



City of  
**Los Banos**  
*At the Crossroads of California*

**AGENDA**

**ADJOURNED**  
**JOINT CITY COUNCIL &**  
**PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING**

LOS BANOS COMMUNITY CENTER LOUNGE  
 645 Seventh Street  
 Los Banos, California

**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2019**

*If you require special assistance to attend or participate in this meeting, please call the Community & Economic Development Department at (209) 827-7000 extension 2433 at least 48 hours prior to the meeting.*

*The City of Los Banos complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990.*  
 \* \* \* \* \*

*Si requiere asistencia especial para atender o participar en esta junta por favor llame a la oficina de la Secretaria del Departamento de Planificación al (209) 827-7000 extensión 2433 a lo menos de 48 horas previas de la junta.*

*Any writings or documents provided to a majority of the Planning Commission regarding any item on this agenda will be made available for public inspection at the meeting and in the Community & Economic Development Department's office located at City Hall, 520 J Street, Los Banos, California during normal business hours. In addition, such writings and documents may be posted on the City's website at [www.losbanos.org](http://www.losbanos.org).*  
 \* \* \* \* \*

*Cualquier escritura o los documentos proporcionaron a una mayoría del Departamento de Planificación con respecto a cualquier artículo en este orden del día será hecho disponible para la inspección pública en la reunión y en la oficina del Secretaria del Departamento de Planificación del City Hall, 520 J Street, Los Banos, California durante horas de oficina normales. Además, tales escrituras y los documentos pueden ser anunciados en el website de la Ciudad en [www.losbanos.org](http://www.losbanos.org).*

1. CALL TO ORDER. **5:00 PM**
  - A. City Council
  - B. Planning Commission
2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE.
3. ROLL CALL.

A. City Council Members

Faria \_\_, Johnson-Santos \_\_, Jones \_\_, Lewis \_\_, Mayor Villalta \_\_

B. Planning Commission Members

Chairperson Cates \_\_, Dees \_\_, Giuliani \_\_, Higby \_\_, Toscano \_\_

4. CONSIDERATION OF APPROVAL OF AGENDA.

A. City Council

B. Planning Commission

*Recommendation: Approve the agenda as submitted.*

5. PUBLIC FORUM: Members of the public may address the City Council & Planning Commission on any item of public interest that is within the jurisdiction of the City Council & Planning Commission, including agenda and non-agenda items. No action will be taken on non-agenda items. Speakers are limited to a five (5) minute presentation.

6. CONDUCT A JOINT STUDY SESSION REGARDING THE LOS BANOS DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC PLAN.

*Recommendation: Informational item only, no action to be taken.*

7. ADJOURNMENT.

A. City Council

B. Planning Commission

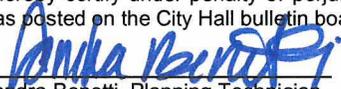
**APPEAL RIGHTS AND FILING PROCEDURES**

Any person dissatisfied with an act or determination of the Planning Commission may appeal such act or determination to the Planning Commission by filing written notice with the Planning Commission Secretary not later than five (5) business days (excluding holidays) after the day on which the act or determination was made. An appeal must state the act or determination which is being appealed, the identity of the applicant and his/her interest in the matter, and set forth in concise statement(s) the reasons which render the Commission's decision unjustified or inappropriate. (Los Banos Municipal Code Section 9-3.2326)

Concerning an action taken by the Planning Commission related to Chapter 2 Articles 1 through 17 of the Los Banos Municipal Code "Subdivisions", if a subdivider or other affected property owner is dissatisfied with any action of the Commission with respect to a tentative map or the nature and extent of improvements recommended or required he/she may within fifteen (15) days after such action appeal to the Planning Commission Secretary for a public hearing on the matter. An appeal must state the action being appealed, identify the agenda item by agency number or project title, and set forth in concise statement(s) the reasons for the appeal. (Los Banos Municipal Code Sections 9-2.807)

Appeals must be in writing and include the appellant's name and address and original signature. A filing fee of \$150.00 must accompany the notice of appeal.

I hereby certify under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of California that the foregoing agenda was posted on the City Hall bulletin board not less than 72 hours prior to the meeting.

  
Sandra Benetti, Planning Technician

Dated this 19<sup>th</sup> day of September 2019



## MEMORANDUM

DATE September 18, 2019  
TO Los Banos City Council and Planning Commission  
FROM Eric Panzer and Bruce Brubaker  
SUBJECT Los Banos Downtown Strategic Plan - City Council/Planning Commission Study Session

This memorandum is intended to help the City Council and Planning Commission prepare for the September 25 study session. It provides a brief project overview; discusses public outreach for the Strategic Plan, identifies the key topic areas of the Strategic Plan, and concludes with a list of questions for the Council and Planning Commission to consider in advance of the September 25 discussion.

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Downtown Strategic Plan is an implementation task of the General Plan Update and is being prepared concurrently with the ongoing General Plan Update. The Downtown Strategic Plan will harmonize with the General Plan update, and with the recent Façade Improvement Program, to accomplish goals for the Downtown and Los Banos at large.

The Strategic Plan is focused on the Key Issues and Preliminary Opportunities:

- Downtown has a good mix of uses, a pedestrian-friendly street grid, good architecture and historic assets, and a fairly continuous building fabric, with some vacant/underutilized sites.
- Downtown could benefit from improved wayfinding and identity, in order to draw people in from regional corridors and create a stronger sense of place.
- Maintaining and enhancing Downtown's historic qualities should be a priority.
- Downtown would benefit from public realm improvements, including more pedestrian amenities, improved building facades, new public spaces, and enhanced landscaping.
- Vacant lots and other underutilized creates gaps in Los Banos's urban fabric but offer opportunities for beneficial infill development.
- The rail corridor continues to be an important focus for future development and revitalization.
- Addressing homelessness and public safety are key to attracting more residents and visitors.

To address these issues and take advantage of these opportunities, the Strategic Plan provides context discussion and strategies organized under the following ten goals:

- Plan for New Land Uses

- Implement Gateways and Wayfinding
- Strengthen Businesses
- Rehabilitate Buildings
- Upgrade Infrastructure
- Improve Safety
- Establish Character
- Develop a Food Scene
- Manage Parking
- Create Public Spaces

## PROJECT OUTREACH

The Strategic Plan is based on public outreach to ensure that it appropriately reflects stakeholders' and the community's values and vision for the Downtown's future.

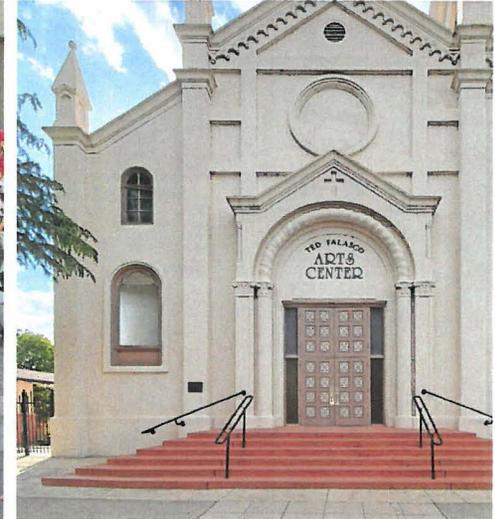
- **Stakeholder Meeting.** On May 28, 2019, the City of Los Banos held a public stakeholder meeting regarding Downtown Los Banos and the creation of the Downtown Strategic Plan. Attendees included Downtown property and business owners, leaders of business and community organizations, members of the public and the consultant team, and City staff. The meeting included a presentation about existing conditions in the Downtown, the Downtown Strategic Planning process, and the Downtown Strategic Plan boundary. This was followed by a group discussion of Downtown Los Banos's challenges and opportunities, with a particular emphasis on topics of importance for the Downtown Strategic Plan.
- **Community Workshop.** On July 8, 2019, the City of Los Banos held a public community workshop regarding Downtown Los Banos and the creation of the Downtown Strategic Plan. Attendees included members of the public, elected and appointed officials, Downtown property and business owners, leaders of business and community organizations, the consultant team, and City staff. Community members identified the homey feel and local businesses as Downtown's greatest strengths, but indicated the atmosphere could be further improved, especially through rehabilitated buildings and public spaces. Participants also indicated that more and better restaurants, a wider variety of stores, new outdoor eating spaces, more civic/cultural uses, and improved nightlife and nighttime safety would serve to attract them and their families.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Prior to the September 25, 2019 City Council/Planning Commission Study Session, City Council members and Planning Commissioners should review the Draft Downtown Strategic Plan the consider the following questions:

- Does the Strategic Plan adequately address key issues for Downtown Los Banos? If not, what additional issues should be discussed and/or what additional policies should be considered?
- Does the Strategic Plan accurately identify, and effectively respond to, the current obstacles to revitalization that Downtown Los Banos faces? Does it do enough to support existing conditions that tend to foster Downtown revitalization?
- Does the Downtown Strategic Plan Area boundary require any adjustments?
- What is your reaction to the strategies that seek to foster a mix of uses in the Downtown that includes more new and rehabilitated housing?
- Are there any strategies proposed that you feel are not a good fit, or require further tailoring?
- How do you feel about modest increases in density (potentially allowing 3-4 stories) if increased development potential would make it more likely that new projects will be built on vacant sites?
- Any other comments on the Draft Strategic Plan?





# LOS BANOS DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC PLAN





# LOS BANOS DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC PLAN

DRAFT | SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

Prepared By:



1625 Shattuck Avenue, Suite 300  
Berkeley, California 94709  
510.848.3815



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# 1

## Introduction and Vision

Downtown is the geographical, historical, and cultural heart of Los Banos. Located in the area surrounding Main Street, Downtown is compact, highly walkable, and boasts a charming mix of new and old buildings integral to the city’s small-town identity. Downtown Los Banos features a pedestrian-oriented environment; mixed-use development with a backbone of retail uses; a traditional, well-connected street grid; and direct pedestrian and bicycle connections to nearby neighborhoods.

Downtown has many strong assets including its historic architectural character, a tight-knit central retail area, the adjacent Rail Trail Corridor, successful businesses, and important local destinations like Wool Growers, Santa Fe Foods, and City Hall. However, the Downtown core is disconnected from nearby regional corridors, has gaps in its fabric, and lacks prominent wayfinding and signage.

This Strategic Plan seeks to address these and other issues to enhance Downtown and promote development on opportunity sites, while maintaining its historic, small-town character. With careful planning, Downtown Los Banos can flourish as a thriving retail, cultural, recreational, and entertainment center.

### 1.1 DOWNTOWN VISION STATEMENT

*Downtown Los Banos is a vibrant, welcoming neighborhood where residents and visitors come together to share in food, shopping, and culture. Downtown’s well-kept historic fabric and high-quality new buildings host a healthy mix of local and national retail, restaurants, and entertainment venues. Old and new housing in Downtown Los Banos meets a high standard of quality and supports its thriving business climate. Downtown Los Banos is clean, safe, and attracts young people, families with children, and tourists during the day and in the evenings.*

This vision of Downtown can be realized by encouraging a mix of ‘work-live-and-play’ land uses. A mixed-use land use designation allows for a variety of activities including residential, commercial and office uses, as well as public and quasi-public uses. By supplementing Los Banos’s existing policies and efforts, as well as those of the 2040 General Plan Update, the Downtown Strategic Plan can serve as a roadmap and implementation guide to achieve this vision.

## 1.2 EXISTING RELEVANT PLANNING EFFORTS & DOCUMENTS

This section describes a number of planning efforts and documents that directly concern Downtown.

### *Community Design Standards*

The Los Banos Community Design Standards, adopted in 2008, establish development standards to support implementing a coherent character for development within the city. Among other goals, the standards emphasize maintaining the city's "small town atmosphere." Chapter 2 of the standards provides design guidance for Downtown. Several objectives outlined by the standards include improving the pedestrian environment, maintaining the traditional street grid and alley circulation system, providing transition between dense urban core and surrounding lower-density uses, and maintaining and enhancing the existing architectural character of Downtown.

