



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 8/21/2025

File #: 25-905

To: Planning Commission

From: Planning and Building Department

Agenda Section: Special Presentation

SUBJECT:

Workshop on McKinleyville Town Center

Assessor Parcel Numbers (APN) 508-251-060, 510-133-013-000, 508-251-008, 508-251-061, 508-251-040, 508-251-051, 508-251-052, 508-251-034, 508-251-035, 508-251-023, 508-251-024, 510-133-006, 510-411-031, 510-133-032, 510-133-028, 510-411-025, 510-411-014, 510-411-006, 510-411-016, 510-401-027, 510-401-026, 510-401-022, 510-401-011, 510-401-028, 510-401-003, 510-341-015, 510-341-019, 510-341-039, 510-341-017, 510-341-041, 510-132-013, 510-132-031, 510-132-007, 510-132-032, 510-132-017, 510-132-015, 510-132-003, 510-122-022, 510-122-005, 510-122-036, 510-122-037, 510-122-024, 510-122-003, 510-122-031, 510-122-033, 510-134-022, 510-122-035, 510-122-032, 510-122-028, 510-122-027, 510-122-026, 510-122-025.

Record No.: PLN-2020-16567

McKinleyville

Workshop on the McKinleyville Town Center Ordinance which will rezone the area as Mixed Use with a Q-Zone overlay. The Q-Zone will apply specific regulations to the Town Center site. The Q-Zone will support a mix of commercial, civic, and residential uses while emphasizing bicycle and pedestrian connectivity, public gathering spaces, open space, and wetland preservation. The Q-Zone includes form-based building design standards. Changes are contemplated in how wetlands are defined in the Community Plan.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Planning Commission:

1. Request that Staff present the Staff Report; and
2. Receive public comment; and
3. Deliberate and comment on the Town Center Ordinance (Attachment 1) and EIR (Attachment

2); and

4. Provide comments on any areas of concern on the McKinleyville Town Center Ordinance.

DISCUSSION:

Project Location:

Generally, between Railroad Avenue on the north and Heartwood Drive on the south and between McKinleyville Avenue on the west and the eastern boundary of Pierson Park on the east.

Present General Plan Land Use Designation: Public Facilities, Commercial Services, Mixed Use, Medium Density Residential

Present Zoning: Community Commercial (C-2), Residential Multiple Family (R-3)

Environmental Review: An EIR is being prepared

State Appeal: This is not in the Coastal Zone

Major Concerns: The Major concerns associated with the Proposed Town Center include the reconfiguration of Central Avenue, Open Space, Wetlands, and the amount of development analyzed in the EIR.

Executive Summary: This workshop is intended to introduce the Planning Commission and the public to the work of the McKinleyville Municipal Advisory Committee (MMAC) to develop an ordinance to implement the Community Plan provisions for a Town Center. The MMAC and the public have spent countless hours developing and refining an ordinance that creates a distinctive place for McKinleyville. The policy guidance comes from the Community Plan and from a significant amount of technical and public input. The MMAC is not finished with their review, but that is expected at the next meeting at the end of August. This staff report presents the policy guidance, the process used by the MMAC to develop the ordinance, the ordinance itself, outstanding issues, areas of controversy and the EIR prepared for the project.

Discussion

1. Background

A. Policy Guidance

The Town Center Ordinance has its policy guidance in the McKinleyville Community Plan which was adopted in 2002. The MCP specifically calls for the adoption of a Town Center ordinance by establishing the following goals and policies:

Town Center Goals and Policies

2351 Goals

- 1. To establish a unique identity for McKinleyville through the development of a viable town center, serving as a community focal point and providing a center for social/community interaction.*
- 2. To develop an area of mixed land uses which encourages bicycle and pedestrian travel, yet allows for convenient and safe automobile access.*

