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Eastern Neighborhoods Plan Loopholes Need to be Closed

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OP-ED BY J.R. Eppler

The Eastern Neighborhoods Plan, the culmination of a decade of analysis, negotiation and community process, represents a grand bargain between the City of San Francisco and our neighborhoods. It purports to balance redevelopment of formerly industrial areas and population growth with neighborhood wariness of additional density in an area historically under-served by City infrastructure.

The Plan has wobbled, however, in implementation. **The surge of development hasn't brought the resources necessary to accommodate new residents.** Certain infrastructure changes — such as rerouting Muni's 22 and 33 lines — have indeterminate time-lines and uncertain net benefits. Wholly unaddressed issues — lack of a public middle school on the Hill, for example — are even more concerning. As we see new building foundations being poured, we also see clearly where the Plan has fallen short.

At the Potrero Booster's October meeting, our executive committee presented reforms addressing the Plan's flaws and ways to further align the incentives of developers and the City with existing neighborhoods to ensure the Plan's ultimate success. These reforms would close planning loopholes for future development projects:

While the Plan increased height limits, heights were set relative to the surrounding area. Developers may currently build to their fully permitted heights, and then add mechanical equipment, elevator penthouses and other building systems on top. We propose that the entire building, including its mechanical systems, fit within the zoned height.

The Plan provides for commercial- and neighborhood-serving, street-activating spaces. Residential demand has resulted in developers proposing "flex units," or spaces which may be either residential or commercial. As the residential value of such a units exceed their commercial value, flex units result in less commercial space. We propose that at least 40 percent of first floor frontages be dedicated to commercial use.

During the Great Recession, impact fees were reduced to spur additional development. Development incentives are no longer necessary; we propose that impact fees for new projects compensate for their full impact.

These reforms would also mitigate the impact of projects currently in the planning pipeline:

- As a check on neighborhood character, we propose that a committee of neighborhood residents — whether the existing Citizens Advisory Committee or otherwise — review and provide feedback on projects. If a project doesn't receive community approval, then a super-majority vote of the Planning Commission would be required for the project to proceed.

- **Development in the Eastern Neighborhoods will result in significantly increased property tax revenue. We propose that a fraction of the increased revenue be dedicated to an Eastern Neighborhoods Infrastructure Finance District, providing dedicated funding for the area's infrastructure needs.**

- **Metering development, and pacing it with infrastructure, would prevent development from overshooting available resources. We propose that market rate development be restricted unless needs in transit, public schools, affordable housing and open space are fulfilled in lockstep.**

- **Last, we propose that the Board of Supervisors regularly review the Plan to affirmatively determine that enough infrastructure to support new development has been built. If so, then development may continue apace. If the Board finds inadequate infrastructure, then a moratorium on permits would halt building until infrastructure catches up, or the impacts of development are otherwise abated.**

Development in the Eastern Neighborhoods must not be a free-for-all land run. We should demand responsible growth; we believe these reforms move us in that direction. We look forward to a broad discussion on reforming the Plan with our neighbors, elected officials and City departments. Your participation is important. We seek your input and encourage you to join us in pouring the foundations of healthy, thriving Eastern Neighborhoods.

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