### *Downtown Revitalization Plan & Façade Improvement Program by Downtown Property Owners*

During the summer of 2018, property owners in Downtown initiated the Downtown Revitalization Plan effort to improve Downtown. They worked with a consultant to identify goals and objectives for Downtown, as well as determine an approach for implementing improvements on private property. The Los Banos Downtown Façade Improvement Program is the result of this effort, which focuses on improvement of existing buildings in Downtown and allows business/building owners to apply for support for improvement projects. The Program establishes a Program Committee that will review applications and select projects to receive funding.

Following the launch of this improvement program, several property owners have petitioned for the creation of a Property and Business Improvement District (PBID), which is the next step in the Revitalization Plan. Under a PBID, property owners assess their properties to facilitate and fund improvements and activities within the district. The Downtown Association would enter a partnership with the City to develop a District Management Plan, which could include services such as lighting, maintenance, marketing, events, environmental beautification, streetscape enhancement, security, and signage. The process to set up a PBID is voluntary, initiated through a vote by property owners, and can take approximately one to one-and-one-half years to complete.

### *Rail Trail Corridor Regulating Code*

The Rail Trail Corridor Regulating Code, Resolution No. 5380, prepared in 2007 and revised in 2012, governs the development and future land use of 60 acres of land along the existing Rail Trail that runs along the former route of the Union Pacific Railroad tracks. The Regulating Code's plan area lies between H and G Streets and spans from 2<sup>nd</sup> Street to one parcel away from Mercey Springs Road. The Regulating Code provides a vision and sets forth regulations for a mix of land uses, building standards, architectural design standards, streetscape standards, block configurations, public spaces, and parking. This Strategic Plan will support and harmonize with the vision and strategy in the Rail Trail Corridor Regulating Code and will focus on the heart of Downtown in the blocks to the south and west.

### *2040 General Plan Update*

The Los Banos Downtown Strategic Plan is a component of the broader Los Banos 2040 General Plan Update effort. This Strategic Plan and the General Plan Update were developed concurrently, and the policies and strategies of the two, while not identical, are intended to reflect and reinforce one another. Each document informs the other, and they are designed to harmonize with respect to both land use and policy.

### *Downtown Strategic Plan Existing Conditions Memo*

This Strategic Plan is informed, in part, by the findings of the Downtown Strategic Plan Existing Conditions Memo, which is a separate document presented to the City in November 2018. Some of the figures and information in that memo are reproduced in modified form in this document.

## **1.3 STAKEHOLDER AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

### *Stakeholder Meeting*

On May 28, 2019, the City of Los Banos held a public stakeholder meeting regarding Downtown Los Banos and the creation of the Downtown Strategic Plan. Attendees included Downtown property and business owners, leaders of business and community organizations, members of the public and the consultant team, and City staff.

The meeting included a presentation about existing conditions in the Downtown, the Downtown Strategic Planning process, and the Downtown Strategic Plan boundary. This was followed by a group discussion of Downtown Los Banos's challenges and opportunities, with a particular emphasis on topics of importance for the Downtown Strategic Plan.

### *Community Workshop*

On July 8, 2019, the City of Los Banos held a public community workshop regarding Downtown Los Banos and the creation of the Downtown Strategic Plan. Attendees included members of the public, elected and appointed officials, Downtown property and business owners, leaders of business and community organizations, the consultant team, and City staff.

The workshop began with a presentation about existing conditions in the Downtown, the Downtown Strategic Planning process, the Downtown Strategic Plan boundary, and the challenges and opportunities identified by the Existing Conditions Memo and the Stakeholder Meeting. The Presentation was followed by a small group activity that invited participants to:

- ◆ Indicate primary and secondary access routes to Downtown Los Banos, for both Los Banos residents and visitors;
- ◆ Identify Downtown entry points and potential gateways;
- ◆ Examine Downtown Los Banos' strengths and weaknesses;
- ◆ Discuss what the Downtown needs to achieve success; and
- ◆ Share what new uses, features, or amenities would serve to attract them and their families to Downtown.

Community members identified the homey feel and local businesses as Downtown's greatest strengths, but indicated the atmosphere could be further improved, especially through rehabilitated buildings and public spaces. Participants also indicated that more and better restaurants, a wider variety of stores, new outdoor eating spaces, more civic/cultural uses, and improved nightlife and nighttime safety would serve to attract them and their families to Downtown.

#### 1.4 DOWNTOWN STRATEGIC PLAN AREA

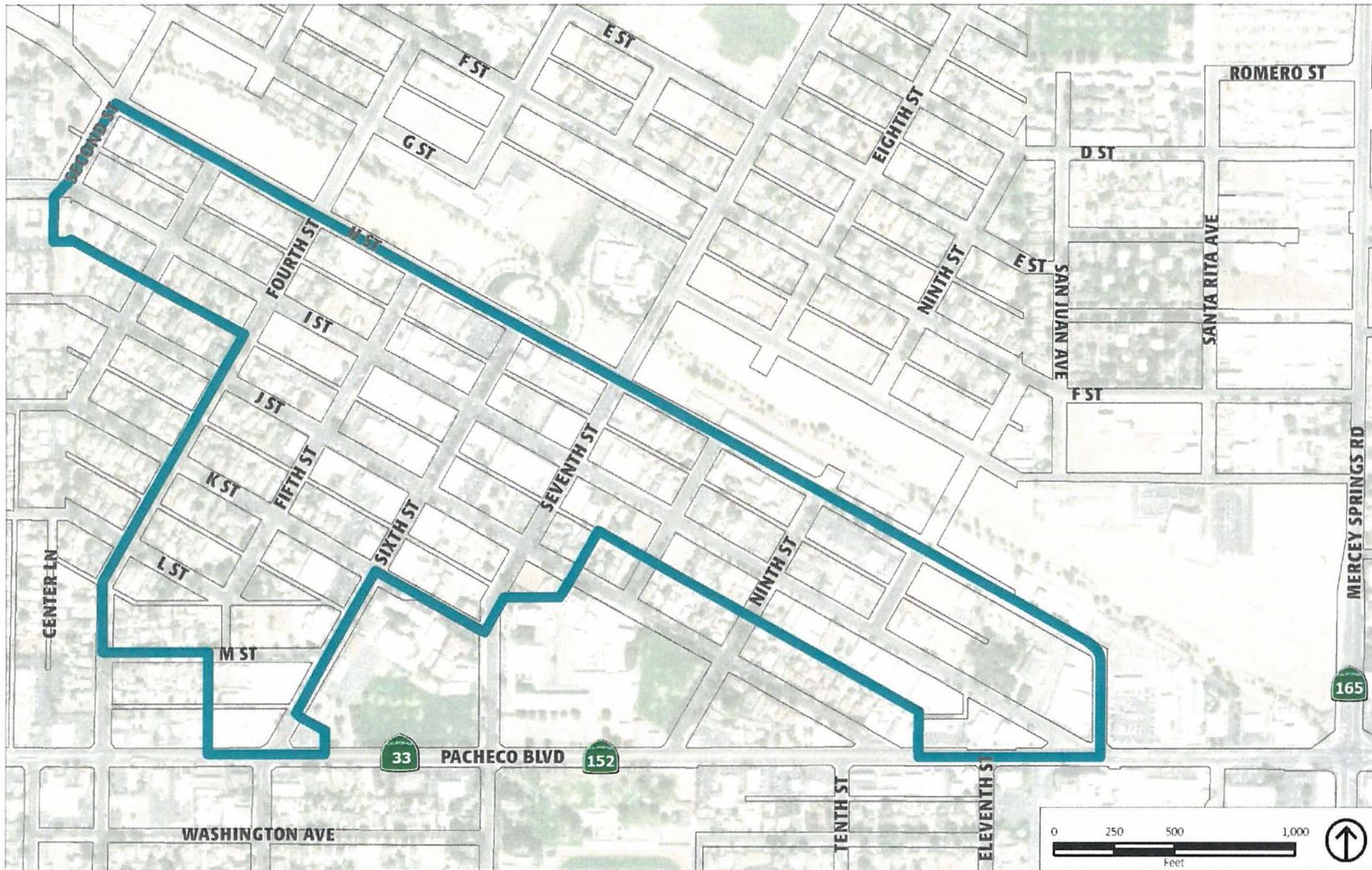
The Downtown Strategic Plan Area was developed based on the Downtown boundary included in Los Banos' previous General Plan, with adjustments made based on the input of stakeholders, community members, and City staff.

The Downtown Strategic Plan Area encompasses the core of Downtown Los Banos, roughly bounded by 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, H, and I Streets, as well as extensions to the northwest, southwest, and southeast. These extensions incorporate mixed uses on H and I Streets, extending northwest to 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, and southeast toward Pacheco Boulevard; and another area of mixed uses extending southwest along 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> streets toward Pacheco Boulevard. The extensions toward Pacheco Boulevard also serve to incorporate important gateways to Downtown at 6<sup>th</sup> and Pacheco Boulevard, and I Street and Pacheco Boulevard.

Figure 1-1 illustrates the Los Banos Downtown Strategic Plan Area. It should be noted that Los Banos could also consider applying many of the strategies included in this Plan to adjacent areas, especially the Rail Corridor, and other areas of the city as well.

Figure 1-2 and Figure 1-3 provide additional context by showing, respectively, the 2030 Los Banos General Plan Land Uses and the existing Zoning Designations in the vicinity of Downtown.

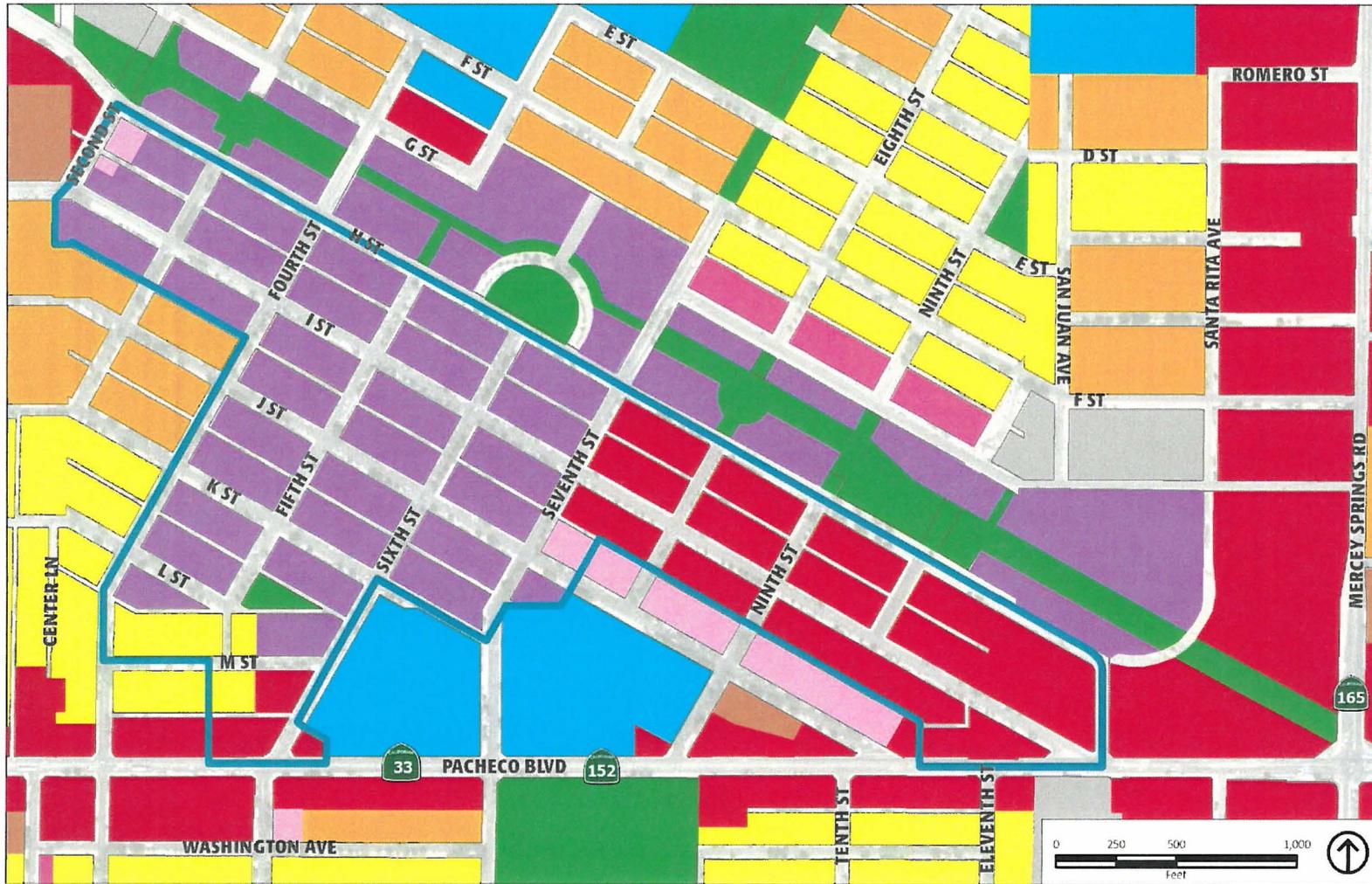
Figure 1-1 Los Banos Downtown Strategic Plan Area



Sources: ESRI, 2018; Merced County, 2018; PlaceWorks, 2019.