2352 Policies

- 1. The County shall adopt a Town Center Area ordinance to identify permitted land uses and standards for the Town Center area identified on the McKinleyville Community Plan Zoning Map.*
- 2. The Town Center Area shall permit mixed-use categories of zoning, including higher density urban housing in concert with retail commercial uses and shopfronts, and shall include an abundance and variety of open spaces.*
- 3. The Town Center Area shall offer a full range of commercial, offices and civic activities. Allowable uses may include, but are not limited to, an expanded grocery store, additional shops, a department store, hardware home supply, restaurants, office space, medical and dental clinic, a movie complex, town green for athletic and civic events, civic buildings, library, high density residential, laundromat, farmers market, residences above shopfronts, child care facilities, and art galleries.*
- 4. The Town Center Area shall have no additional drive-thru restaurants, and no large “big-box” department stores, as defined. Rather, the department stores should be divided into several separate rooms or buildings to avoid the look of the giant retail, department store.*
- 5. The Town Center Area shall permit all public facility uses currently identified in the Public Facility land use designation in the Humboldt County Framework Plan (chapter 2761). All existing and proposed public facility uses shall remain as public facilities, and shall not be converted to incompatible commercial uses.*
- 6. The Town Center Area shall identify implementation alternatives associated with a Central Avenue pedestrian crossing. The alternatives should contain solutions which ease pedestrian traffic, including longer time frames at the crosswalk light, funding mechanisms for a pedestrian bridge over Central Avenue, and traffic calming measures as illustrated herein.*

Design Standards Goals and Policies

2641 Goals

- 1. To promote safe, accessible and human scale residential and commercial areas where people of*

all ages can work and play.

- 2. To promote preservation and development of pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods and commercial areas.*

2642 Policies

- 1. Design review standards shall be adopted for the Town Center area as identified on the Plan's land use maps. A Design Review Committee shall be formed to develop those standards within the Town Center area. No Special Permit shall be required as part of the process.*
- 2. The County shall adopt a Design Review ordinance which establishes clear development standards. The design review standards must be consistent and compatible with the overall principles, objectives and policies of the entire General Plan.*
- 3. Mixed-use categories of zoning, including higher density urban housing above retail commercial uses and shopfronts shall be designed to include an abundance and variety of open spaces, such as urban parks, courtyards and gardens, with a connected system of pedestrian walkways, alleys and streets.*
- 4. Intersections and streets within the Town Center shall be designed to facilitate pedestrian movement, and shall provide bicycle connections to commercial areas and transit stops. Transit stops should provide shelter for pedestrians and provisions for secure bicycle storage.*
- 5. Clear, direct and comfortable pedestrian access to the Town Center shall be encouraged.*
- 6. The design review standards shall include a review of street lighting and commercial lighting impacts. Exterior lighting shall be compatible with the surrounding setting, and will not be directed beyond the boundary of the parcel.*
- 7. All designs shall include the protection of natural land forms through minimizing alteration caused by cutting, filling, grading or clearing.*
- 8. All designs shall screen or soften the visual impact of new development through the use of landscaping. If appropriate, species common to the area and known fire resistant plants should be used.*
- 9. Where feasible, new utilities shall be underground. When aboveground facilities are the only feasible alternative, they shall be sited as unobtrusively as possible.*
- 10. Signs shall be limited in size, scale and number.*
- 11. The design review standards shall include an evaluation of the basic qualities of building and places including:*
 - entries and windows that create frequent points of interest along public streets;*
 - ease of access for the physically impaired;*

- *well crafted durable materials;*
- *elements that are human scaled, relating to human activities, such as seating, gathering places, etc.;*
- *passages, terraces, balconies and courts;*
- *diversity within a coherent whole;*
- *mid-town bicycle and pedestrian corridor; and*
- *sign standards.*

12. *The Community Principles of Section 2100 (Overview) shall be used, as applicable, in developing the design review standards.*

Between 2002 and 2019 there was no work done toward completion of the Town Center. This becomes part of the discussion about some of the park and civic spaces. There are existing facilities within the Town Center boundaries (Pierson Park, Sheriff's substation, Azalea Hall, Library, and Community Center.) This is not the creation of a Zoning District for completely undeveloped property. There has been some development in the town center including the community building on Heartwood, the Lays building on Nursery Way, and Starbucks.

