and lacking privacy because of second-story adjacent structures?

2. rows of two-story properties forming “tunnels” on alleys?

IV. There are build-out features that are hard to count but nonetheless important. Unavoidably, they circle us back to vagueness.

1. What would be the overall mass, scale and “feel” of the area under R-1 vs. R-2?
2. Recognizing that the purpose of a conservation district is not to freeze it, what would be the historical “feel” under each zoning at build-out?
3. What are the probabilities that the area will, in the next ten years, be served by a truly first-rate system of mass transit?

The Need For Answers.

I submit that we cannot make a reasoned choice between R-1 and R-2 zoning for the Old North without answers to most if not all the above questions (and others that will come to mind).

Specification of build-out features under both zoning schemes requires that skilled planners work through the data applying each. Happily, this is exactly the kind of exercise that is the “reason-for-being” of that occupation.

Two Speculations.

While I do not know what will be found, I know enough to offer speculations on two build-out features.

1. At this time, the Old North has a population of on-the-order-of 400 people living in about 200 residential units (these numbers depend in part on exactly what one counts as a resident, a dwelling, and the area).

A significant minority of properties already have two dwellings (one even has an illegal

three units). But there is still ample space for more second units of the R-1 or R-2 kinds (and demolitions could create new possibilities).

My ballpark projection is that at R-1 build-out the population would be some 600 people. At R-2 build-out, it would be about 800 people.

This may not sound like much, but the former is a 50% increase and the latter is a 100% increase.

The nine main blocks of the Old North are .054 of a square mile. These nine contain almost 400 people. This means that the current population per square mile density is about 7,000, which is in the range of major American cities. Population increases of 200 and 400 soar the density into the range of such highly dense cities as San Francisco (15,000).

2. Then, of course, we need projections for other questions enumerated above. The build-out number of cars is among these. My guess is that under R-1 zoning we might expect another (at least) 100 resident cars. Under R-2, there might be an additional (at least) 200 cars. (Either increase would inflict the Old North with the San Francisco car nightmare.)

Concluding Suggestions.

In my view, without an effort of the sort I have outlined, we are lurching blindly into the future. Clearly, we risk disaster.

I urge the City Council not to adopt the pending R-2 CD ordinance. Instead, undertake a study of the likely long-term effects of R-1 and R-2 zoning. Based on the results, chart an empirically grounded course of action.