 Downtown Strategic Plan Area

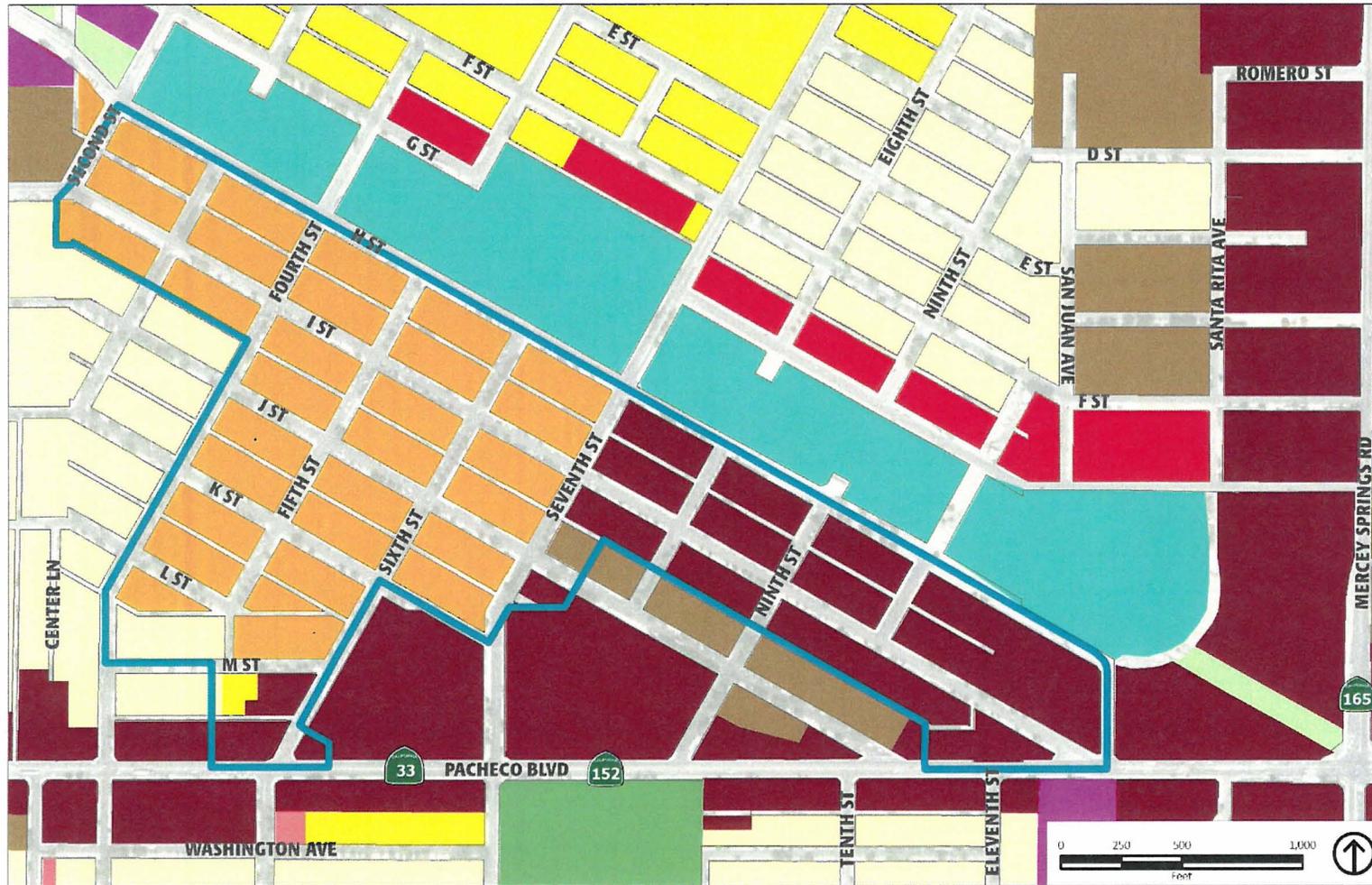
Figure 1-2 Los Banos 2030 General Plan Land Use Designations in the Vicinity of Downtown



Sources: ESRI, 2018; City of Los Banos, 2019; Merced County, 2018; PlaceWorks, 2019.

- |   |   |   |   |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|--|
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: purple; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Mixed Use                | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: orange; border: 1px solid black;"></span> High Density Residential   | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: green; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Park      | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: pink; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Professional Office            | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: blue; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Civic/Institutional | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; border: 2px solid blue; border-radius: 5px;"></span> Downtown Strategic Plan Area |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: red; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Commercial                  | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: yellow; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Medium Density Residential | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: grey; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Industrial | <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: lightyellow; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Low Density Residential |  |  |
| <span style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: magenta; border: 1px solid black;"></span> Neighborhood Commercial |   |   |   |  |  |

Figure 1-3 Existing Zoning Designations in the Vicinity of Downtown



Sources: ESRI, 2018; City of Los Banos, 2019; Merced County, 2018; PlaceWorks, 2019.

- |                                  |                               |                     |                              |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Low Density Residential (R-1)    | Neighborhood Commercial (C-N) | Park (PARK)         | Downtown Strategic Plan Area |
| Medium Density Residential (R-2) | General Commercial (C-1, C-2) | Open Space (OS)     |                              |
| High Density Residential (R-3)   | Highway Commercial (H-C)      | Rail Corridor (R-C) |                              |
| Mixed Use (M-X)                  | Professional Office (P-O)     |                     |                              |

## 2

# Downtown Strategies

The strategies described in this chapter form the core of the Strategic Plan and are divided into sections that address a variety of topic areas identified based on input from stakeholders, community members, and City staff. Each section discusses the overall context and goals for a topic area, followed by a list of strategies designed to help achieve those goals. This chapter addresses the following topics:

- ◆ Plan for New Land Uses
- ◆ Implement Gateways and Wayfinding
- ◆ Strengthen Businesses
- ◆ Rehabilitate Buildings
- ◆ Upgrade Infrastructure
- ◆ Improve Safety
- ◆ Establish Character
- ◆ Develop a Food Scene
- ◆ Manage Parking
- ◆ Create Public Spaces

The goals described in this section are intended to harmonize with those of the 2040 General Plan. The strategies listed in this chapter are designed to overlap, reinforce, and/or supplement the policies and actions included in the 2040 General Plan. This chapter also incorporates photos, diagrams, and maps that inform and illustrate the various topics and strategies.

### 2.1 PLAN FOR NEW LAND USES

One of the keys to ensuring success for the Downtown is fostering a healthier and more vital mix of land uses. As the historic and cultural heart of the city, Downtown Los Banos has enormous potential. Unfortunately, recent levels of investment and development have not met that full potential. A lack of new housing in the Downtown, for example, means that there are relatively few residents living in close proximity to its primary commercial streets. This means fewer customers, a more challenging business climate, and commercial rents that don't yet incentivize new development.

Fostering a mix of residential, retail, office, and civic uses can help build a foundation for an active downtown both during the day and at night. This in turn helps small businesses succeed and serves to attract new development and amenities to the Downtown. The interdependencies between workers, residents, and the business that serve them help build a virtuous cycle that self-reinforces, further improving the economic health of the downtown and its resiliency in the face of downturns. The following sections provide context of each overarching category of land use and describe their role in the downtown. These

discussions are followed by a set of strategies tailored to that land use, but which may be useful for other land uses as well.

Figure 2-1 illustrates opportunity sites in the Downtown Strategic Plan Area, which have long-term potential to develop or redevelop as the variety of new uses discussed below. Based on a preliminary digital survey and information available as of the writing of this Strategic Plan, these areas were identified as candidates for potential redevelopment. Sites were included if they appeared to be undeveloped or featured low-density, non-residential uses that did not appear to be of historical significance. Identifying an area as an opportunity site does not imply that it necessarily can or will be redeveloped, nor are redevelopment opportunities strictly limited to these sites.

### *Housing and Lodging*

Housing is the most fundamental land use for any city; without it, an area could be considered a district, but not a neighborhood. Although housing exists in and near Downtown Los Banos, the city has excellent opportunities to increase the housing supply downtown, and in turn build a stronger Downtown community and foundation for the local economy.

Although demand remains strong for suburban, single-family neighborhoods, demand for downtown housing options is rising. People of all age groups increasingly prioritize walkability when considering what neighborhood to live in, and significant numbers of young people and retirees are interested in the convenience and excitement of living Downtown.

Los Banos has an opportunity to leverage these trends to attract investment in the Downtown and improve its business climate. More residents in the Downtown means more foot traffic and patronage for local businesses. This increased activity is self-