B. Ordinance Development.

Work began on developing the ordinance in 2019. In approaching the work, it was important that this be a very public process and that the result represents how the community envisions a town center. Initially the McKinleyville Municipal Advisory Committee considered appointing a separate group of people to facilitate this public process, but the purpose of the MMAC is to solicit public input and make recommendations, so it was decided the MMAC would be the best group to facilitate this process.

The process started on November 13, 2019 with a meeting in Azalea hall, providing the participants to identify the elements that are important to them in development of a Town Center Ordinance. This was followed by a meeting on December 18, 2019 where participants were given the opportunity to go to tables that were broken out by topic including: Community Space and Art, Design, Economic Vitality, Housing and Homelessness, Land Use, Sustainability, transportation and wetlands. There were at least 35 public meetings where the Town Center Ordinance was discussed, including an open house on November 13, 2021 to allow people to come and ask questions and look at what was being proposed. During the Period of 2020 to 2021 the County hired Kash Boodjeh to help with the design elements of the Town Center. In July of 2023 Walkability and Complete Streets innovator and expert Dan Burden performed a walk audit in the Town Center Area along Central Avenue.

The MMAC has not completed their recommendation on the Town Center Ordinance. It is expected this will occur on August 29, 2025, prior to this being presented to the Planning Commission. There

are only a couple of items to be addressed by the MMAC.

2. Ordinance Provisions

- A. Zoning. The proposal is to Zone the entire area of the Town Center (Shown in Map 1 of the Town Center Ordinance) to Mixed Use Urban with a Q Zone overlay. The Q Zone overlay is what is described in the Town Center Ordinance. Under the Q Zone the area of Pierson Park will be designated for Public Facilities (PF), and in that area the PF zoning regulations of the Zoning Ordinance will be applied. The Trailer Park on the east side of Central Avenue will be designated R -3 with the R-3 standards applying. An area along McKinleyville Avenue will be designated as wetlands and in that area the standards from the Streamside Management Areas and Wetlands standards will apply. The remainder of the area will be designated as Mixed Use, and the ordinance is dedicated to describing the standards for that area. The table on Page 5 of the ordinance shows the permitted uses in the area designated as Mixed Use.
- B. Building Design - Form Based Code. The building design will follow a simple form-based code approach that is differentiated by the type of street on which the building is located. The Street Frontage types are shown in Map 2 with the following table showing the building form standards according to the building type. The purpose of the code is to allow development patterns that are creative and interesting while establishing a walkable community with buildings adjacent to the sidewalk, prioritizing development at the human scale creating opportunities for the town center where people come to meet.
- C. Connectivity. This section of the ordinance discusses all modes of travel with a priority placed on pedestrians, bicycle, and transit. Vehicular traffic is not ignored. The circulation network for the town center focuses on creating internal and external connections for pedestrians and bicyclists. This is shown on Map 3 of the ordinance. There is a new east/west trail extending from McKinleyville Avenue, through the shopping center, across central to Pierson Park. Ideally this will become the central core of the western portion of the Town Center where people come to meet and gather. There is also the completion of the Mid Town trail (North/south) through the middle of the site, in addition to bicycle paths on Railroad, Central Avenue and Hiller. The ordinance also calls for the creation of a transit center to facilitate transit travel to and from the Town Center.
- D. Central Road Diet. The most divisive discussion associated with the town center is whether to reduce the number of lanes on Central Avenue. Policy 6 above of the Town Center Goals and Policies clearly wanted to address pedestrian crossings of Central Avenue. The most effective approaches are to reduce the distance pedestrians need to travel to cross the street and to slow traffic. In addition, there was significant testimony that the bicycle lanes and sidewalks along Central Avenue do not feel safe. It is also important to consider that many communities have slowed traffic through their business districts resulting in an increase in business. The objective of the road diet is multi-faceted in that it improves bicycle and pedestrian safety and creates a better

sense of place where people are not just traveling through, but this becomes more of a destination. Not many well-planned community centers have a high-speed roadway bisecting the area. This tends to detract from crossing from one side to the other unless there is a dedicated pedestrian overcrossing. A pedestrian overcrossing was eliminated early due to space constraints and cost.