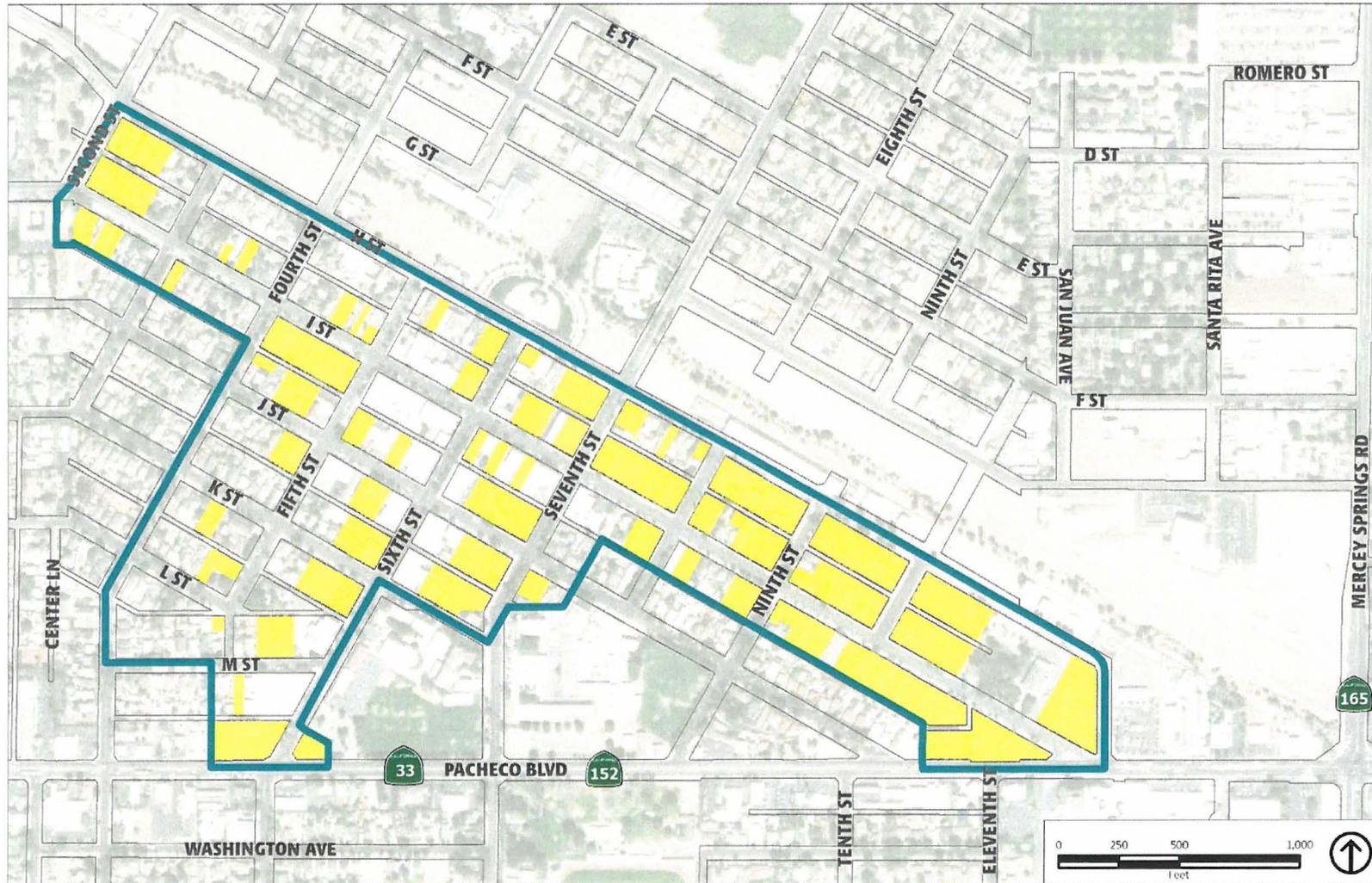


*Housing over ground-floor retail in Windsor.*

reinforcing because it will also serve to attract more people to the Downtown from other neighborhoods. Put simply, people enjoy spending time where they can engage with other people. More downtown residents also means more people to put time and care into enhancing the neighborhood and more eyes on the street to improve safety and deter problematic behavior.

Encouraging more housing Downtown offers other benefits as well. As additional residences and other uses develop in the Downtown, walking, biking, and transit will become increasingly viable alternatives to driving in the area. This serves to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, while also improving public health by encouraging active transportation. More people living, working, and shopping in the Downtown also means increased tax revenue for the City, and makes provision of services in the area more efficient.

**Figure 2-1 Opportunity Sites within the Downtown Strategic Plan Area**



Sources: ESRI, 2018; Merced County, 2018; PlaceWorks, 2019.

- Downtown Strategic Plan Area
- Opportunity Sites\*

\*Opportunity sites are based on a preliminary digital survey and information available as of the writing of the Downtown Strategic Plan. Sites were included if they appeared to be undeveloped or featured low-density, non-residential uses that did not appear to be of historical significance. Areas were designated using inclusive approach with an eye toward long term potential. A site's inclusion in this map does not indicate that the site necessarily can or will be redeveloped.

As part of its efforts to bring more residents to the Downtown, Los Banos also has the opportunity to ensure that the housing built serves a diverse cross section of the community. This means providing housing with a variety of sizes, types, and affordability levels. Providing for a mix of housing types ensures that a diversity of Downtown workers are also able to live in the neighborhood, and it enables people at all income levels and life stages to enjoy and live in the Downtown over the long term.

Similar to housing, new lodging uses also have a role to play in Downtown revitalization. As Downtown Los Banos develops a reinvigorated mix of dining, shopping, and entertainment opportunities, regional visitors and travelers will want to stay in the Downtown. Providing lodging serves this need, while further adding to the customer base for Downtown businesses.

Given these numerous benefits, this Strategic Plan incorporates the following strategies that would serve to encourage and incentivize increased housing and lodging development in the Downtown:

- a. Promote Downtown Los Banos as a pedestrian, specialty retail, entertainment, cultural, office, and housing area.
- b. Promote use of first floor space in new buildings downtown for retail, food service, and other high volume commercial/civic uses, and office, lodging, and residential uses on second floors.
- c. Increase allowable densities in the Downtown to increase project feasibility and attract development and investment.
- d. Consider adoption of a local density bonus that incentivizes affordable housing or other amenities for the



*Historically inspired hotel under construction in Winters, CA (Winters Express).*

Downtown by granting additional density above the State Density Bonus.

- e. Conduct a development fee analysis and permitting audit to determine if the City's various development fees and/or permit procedures are negatively impacting the feasibility of new Downtown development.
- f. Pursue mixed-use, mixed-income projects in Downtown Los Banos—especially projects that could act as catalysts for additional development and investment Downtown. To accomplish this, employ the following sub-strategies:
  1. Seek State and federal affordable housing funds and tax credits to finance development.
  2. Enter into public/private partnerships with non-profit or for-profit developers.
  3. Partner with the Los Banos School District to build housing for teachers, or a mixed-income project with a set-aside for teacher housing.



- 4. Pursue State set-aside funding to build housing for farmworkers and their families.
- g. Allow and promote the creation of live-work units Downtown for artists and craftspeople.
- h. Revise or add provisions to the development code regarding Group Living Accommodations to allow and encourage cooperative housing for seniors.
- i. Amend Los Banos’s building code to allow for and/or encourage the construction of pre-fabricated multi-family housing.
- j. Provide targeted tax or fee reduction incentives to encourage development, potentially including geographically-targeted incentives for areas where development may be difficult.
- k. Explore the possibility of allowing certain projects that include housing or types of housing by right.
- l. Implement objective design and development standards to expedite staff review and discretionary approvals.
- m. Allow for and encourage the development of one or more lodging uses in the Downtown, if economically feasible.



*Office/Commercial*

Downtown Los Banos currently has only very limited amounts of office space, and the majority of existing office space is for civic uses or financial institutions. This lack of office space means that Downtown Los Banos is not meeting its full potential as a job center and is missing out on the economic benefits of hosting a larger workforce. Encouraging the creation of new office space in Downtown Los Banos has the potential to help the City meet an array of broader goals for the Downtown.

A primary benefit of encouraging new office uses is the daytime foot traffic that it generates. Office workers patronize local businesses before and after work, and especially restaurants during lunch. This Strategic Plan envisions a future where Downtown Los Banos has a healthy mix of commercial office and retail that encourages workers to run errands in the Downtown before and after work and linger in the Downtown for dinner and drinks before going home. (And, if more housing

is built, Downtown may even be home for these workers.) This increased daytime foot traffic can enliven and serve to draw more visitors to the Downtown at times when it might otherwise be less populated.

Creating additional and more modern office space in Downtown Los Banos also serves to boost the local job market and expand economic opportunity. Historically, downtowns similar to Los Banos have provided opportunities for smaller professional offices to provide services to local residents in fields like tax preparation, law, and financial consulting. Although there are some businesses like this in Downtown Los Banos, there may be unmet demand for additional professional services. In addition, having more office space available can encourage startup formation in Los Banos and offer opportunities for existing companies to open Los Banos offices.

Currently, Los Banos's housing demand and economic health is strongly influenced by conditions in far-flung job centers over which the City has no control. Increasing Los Banos's job base can help make it less reliant on other nearby job markets and insulate it, to a degree, from swings in the broader economy.

Overall, creating more office space in the Downtown helps build synergistic relationships with housing, retail and, other uses in the Downtown. Therefore, this Strategic Plan incorporates the following strategies to encourage and incentivize new office development in Los Banos:

- a. Identify opportunity sites within and immediately adjacent to the Downtown where Los Banos could work to attract a larger scale mixed-use office project.
- b. For office projects proposed on larger opportunity sites within and immediately adjacent to the Downtown, encourage the incorporation of:
  1. Supportive services/retail, including pedestrian-oriented retail at key ground floor locations.
  2. Minimum density standards to avoid allowing new projects which underutilize their sites; and creating a process for permitting exceptions when merited by economic and/or site conditions.
- c. Amend design guidelines and development standards to ensure that new office developments provide contemporary amenities that will be attractive to tenants. Examples include but are not limited to: green building features, high speed internet, abundant natural light, informal gathering spaces, etc.
- d. Leverage construction of the new Courthouse and police station to encourage nearby commercial development to serve the needs of Courthouse workers and visitors.
- e. Explore opportunities for creating new office buildings shared by a mix of private-sector, public-sector, non-profit, and community-based organizations.
- f. Work with local business groups, property owners, and developers to approach major firms about the possibility of creating satellite offices in Los Banos.
- g. Grant conditional tax and/or development fee relief when it is necessary to ensure the feasibility of a proposed office/employment use.

- h. Encourage the development of a co-working space in Los Banos to provide office space and collaboration opportunities for freelancers and startups.

*Civic, Public, and Institutional Uses*

Los Banos has an opportunity to build on existing civic and public uses in and near the Downtown in ways which reinforce other uses and provide additional benefits to the community. Creating new institutional uses in the Downtown not only helps provide necessary services and amenities for new Downtown residents but can signal to potential developers and other private interests that Los Banos is invested in its Downtown.

Downtown Los Banos currently features several institutional uses, including Los Banos City Hall and the Police station, with the Los Banos Community Center just across the Rail Trail. Although the police station will soon be moving to the new Courthouse site, which is just beyond the Downtown boundary, the City can still leverage these civic uses, as well as other opportunities for the creation of new civic uses Downtown.

Civic uses serve a variety of functions, the foremost of which is providing the community with essential services and support. Civic uses foster Los Banos's long-term success by providing residents with health care, education, and opportunities for recreation and physical fitness. Residents who are educated, healthy, happy, and interconnected are more economically successful, require fewer public services, and are better able to give back to their communities. Encouraging more civic uses in the Downtown with the following strategies can thereby enhance Los Banos's safety net and strengthen the city's long-term prosperity:



- a. Pursue State and federal grants and other funding for the planning and construction of civic uses and infrastructure projects; investigate the possibility of using Community Development Block Grants to fund new civic uses and programs in the Downtown.
- b. Propose public bond measures for new civic uses, potentially including a new library and/or expanded community/fitness center; convene a working group to identify unmet needs and priority projects.
- c. Evaluate the potential to place a dual-purpose performance space on the site of the Westside Union or Los Banos Elementary school.
- d. Explore opportunities to create new public facilities and civic uses along the Rail Corridor and/or near the site of the new police station and courthouse.

- e. Investigate options for reusing the Crest Theater as a civic or community use.
- f. Collaborate with Downtown business organizations and property owners to explore the possibility of creating a new children’s museum or activity center.
- g. Approach Sutter Health to investigate opening a community clinic or other health facility Downtown.
- h. Identify opportunity sites within and immediately adjacent to the Downtown where Los Banos could work to attract a large mixed-use project with an institutional anchor.

*Focus Areas*

The Downtown Los Banos Existing Conditions Memo identified three key corridors/areas to target for mixed-use infill development to foster more activity and vibrancy:

- ◆ The south side of H Street across from anticipated Rail Corridor developments, from its intersection with 5th Street south and east to Pacheco Boulevard, especially in the vicinity of the 6<sup>th</sup> Street intersection.
- ◆ I Street, from 6<sup>th</sup> Street to Pacheco Boulevard with an emphasis on the area between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets, as well as vacant/underutilized parcels in the vicinity of its intersection with 6<sup>th</sup> Street.
- ◆ The block of 6<sup>th</sup> Street from M street to Pacheco Boulevard, with special emphasis on the Pacheco Boulevard Intersection, which could serve as a new Downtown gateway.

The following strategies apply to these areas:

- a. Incentivize development with zoning overlays that allow for increased density, by-right project approvals, or other incentives to encourage infill projects.
- b. Prioritize historic structures in these areas or rehabilitation incentives and adaptive reuse efforts.
- c. Evaluate opportunities for targeted fee reductions, public-private partnerships, or other direct incentives to encourage infill development in these areas.

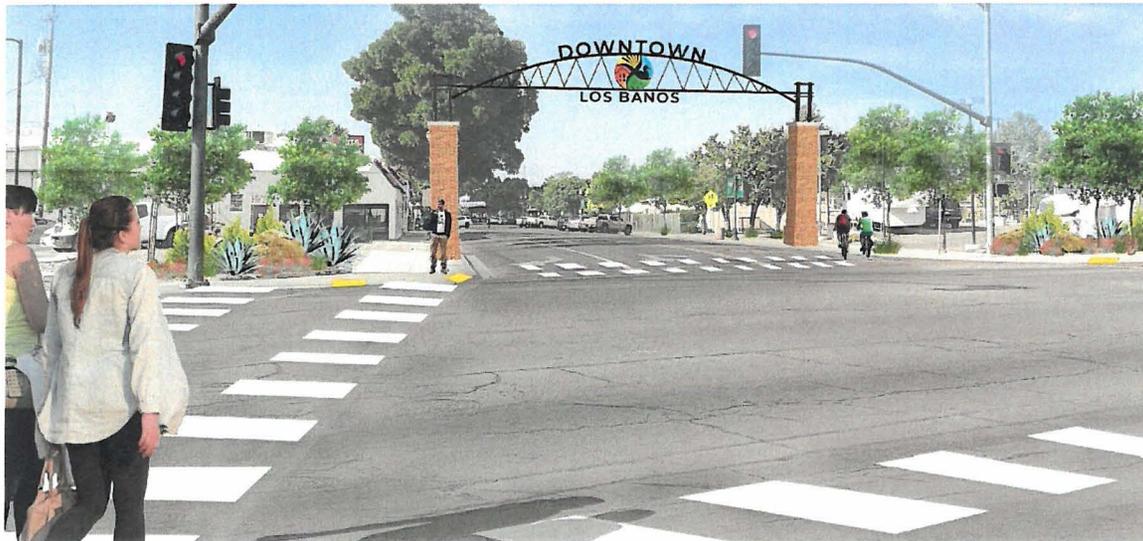
**2.2 IMPLEMENT GATEWAYS AND WAYFINDING**

Downtown Los Banos is a welcoming and handsome district, but many visitors pass through without knowing it’s there. Downtown lies four to five blocks north from State Route 152 / Pacheco Boulevard and is not visible from the highway. Although there are two existing “Welcome to Downtown” monument signs indicating a gateway at 6<sup>th</sup> and SR 152, they are not particularly visible due to the low height and modest size. Many community members expressed an interest in deploying new, more visible signage along SR 152 to better highlight the presence of and ease of access to Downtown.



Gateway signage should be considered for two locations that lead directly from SR 152 to Downtown: 6<sup>th</sup> Street and SR 152 for eastbound travelers, and I street and SR 152 for westbound travelers. Discussions with community members indicate that as the main entry into Downtown, the intersection of 6<sup>th</sup> and SR

Figure 2-2 Two Potential Downtown Gateway Options (current view pictured at right)



152 should have a highly visible sign, while the sign at I Street and SR 152 can be a more modest gateway sign.

Once in Downtown, visitors do not know where to find key destinations. Wayfinding signage could help visitors navigate more easily and discover new points of interest. The signage could indicate the location of public parking, Henry Miller Plaza, the Crest Theater, City Hall, and other locations. Los Banos should undertake the following strategies to improve wayfinding and signage in and around Downtown:

- a. Embark on planning, community engagement, and design for two gateway signs and associated landscaping along SR 152 at 6<sup>th</sup> Street and I Street. Because Caltrans controls the right-of-way along SR 152, they should be consulted as part of this process.
- b. Include these gateway signage goals and locations in the discussions of improvements to SR 152 in the ongoing SR 152 Specific Plan project, funded by Caltrans. This planning process is underway in 2019 and expected to be completed in 2020.
- c. Develop a Downtown Wayfinding program that will determine appropriate locations for wayfinding signage, designs for the signage boards or kiosks, and cost estimates for implementation.
- d. Seek funding to implement and maintain the signage installations once designs and costs are determined.

### 2.3 STRENGTHEN BUSINESSES

Diverse, self-sustaining businesses are key to the success of any commercial or mixed-use district. Downtown Los Banos already has many of the ingredients needed for achieving greater

vitality, but still needs a critical mass of places to shop, dine, and socialize. Nurturing existing and new businesses will serve not only to enhance Downtown Los Banos, but to also achieve other citywide goals.

Achieving a mix of restaurants, shops, entertainment, and other commercial uses is essential to creating a vibrant and resilient commercial or mixed-use neighborhood. Areas composed purely of residential, office, or industrial uses serve important functions, but the appeal of a Downtown comes largely from its heterogeneity and the steady stream of activity that fosters. While residential neighborhoods may fall quiet during the daytime and office uses go dormant at night and on weekends, thriving Downtowns are bustling day and night. Knowing that there is nearly always something to buy, do, see, or eat in a Downtown is part of its appeal.

Downtown Los Banos already enjoys features that set the stage for its success, but it falls short on the number and variety of businesses necessary to reach its full potential. Factors in Downtown Los Banos's favor include its central location within the city; easy access to nearby neighborhoods and highways; its tight-knit, walkable urban fabric; and its historic buildings. Because people tend to enjoy areas where they can easily walk around and encounter a variety of stores, restaurants, and other attractions, Downtown Los Banos has a solid geographical/structural foundation. Through a focused effort, Los Banos can foster a business mix that fills out that existing structure, and dovetails with the Downtown's nostalgic, small-town appeal.

Generating more business Downtown also offers significant benefits for Los Banos and its residents as a whole. More businesses Downtown means more jobs and opportunities for Los Banos workers and entrepreneurs. More economic activity



Downtown would also generate additional tax revenue for the City, both through increased sales and through eventual increases in property values as Downtown land becomes more valuable and new developments are completed.

The following strategies cover a variety of ways Los Banos can seek to attract, retain, and grow businesses in the Downtown:

- a. Partner with local business organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Los Banos Downtown Association, and any business improvement districts in their efforts to support and attract Downtown businesses.
- b. Encourage formation of a Buy Local Los Banos organization, through which Los Banos businesses work together to encourage residents and visitors to buy local products and patronize local businesses.

- c. Work with business organizations to develop and market a Los Banos coupon book that focuses on a local, independent, and Downtown businesses.
- d. Revise the City Website to include more detailed direction for starting a business and create an online application system for business licenses.
- e. Create a Revolving Loan Fund to provide low-interest loans to assist small businesses who cannot find private financing, and establish a board, commission, or other review body to evaluate applications and administer the program.
- f. Increase/expand city-offered consultation services for small businesses and entrepreneurs.
- g. Collaborate with business organizations to engage in marketing campaigns both to potential downtown visitors and customers, and to larger business interests who may wish to invest in Downtown Los Banos.
- h. Develop programs for targeted tax or fee relief for small businesses.
- i. Work with business organizations, property owners, and small business owners/founders to identify spaces for new and relocated business and reduce vacancies in the Downtown.
- j. Collaborate on and/or help fund marketing efforts for the Downtown.



- k. Expand, promote, and leverage Downtown events, such as street fairs, farmers markets, etc. to attract new businesses, and to build public awareness and support for Downtown revitalization.
- l. Create a Downtown Los Banos website to promote events, build public awareness, and market downtown to consumers, businesses, and investors.
- m. Conduct consumer surveys to determine what goods, services, and amenities residents most want and need in Downtown Los Banos.
- n. Explore establishment of a small business of the month and/or year award to highlight local businesses and entrepreneurs.
- o. Use social media to promote Downtown Los Banos businesses and events.

- p. Work with Merced County to explore opportunities for holding more events at the County Fairgrounds and leverage existing events to bring additional foot traffic to Downtown Los Banos.
- q. Establish new Downtown events such as open streets events, holiday gatherings, First Fridays, or others.

#### 2.4 REHABILITATE BUILDINGS

Downtown Los Banos's historic fabric is a key asset that is fundamental to the city's charm and small-town character. Unfortunately, many older buildings are in various states of disrepair and require significant upgrades to meet modern standards. Nevertheless, taking on the challenge of rehabilitating and modernizing Downtown's historic structures has the potential to yield both tangible and intangible benefits for the City and its residents.

The layout and historic buildings of Downtown Los Banos are reminiscent of small-town main streets in other American cities that were built up during the 19th and early 20th centuries and share a similar agricultural heritage as Los Banos. Downtown Los Banos is unique within the city for the northwest-southeast orientation of its street grid, an orientation that is also found in other historic downtowns of the San Joaquin Valley.

The reason for this striking diagonal grid is the early presence and importance of the railroad in Los Banos, near which the Downtown developed. At the time of Los Banos's early growth, the railroad was the primary regional transportation system for both residents and the abundant agricultural products that came from and through Los Banos. Los Banos's downtown reflects a time when walking would have been a commonplace



mode of transportation and close proximity to the railroad was key for businesses.

Historic downtowns have enjoyed a recent renaissance in large part because their design feels human scaled and is convenient for walking. A tight-knit fabric of small storefronts is able to constantly provide new sources of visual interest and diverse opportunities for shopping in a small area. With renewed interest in buying locally and finding unique items, consumers are increasingly turning to mom-and-pop stores and the historic areas that host them. Los Banos has the opportunity to make the most of these trends by nurturing the rehabilitation of this traditional urban fabric.

Undertaking these upgrades to the historic fabric will require a variety of approaches depending on the state of a particular structure and the needs of the uses seeking to locate there. Some buildings may only require decorative changes or other exterior upgrades, while others may require new utility systems, foundation work, or safety/seismic upgrades. For example, many older buildings in Los Banos don't meet modern code requirements for new full-service restaurants, requiring upgrades to electrical, ventilation, and wastewater systems.

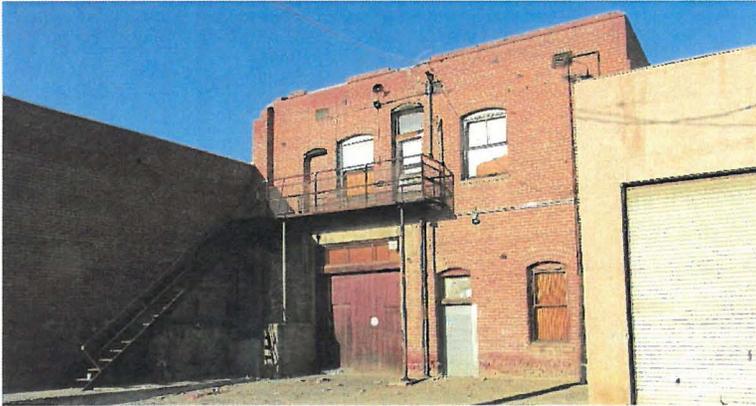
These upgrades are currently challenging to undertake and finance because the foot traffic and potential rents in the



Downtown do not necessarily justify the expense. It is therefore necessary for the City and Downtown business organizations to provide logistical and financial support to early revitalization efforts. As Downtown business increases, rising revenues and rents have the potential to make future rehabilitation efforts self-sustaining, reducing the need for subsidy and support.

In 2018, the Los Banos Downtown Association initiated a Downtown revitalization effort, including a Downtown Façade Improvement Program. These strategies are intended to reiterate and build on the approaches of that program:

- a. Work with the State Office of Historic Preservation's Local Government Assistance Program and California Main Street Program to craft economic incentives to preserve and rehabilitate historic structures.
- b. Adopt a Local Mills Act program to provide tax relief to property owners who rehabilitate historic structures.