In the draft ordinance available to the Planning Commission there are three alternatives currently available to the MMAC. Exhibit 1 has been part of the discussion for some time. It would have three lanes with an open center turn lane. There would be separate paths for pedestrians and bicyclists separated by landscaping. The bike paths would be separated from traffic by landscaping. Alternatives 1 and 2 came from a study conducted for Public Works. Alternative 1 would place a 10' bike/pedestrian path on the west side of Central and narrow down the lanes to basically maintain the existing lane configurations. Alternative 2 would maintain the same pavement cross section of Central but reduce the lanes to 3 and add 9' buffers between the travel lane and bike path.

The MMAC has not yet taken a formal vote on this. It is difficult to see this being unanimous either for the road diet or to maintain the existing road configuration. Once this is presented to the Planning Commission in the public hearing it will be controversial.

- E. Design and Development Standards. The Design and Development standards begin with insuring that any proposed project for which permits are being sought must comply with the provisions of the ordinance. A unique feature of the ordinance is there is no minimum parking requirement for the mixed use and if parking is desired it must be put into a common parking facility (Ord section 5.2). There is a maximum number of spaces specified for residential parking. There are minimum spaces required for bicycle parking.
- F. Public Open Space. This is in section 5.5 of the design standards, but since it is an area receiving public attention, it is being called out separately. Open space is a requirement of the town center. A minimum of three percent of the undeveloped town center shall be devoted to open space with a single space that is a minimum of 20,000 square feet. The Arcata Square scales out at slightly over an acre (acre = 43,560 sf.). This open space requirement cannot be satisfied in the wetland area or using the bicycle/pedestrian facilities.
- G. Protection and Conservation of Wetlands. In the early discussions on this topic based on the County GIS it appeared that it would not be possible to develop the town center based on the wetlands on these infill parcels. The McKinleyville Community Plan defines a wetland as having any one of the normal three parameters used by the County General Plan and Army Corps of Engineers to define a wetland (hydric soils, water and wetland plants). Wetlands was a topic that received significant consideration. The MMAC and interested community members took a field trip out on to the property behind the shopping center and looked at wetland areas. The field trip

included a biologist hired by the property owner and a representative of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The southwestern corner of the property contains the best wetlands on the property and the highest potential for wetland creation.

This gave rise to the thought that since most of the wetlands on site are not high value and have been grazed for years, that allowing relocation of wetlands to an area developed to wetland mitigation would allow a more coherent town center design. There was a desire to see the spruce grove in the middle of the site retained, so the proposal is to take the 14 acres surrounded by McKinleyville Avenue, Railroad Avenue, Hiller and the Spruce Grove and use that for wetland preservation and mitigation. This is approximately one third of the area behind the shopping center. The ordinance includes precise steps for the mitigation requirement including provisions for long-term maintenance of the area.

3. Topics MMAC has not Decided.

The MMAC is scheduled to have a final meeting on August 27, 2025, to make a recommendation to the Planning Commission on the entirety of the Plan and the FEIR. There are only three issues left to decide upon as follows:

A. Central Avenue Road Diet. This discussion is extremely divisive within the community. Many like Central Avenue like it is and want no change. This includes the McKinleyville Community Services District who is concerned about being able to maintain infrastructure under Central Avenue. The primary alternative would place landscaping in an area needed for maintenance. Many in this group realize it would be good to slow down traffic on Central Avenue. Others really see the road diet as part of the image for the town center placing reconfiguring the road to emphasize bicycle and pedestrian connections and defining a special place.

As part of the EIR the Traffic Study looked at both Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) Impacts and the operational impacts of the Road diet. There would be impacts to other intersections in the areas, and the Traffic Study does make recommendations to mitigate those impacts. The road and intersection impacts are not impact under CEQA anymore as SB743 changed the metric from Level of Service to VMT. This was provided as an informational item.

B. Wetlands. When this journey began there was the appearance that the one parameter wetlands dominated the site and would make it very difficult to develop a town center. There is now a wetland delineation that shows there are only .64 acres of one parameter wetlands. The question before the MMAC is whether to just stick with the McKinleyville Community Plan definition of wetlands as a single parameter or allow the definition to be three parameters in the Town Center.