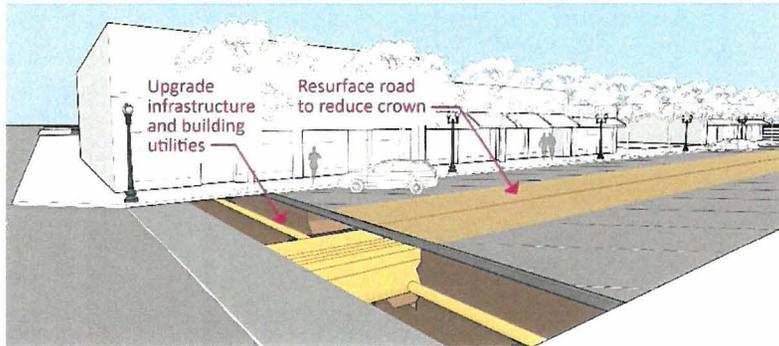


- c. Collaborate with the State Historic Preservation Office to assist owners of historic properties in claiming the 20 percent federal income tax credit available for the rehabilitation of historic, income-producing buildings that are determined by the Secretary of the Interior, through the National Park Service, to be “certified historic structures.”
- d. Institute local tax and/or fee relief to incentivize the preservation and rehabilitation of historic structures.
- e. Establish and fund a local grant program to support the preservation and rehabilitation of historic structures.
- f. Enter into public/private partnerships for the preservation and restoration of historic structures.
- g. Pursue private and charitable funding to support building rehabilitation and façade improvement.
- h. Adopt and implement a local landmarking program to help owners of historic properties access preservation incentives and funding.
- i. Establish a historic district in Downtown Los Banos to facilitate preservation efforts and improve access to State and federal rehabilitation incentives.
- j. Incentivize and/or support adaptive reuse.
- k. Encourage project developers to pursue purchase of adjacent historic properties/structures and to integrate their rehabilitation in the overall project.
- l. Allow new developments to preserve and restore historic facades while building new structures above and/or behind them.
- m. Pursue grants and other financial assistance from foundations and organizations with a focus on historic preservation, potentially including but not limited to: the California Council for the Humanities, the Getty Conservation Institute, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the US Small Business Administration.

## 2.5 UPGRADE INFRASTRUCTURE

Adequate infrastructure is a basic prerequisite for the success of any city, neighborhood, or business district. Although Downtown Los Banos has seen certain infrastructure upgrades in recent years, more needs to be done to make Downtown Los Banos attractive to a wider array of businesses and developments. Fortunately, Downtown Los Banos’s need for upgraded infrastructure coincides with a period of renewed interest in the revitalization of historic downtowns, as well as State efforts to fund new infrastructure.

Downtown Los Banos is fortunate to have already undergone a number of infrastructure upgrades which position the Downtown well for continued improvement. For example,



many of Downtown's central blocks have seen their overhead wires undergrounded and sidewalks recently repaved. And, thanks to the efforts of the former Los Banos Redevelopment Agency, Downtown Los Banos has also installed historically inspired, pedestrian-scale lighting on a number of blocks.

However, additional and/or expanded upgrades are still needed for Downtown Los Banos to reach its full potential. For example, there are a number of blocks in the vicinity of Downtown that could benefit from expanded undergrounding of overhead utilities and installation of pedestrian-scale street lighting, most notably certain blocks of I Street that are good candidates for infill development. Additionally, ensuring that all areas of Downtown have broadband internet infrastructure in place could serve to attract new businesses and office developments. And perhaps most importantly, attracting new dining, nightlife, and entertainment uses will require ensuring that water/wastewater infrastructure and its connections to individual buildings are sufficient to meet code requirements.

Pursuing ongoing infrastructure improvements in the Downtown will not only ensure that the services necessary to conduct business are available, but also signal to business owners, investors, and developers that Los Banos has a long-

term commitment to the revitalization and redevelopment of Downtown. To help achieve this, the following strategies are recommended to spur and fund further infrastructure upgrades:

- a. Pursue State and Federal grants and other funding for infrastructure construction and planning.
- b. Draft and adopt a Capital Improvements Plan to identify priority projects, funding sources, potential phasing and key stakeholders.
- c. Propose public bond measures for infrastructure/streetscape projects, subsequent to or independent of development of a Capital Improvements Plan, potentially including repaving, improved water/wastewater systems, fiber-optic and/or municipal internet, enhanced street lighting, support for building rehabilitation, and/or renewable energy systems.
- d. Closely follow State-level developments for potential funding sources and other opportunities, such as the revival of redevelopment agencies.
- e. Review infrastructure-related development impact fees and set them at the upper feasible limit to fund infrastructure projects while continuing to encourage Downtown development.
- f. Require large development projects to include and/or fund infrastructure and streetscape improvements, as feasible. These upgrades could include, among other things: repaved sidewalks, pedestrian-scale lighting, undergrounding of utilities, and/or new street trees.

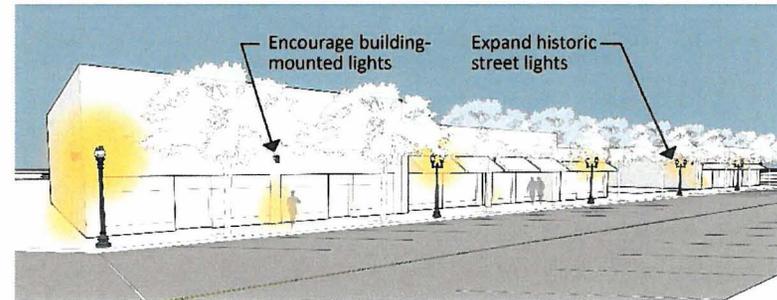
- g. Pursue street repaving that lowers centerline pavement heights to improve access for disabled persons and facilitate addition of sidewalk bulb-outs.
- h. Encourage formation of a business improvement district that can help direct and fund streetscape and lighting improvements.

## 2.6 IMPROVE SAFETY

Safety is a fundamental concern for a successful downtown. No amount of businesses or amenities can ensure the success of a downtown if people do not feel safe visiting. Fortunately, the safety challenges in Downtown Los Banos are not as intractable as those in some other cities; and Los Banos has already made strides to address these issues. Even so, Downtown Los Banos's continued revitalization depends on additional steps to make the neighborhood safe and welcoming.

Downtown Los Banos stakeholders have identified vagrancy, drug use, and disorderly conduct as major safety concerns in the Downtown. Fortunately, the most recent count of homeless individuals in Merced County identified 57 homeless people in Los Banos, down from 76 in 2017. The recent decline is attributed to the success of local outreach efforts to help people find housing or connect with family.

Stakeholders have also identified the nature of some Downtown establishments as potential drivers of inappropriate behavior and safety issues. As the City works to resolve issues surrounding detrimental business practices, it is also important to bear in mind that the causes of crime and safety issues are complex, and that perceptions of safety are also important and not necessarily proportional to actual threats. Crime is a result of interplay between socioeconomic opportunity,



environmental factors, education, public health, and the criminal justice system—and many of these factors relate to higher-level institutions that are beyond the City's control.

Nevertheless, comprehensive, community-based strategies that rely on evidence and nuance, and which build trust between residents and law enforcement have proven to be highly successful approaches to improving public safety. Although many of the practices that support this approach are beyond the scope of this Strategic Plan, a number of aspirational strategies are included below, alongside more specific, planning-related strategies that may be employed to help deter crime and improve Downtown safety:

- a. Improve street lighting in Downtown Los Banos, with a focus on pedestrian-scale lighting that improves sidewalk safety and adds visual appeal.
- b. Require new developments and major renovations to integrate pedestrian-scale lighting into building façades.
- c. Implement Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) concepts and approaches by amending Los Banos's development and design standards or by adopting a set of CPTED standards as a supplement to



the Community Design Standards. Consider implementation of policies including but not limited to:

1. Work to increase foot and bicycle traffic on streets in Downtown Los Banos
  2. Require new developments to use lighting fixtures and brightness levels that prevent glare and the creation of shadowed areas where people can hide.
  3. Ensure new developments and major rehabilitations put “eyes on the street” by providing building transparency at ground level and preferably on upper stories as well.
  4. Avoid building massing that creates recessed areas or blind corners.
  5. Avoid building features which allow external access to upper windows or roofs.
  6. Discourage use of tall fences and promote fencing that allows visual permeability (e.g. picket fencing); but discourage chain-link fences or other types which create a sense of neglect or squalor.
  7. Increase regular public activities in the Downtown in the evenings and at night to change perceptions and put eyes on the street.
  8. Install string lighting on trees or suspended lights over street to create a sense that Downtown is an active, safe, and enjoyable place to be at night.
- d. Regulate Los Banos’s nightlife more closely and work with business organizations and venue owners to reform practices to create a safer and more welcoming environment.
  - e. Work with the Los Banos Police Department to institute Downtown foot and/or bicycle patrols.
  - f. Work with the Los Banos Police Department to establish and/or expand community-based policing initiatives.
  - g. Seek County, State, federal, and charitable funding to create an emergency shelter, treatment center, and/or supportive housing so that individuals with substance use issues have an alternative to being on the streets.
  - h. Enforce the Los Banos and California building codes to ensure buildings are safe and maintained at a level that meets minimum habitability standards.

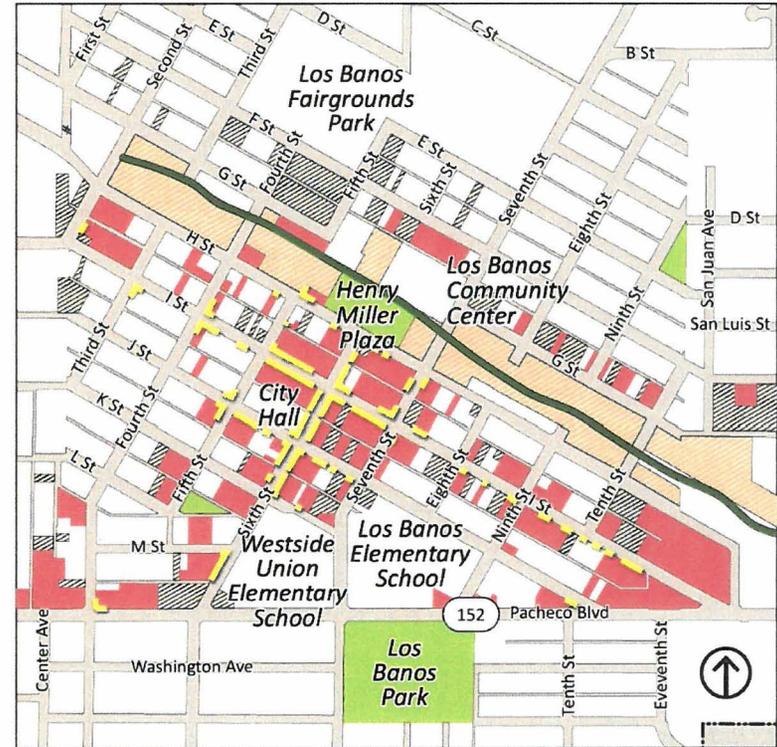
## 2.7 ENHANCE LOS BANOS CHARACTER

Downtowns throughout America were negatively affected by the rise of modern shopping centers and big box stores. Previously lively downtowns began losing customers and businesses in the 1950s and 1960s, and in some places these trends continue. But in recent years many downtowns across California and the US have enjoyed revitalization as shoppers rediscover their appeal and amenities. The history and authenticity of the downtown environment, including the presence of small and local businesses, enhances the shopping experience with a sense of community and substance. Increasingly, residents and visitors are viewing downtowns in their long-standing role as a place not just to shop, but to live, work and play.

As mentioned previously, Downtown Los Banos has many positive attributes, including a pedestrian friendly circulation network, a concentration of historic buildings, recent pedestrian realm improvements, and several well-known businesses and institutions. Despite these positive attributes, further improvements could provide Downtown visitors with stronger and more cohesive sense of place.