C. Modification to Community Plan. This relates to the single versus three parameter wetland

provisions. If the MMAC decides to stay with the single parameter definition of wetlands, then there is no need to amend the Community Plan. If they move to the three-parameter definition, then they need to vote on the language of the modification to the Community Plan.

4. Areas of Concern.

- A. Lack of Public Process. As the MMACs work on the Town Center Ordinance nears completion there is the complaint of a lack of public process. Some of these commenters are new to the process and have not experienced 6 years and over 35 meetings. Others have been consistently present but do not feel like what they have advocated for has been heard. The MMAC has repeatedly discussed that not every idea somebody has will be incorporated into the ordinance and there needs to be give and take. The MMAC has listened to the public comment. Some complain that the nature of only having 3 minutes limits people's ability to address the issues. This format has provided the ability for people to be heard and allow some amount of equality for all who want to speak to have the ability. No process is perfect, but it would be a discredit to the MMAC's efforts to say there has not been a public process. If the MMAC were somehow all ideologically the same and rejected other points of view, there could be an argument made that certain viewpoints were not accepted, but the MMAC is a very diverse group. There has been a very long public process with points along the way to bring in more of the community (Initial meetings, open house, Dan Burden Walkability Survey).
- B. Central Avenue. This is discussed above under 3.
- C. Open Space. Comments have been made that there is not sufficient open space in the Town Center. Some don't believe that the wetland area should be considered public open space, and want additional parkland to Pierson Park, and do not feel the three percent open space requirement is adequate. Each of these is a topic in which the MMAC has sought to find balance between the need and desire for open space while wanting to make sure the town center can be a viable community core.
- D. Wetlands. There are some in the community who would like to see the wetlands be retained in place and believe that the Community Plan does not allow relocation of wetlands.
- E. Amount of development analyzed in the EIR. As discussed in the EIR the town center ordinance proposal would allow less development than the current C-2 and R-3 zoning could allow, due to the heights allowed primarily in the C-2 zone which allows a 75' height limit with residential above the first floor. The Town Center allows up to 4 stories, which does not need 75' in height. In the DEIR an effort was made to look at what could develop in the Town Center if it was done with absolute efficiency. Some of this is because off Street parking is not required for Mixed-Use Development, so this greatly affects how much can be constructed. It is important to recognize the numbers in the EIR were used to make sure the EIR adequately

disclosed the maximum development that could occur while it is the Form Based Code that will set the limits of what can be constructed. The numbers in the EIR simply set the assumptions of what is evaluated. If a time comes when that would be exceeded, then additional environmental work would need to be completed. To that end the numbers are conservative.

Environmental Review: A Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) was prepared to evaluate the potential environmental effects of development which could result from the Town Center. Life Plan Humboldt had prepared significant technical material and contributed this to the information contained in the DEIR. The DEIR was circulated for public review from April 11, 2025, to May 27, 2025.

The DEIR found one significant and unavoidable impact related to implementation of the ordinance and that was traffic noise to sensitive receptors along Railroad Avenue. There is not feasible mitigation for this and slowing traffic below the posted speed limit of 25 miles per hour is not viewed as effective. The DEIR found 13 potentially significant impacts which can be reduced to a level of less than significant with the implementation of mitigation measures. Topically these relate to Air Quality, Biology, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and Noise.

In response to the public review of the DEIR, 27 letters were received, including a letter from CDFW, McKinleyville Community Services District, an NGO and 24 letters from private individuals. There is also a set of comments from a public meeting at the MMAC on April 23, 2025.

The Final EIR and response to comments is being prepared and will be available for the next MMAC meeting and the Planning Commission Hearing scheduled for September 18, 2025.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Town Center Ordinance
2. Draft Environmental Impact Report
<https://humboldt.gov/2564/McKinleyville-Town-Center-Master-Plan>
3. Comments on DEIR
<https://humboldt.gov/2564/McKinleyville-Town-Center-Master-Plan>
4. Issues and Responses Presented at MMAC 6/24/2025
5. Survey Results 2-14-2020
6. Letter from Marianne Tan

Please contact John Ford, Planner, at jford@co.humboldt.ca.us or 707-268-3738 if you have questions about this item.