There is a unified scale and detail in the older buildings in Downtown that makes them feel natural and comfortable. Generally this means the buildings have a human scale: the windows have a vertical proportion (like a person); the details of cornices, eaves and sills break down the larger scale of the building and show evidence of being made by hand; and the materials of construction are brick, stone, and painted wood. Ensuring new and rehabilitated buildings reflect these handsome traditions will be key to maintaining and enhancing Downtown's character. Sometimes the best way to add

Figure 2-3 Los Banos Downtown Defining Features and Community Character



Source: ESRI, 2018; Merced County Assessor, 2018; City of Los Banos, 2009.





*An existing alley in Downtown Los Banos.*



*An improved alleyway in Lodi, California.*

character to a place is to uncover that which has been covered up. Some of the buildings in Downtown may have beautiful facades that are waiting to be exposed and restored. Property and business owners should look for opportunities to uncover character hidden in plain sight throughout Downtown.

Leveraging and improving existing assets in Downtown offers additional opportunity to create character. Following the lead of other downtowns, Los Banos could refurbish and repurpose long-neglected alleys. Turning them into lively places can be as simple as lighting them festively and activating them with new uses and. Similarly, improved signage could bring new attention and patronage to existing Downtown businesses, while also helping Downtown read as a unified whole. Likewise, improving on Los Banos's existing street trees can help soften the transition from building edge to sidewalk and provide shade.

Downtown Los Banos has an enormous opportunity to enhance and amplify its all-American charm and provide visitors with an experience they'll want to return to. The following strategies can help Los Banos achieve this vision for enhanced character:

- a. Cultivate high-quality landscaping that recalls Los Banos's origins as an agricultural and ranching center.
- b. Care for and maintain healthy and vigorous street trees that provide ample shade and are appropriate for Los Banos's climate.
- c. Pursue grants and other funding sources to provide a landscaping and streetscaping program Downtown.
- d. Implement a unified retail signage program in the Downtown, potentially including requirements for all establishments have awnings over entrances, storefront windows, and awning-level blade signs to help pedestrians locate stores.
- e. Build upon the Façade Improvement Program to develop an enhanced set of Design Guidelines for all new construction and additions.

- f. Require contemporary materials (e.g., plaster, hardboard) used for building rehabilitation are detailed to have a scale and feel similar to original historic elements.
- g. Work with property owners and developers to encourage building rehabilitations that expose and restore hidden materials and details in building facades.
- h. Explore opportunities to convert alleyways into pedestrian-oriented public spaces, potentially including dining areas, kiosks, or other amenities.

## 2.8 DEVELOP A FOOD SCENE

California enjoys worldwide recognition for its fresh produce and innovative cuisine, and the Central Valley remains the agricultural powerhouse behind the state's culinary reputation. Los Banos's location in the San Joaquin Valley and history as a center for agricultural production and food processing uniquely positions it to leverage these assets to develop a thriving food scene. Invigorating Los Banos's food scene has the potential to be a driver for Downtown revitalization and increased tourism and consumer spending in the City.

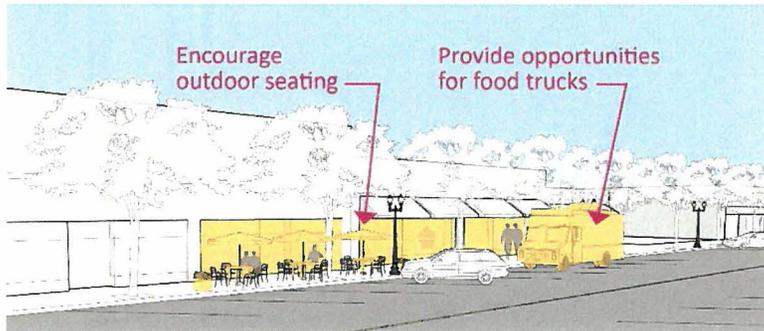
Across California and nationwide there is a growing trend toward the enjoyment of seasonal and locally grown food, for reasons related to health, the environment, and simple pleasure. Younger generations especially are electing to spend less money on material possessions and instead indulge in food, drink, and entertainment. These trends coincide with research showing that people are made happier by the experiences they have than by the things they own. Surrounded by some of the state's most productive farmland, and with an established reputation for food processing and excellent dairy products, Los Banos is an enviable position to benefit from these trends.

Food brings people together because everyone needs it and almost everyone enjoys it. Attracting more full-service restaurants to Downtown Los Banos is therefore an excellent approach to drawing more people downtown and laying a groundwork for further development and revitalization. Additionally, restaurants tend to enjoy higher margins than retail, making them a more stable option for seeding Downtown commercial expansion. A thriving food scene also offers excellent economic opportunities for Los Banos workers, giving them entry points into artisanal food production and restaurant management. Finally, developing a local food scene provides a forum for culinary and cultural exchange for Los Banos's diverse ethnic and immigrant communities.

The following strategies offer a variety of mechanisms and programs the City of Los Banos could pursue to nurture a thriving food scene Downtown and citywide:



Turlock Farmers Market (Nan Austin, Modesto Bee)



- a. Offer tax credits, rebates, or other financial incentives to promote building rehabilitations and systems upgrades to meet the needs of full-service restaurants.
- b. Streamline permitting for opening restaurants and adjust permit categories and procedures to allow for restaurants that serve foods that do not require commercial kitchen features such as ventilation and industrial sinks.
- c. Encourage and allow for food trucks in Downtown Los Banos and explore creation of a permanent, designated space for a cluster of food trucks. Work to ensure the space includes amenities for patrons, such as restrooms, water fountains, seating, and protection from the elements.
- d. Work to attract a biergarten or similar outdoor space for family-friendly drinking and eating options; work with owners to provide games and entertainment.
- e. Assist local restaurants so they can expand their footprint or open additional locations in the Downtown.
- f. Contact popular restaurants in nearby communities to explore opportunities for them to establish a presence in Downtown Los Banos.
- g. Create multiple weekly farmers markets that serve different neighborhoods on different days. Consider creating a Saturday Downtown Farmers Market to draw additional visitors to the Downtown on weekends.
- h. Work with local farmers market organizers to ensure that low-income residents are able to use EBT (food stamps) to purchase farmers market products.
- i. Simplify permitting procedures to allow for sidewalk café seating in appropriate locations.
- j. Pursue creation of a market hall in Downtown Los Banos to feature a mixture of fresh, affordable, local, and gourmet foods.
- k. Work with existing local markets/grocers to expand their retail footprint and offerings in the Downtown.



Vista Ranch Beer Garden in Merced. (eRench Productions)

- l. Work with local restaurants, markets, cultural organizations and food growers to organize an annual food festival that celebrates San Joaquin Valley produce and cuisines from across local cultures.
- m. Pursue community gardening and edible schoolyard programs that offer schoolchildren and their families the opportunity to grow their own food and connect with Los Banos’s agricultural heritage.
- n. Encourage and/or incentivize new developments to incorporate rooftop agriculture as an amenity for residents, an energy efficiency/stormwater prevention measure, and as a showpiece for Los Banos.
- o. Partner with existing or new community-based organizations whose goals is to teach culinary and restaurateur skills to marginalized populations; work to find space for such organizations in the downtown.
- p. Work with downtown business groups and restaurants to create pub crawls, wine walks, and other similar food/drink tours of Downtown Los Banos.
- q. Pursue a local food scrap collection program to reduce waste, improve Los Banos’s sustainability image, and provide high quality compost for local community gardens and food growers.
- r. Work to build or convert an existing space to host a family-friendly brewpub that offers a full menu and entertainment.



## 2.9 MANAGE PARKING

Vehicle parking plays a mixed role in the vitality of cities and downtown areas. Although parking is necessary for people to conveniently access areas by car, an excess of parking, especially in surface lots, can deaden an area. Moreover, devoting space to parking makes it unavailable for use as parks, open space, or revenue/tax-generating uses like new homes and business. Achieving optimal outcomes for any business district requires striking a balance that provides adequate parking, fosters efficient utilization, and promotes alternatives to driving.

Many historic downtowns, including Los Banos’s, have seen their urban fabric disrupted by the addition of parking. Fortunately, much of Los Banos’s historic street frontage remains; however, there is still a number of buildings in Downtown, especially along I Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Street, which were demolished and replaced with parking during the mid- to late-twentieth century. Working to fill these gaps while maintaining an adequate parking supply will be a key long-term goal for the revitalization of Downtown.

Travelers' parking habits—and satisfaction with their parking experience—depend on location, cost, and the ease of finding a spot. Finding a parking spot near one's destination is always preferable, but can be especially important in Los Banos, where the summertime climate can make walking long distances uncomfortable. Finding a spot within a reasonable amount of time is equally important, since someone who is forced to circle repeatedly in search of a spot may simply give up and drive off, or even decline to return in the future. Although travelers tend to be less sensitive to moderate parking costs than might be expected, the price of parking is also important. All else being equal, drivers will opt to visit neighborhoods where parking is cheap or free over ones where it is expensive. Even so, factors of convenience and a desire to visit an area can often overcome concerns regarding the cost of parking.

The ultimate goal of Downtown parking is not merely to store cars, but to enable the people riding in them to conveniently visit Downtown. This, in turn, means that creative, adaptable approaches to parking are preferable to uncritically maintaining or expanding parking supply. Because drivers tend to be more concerned with quickly finding a spot near their destination than with parking costs—within reason—the optimal approach is to maximize parking utilization, while still making sure a few spots are available on any given block at all times. This approach to parking, championed by parking expert and UCLA professor Donald Shoup, aims to achieve 85 percent occupancy for street parking on most blocks in a business district. This level of usage indicates that an area is receiving a good number of visitors, ensures that anyone driving down the block is likely to find a spot right away, and serves to maximize parking revenue for cities that charge for parking.

As Downtown revitalization advances, more innovative strategies for managing parking may become feasible, or even preferable. Although it is not likely economically justified currently, potentially building a parking structure in Downtown Los Banos could represent a future strategy for achieving optimized street parking utilization and for allowing existing surface parking to be replaced with infill development. If and when a stronger mix of uses and larger employment and resident base is achieved in the Downtown, it may also be possible to explore new public and active transportation options that allow people to travel to and within the Downtown without the need for a car.



Overall, adopting the more managed approach to parking in Downtown Los Banos would represent a major departure from the City's current practice. This shift would require a significant investment of resources and should therefore be undertaken only after thorough study and careful consideration. The following strategies outlined below are consistent with investigating and potentially adopting this approach:

- a. Develop and install clear, visually appealing parking signage based on the best practices of other cities.



- b. Conduct a parking supply study for Downtown Los Banos to identify geographical areas, times of day, and days of the week when parking is most abundant or scarce. This study would serve to inform Los Banos’s parking policies by identifying what parking restriction and pricing schemes would be most appropriate for different times and areas.
- c. Aim for an 85 percent parking occupancy rate at any given time; this usually equates to roughly one vacant space per block, which helps travelers find a space quickly while ensuring parking is not underutilized.
- d. Adopt parking time limits for on-street spaces to ensure that street parking is available for visitors and customers. Encourage Downtown employees who need all-day parking to park in centrally-located lots instead.
- e. Implement paid on street parking subject to the findings of a parking study and/or based on the expertise of staff and local business owners.
- f. Consider inexpensive or free parking for the first hour or half hour, with increasing rates for longer periods, in order to encourage turnover and attract customers making quick trips.
- g. Pursue lower-cost options for potential implementation of paid parking, such as solar-powered ticket machines instead of individual parking meters.
- h. Evaluate the feasibility of building a parking structure in Downtown Los Banos:
  - 1. Determine what conditions would fiscally justify the creation of a parking structure.
  - 2. Explore options for building a shared parking structure as part of another project (e.g., a new office).
  - 3. Consider how long-term changes in travel patterns or vehicle ownership may affect parking needs.
  - 4. Investigate options for creating a parking structure designed for future conversion to non-parking uses.
  - 5. Ensure that any new parking structure includes pedestrian-oriented street frontage.
  - 6. Set phased goals for the City to remove surface parking lots and/or replace them with structured parking over time to allow for conversion to other uses.

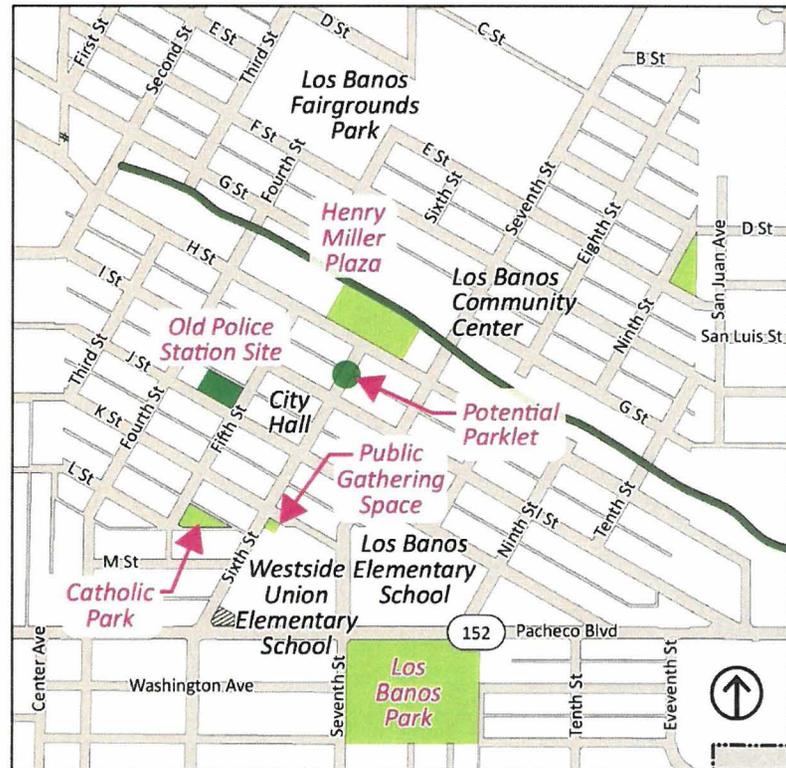
- i. Identify blocks where angled parking could be converted to parallel parking to allow wider sidewalks and/or new parklets; and, if needed, consider what blocks could be converted from parallel to diagonal parking to avoid a net loss of parking spaces.
- j. Explore the need for and potential to convert portions of the old Police station site to public parking to accommodate parking needs if studies show additional parking is needed, or to reuse other parking lots for new uses if the additional parking is not needed.
- k. Work with Downtown business organizations to evaluate the feasibility of creating a Downtown “Shopper Shuttle” that would enable residents to reach the Downtown without driving and parking.
- l. Consider options for redeveloping the parking lot adjacent to City Hall for the purpose of a new civic use or a shared public-private mixed-use project.
- m. Install additional on-street bicycle parking and require large-scale new developments to incorporate bicycle parking for residents, employees, and customers.

**2.10 ENHANCE PUBLIC SPACES**

Downtown Los Banos enjoys a pedestrian-friendly street network and finely scaled buildings. However, Downtown lacks a central, memorable public gathering space, where community members can meet friends, relax, or just people-watch.

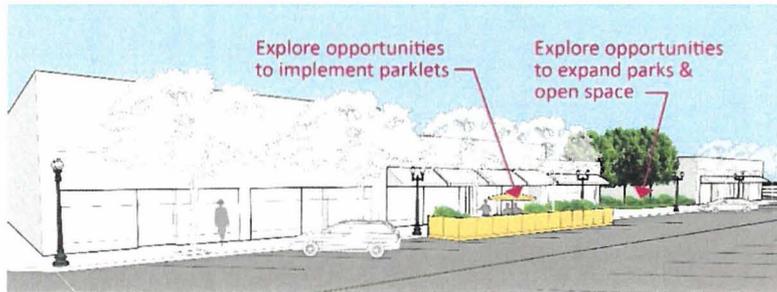
Downtown Los Banos currently has three public spaces, each of which have positive features but could be further improved:

**Figure 2-4 Downtown Los Banos Parks and Open/Public Spaces**



Source: ESRI, 2018; Merced County Assessor, 2018; City of Los Banos, 2009.





- ◆ Catholic Park. Located 5th and L Street, this triangular park features mature trees, good shade, grassy areas, and a play structure for small children.
- ◆ The small gathering space adjacent to Westside Elementary School. Located at the southeast corner of the 6th and K Street intersection, this small square includes benches, trees, and a historically-inspired street lamp. This location is important as it is the beginning of the commercial portion of Downtown along 6<sup>th</sup> Street. The space is visually attractive and shady, but there is no signage or marker announcing the public nature of the space, and it is currently not used by a cross-section of the community.
- ◆ Henry Miller Plaza. Located at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Henry Miller Plaza is a beautiful and recently built gathering space featuring interesting artwork. Unfortunately, the plaza remains underused due to lack of enclosure and actively-used neighboring buildings.

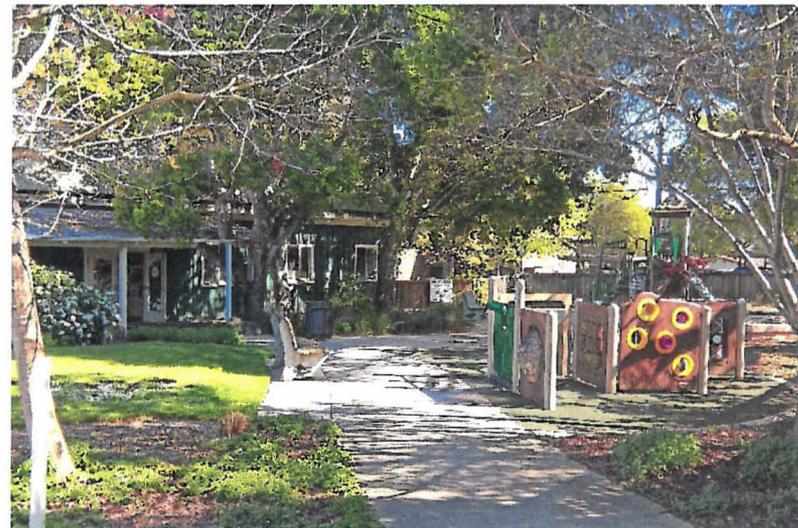
Jan Gehl, an expert on public street life and the author of the book *Life Between Buildings*, has summarized the benefits of providing welcoming public space, including:

- ◆ Access and opportunities for all groups of society to express themselves

- ◆ Healthy, safe places where people can be outdoors
- ◆ Activity that attracts other activity

Some key characteristics of good public spaces are well known. Strong edges that enclose space are more comfortable to inhabit than wide open places with no edges. Neighboring buildings with indoor activity spilling out and activating the area also helps create good public space. An appropriate scale to the space is important, with the height of surrounding edges proportional to the width of the space.

Given the number of vacant parcels and opportunity sites Downtown, there may be both small- and medium-scale opportunities to add new spaces for public gathering that will help bring activity and energy to downtown. For example, parklets are public spaces created from on-street parking spots that are growing in popularity in many communities. By repurposing some of the public space of the street (which



already belongs to the City), parklets have been found to create interest and activity at low cost. Parklets include seating and landscaping, often installed on a temporary basis but sometimes permanently. They can even be installed as a pilot program for a day or a weekend to test the idea. Ideal locations include spaces in front of an active business like a café.

The following strategies are proposed to improve existing and provide for additional public space in Downtown Los Banos:

- a. Maintain Catholic Park's current features and enhance the park with signage, activity, and amenities.
  1. Engage community members to find out what additional amenities may be needed at Catholic Park (e.g., park lighting, a well-designed sign marking the park, fencing around the play area, seating for parents, sidewalks along L Street, a water fountain, and/or new crosswalks).
  2. Ensure that Catholic Park is noted on any wayfinding signage installed in Downtown.
  3. Explore the potential for the City to purchase the undeveloped parcel immediately to the south in order to expand Catholic Park and connect it to M Street. As part of this effort, also consider the potential to close this block of L street to car/truck traffic and integrate it into the park as a bicycle/pedestrian pathway.
  4. Seek state, regional, or federal parks and recreation funding to implement improvements.
- b. Improve and activate the existing public gathering space at 6<sup>th</sup> and K Streets through new character-defining



Painted intersection in Milwaukie, Oregon. (Bryan Dorr)

features and efforts to ensure the space and its surroundings are safe, welcoming, and engaging:

1. Name the space and install signage to foster a more formalized and memorable sense of identity.
2. Improve lighting in and around the space to make it feel more festive and safer at night. (Options could include new and brighter streetlamps or lights strung around and/or between trees.)
3. Increase the use of this public gathering space through new initiatives and activities, potentially including: after-school activities; bake sales or other school fundraisers; music and performances; creation of chalk or street art; or programming coordinated with Downtown events such as the Fall and Spring Faires.

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4. Coordinate with the Los Banos Unified School District so that if and when the portable classrooms adjoining this space are replaced, the District explores options for enhancing the space with new buildings/entrances.
5. Partner with business and property owners to improve properties on all four corners of this important intersection. Potential efforts include:
  - ◆ Expanding the mural on the Farmer’s Insurance Building at the northeast corner of the intersection and providing nighttime illumination.
  - ◆ Adding more attractive landscaping and street trees to the sidewalk surrounding the Chase Bank.
  - ◆ Promoting future redevelopment of the Chase Bank site with a new, mixed-use gateway project.
  - ◆ Improve landscaping on the corner occupied by the Santa Fe Market and consider adding a new sign board under store sign featuring the messages “Welcome to Downtown Los Banos” and “Bienvenidos al Centro de Los Banos.”
  - ◆ Exploring long-term reconstruction of the Santa Fe Market to incorporate mixed uses and a pedestrian orientation that moves the market entrance up to the sidewalk and provides a sidewalk café and seating.
6. Improve the appearance of the 6th and K Street intersection and visually announce the beginning of commercial Downtown Los Banos by creating eye-catching crosswalks and potentially a design or logo in the center of the intersection.



*Temporary Parklet installed on Alisal Street in Salinas.*



*Permanent parklet installed in Berkeley.*

- c. Activate Henry Miller Plaza and encourage more visitors through a variety of potential efforts, including:
  - 1. Promoting development of new buildings and land uses surrounding Henry Miller Plaza, as envisioned by the Rail Trail Corridor Regulating Code.
  - 2. Developing temporary, shaded public parking lots on either side of Henry Miller Plaza.
  - 3. Upgrading recently-added stop signs to a traffic signal at 6<sup>th</sup> and H street, along with high-visibility crosswalks to calm the speed of traffic, make it safer for pedestrians to cross H street, and make it easier for visitors and employees of the Community Center, as well as the new Courthouse and Police station to walk or bicycle Downtown.
  - 4. Ensuring that Henry Miller Plaza is prominently featured in any wayfinding signage program.
- d. Partner with Merced County to improve “Pacheco Park” (Merced County, Los Banos Park), enhance its role as a near-Downtown recreational amenity, and include new signage directing park-goers to explore Downtown.
- e. Ensure Rail Corridor development or other larger scale development such as office and employment centers near Downtown includes attractive and well-maintained public spaces. Consider incorporating privately owned public open spaces (POPOS) to create new informal public gathering places and integrate new uses with the broader community.
- f. Create new public spaces in Downtown, potentially including the following opportunities:

- 1. Consider reusing part of the soon-to-be vacated Police Building complex at 5<sup>th</sup> and J Street as a small gathering space. Depending whether the old police building is demolished, as has been discussed, the site is large enough to accommodate a public gathering space as well as a new public parking lot.
- 2. Consider repurposing one or two parking spaces along 6<sup>th</sup> Street to create one or more parklets.
- 3. Consider long-term opportunities to convert public surface parking into parks or plazas, and explore short-term opportunities pilot such conversions on a temporary basis.







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