

Big City Center

The City Council and Alex Mehran unveiled their plans for the City Center on February 22, 2007. My first reaction was, it's BIG. It will cover 39 acres on both sides of Bollinger Canyon Road and Camino Ramon. I knew this, because those lots had all been zoned City Center Mixed Use, so it's no surprise that they are being used for the mixed City Center, but the scope of the plan still surprised me. It will be Stoneridge Mall and then some.

Two years ago I sat in on some of the Economic Development Committee meetings to develop the Economic Development Strategic Plan. The Consultants who lead the meetings said it would take about 700,000 sq. ft. of retail to make a viable, cost effective retail base for San Ramon. At that time, the city only had about 18 acres for the City Center, and not enough room to put all of that retail. With the addition of Bishop Ranch 2, and the recently rezoned 3.5-acre patch of Bishop Ranch on the south side of Bollinger Canyon Road, the total acreage was increased to 39. Of that about 36 acres will be devoted to retail and office space, with housing above. About 3 acres will be left over for a City Hall & Library building.

I also sat in on several prior-planning meetings over the last seven years, to find out what residents wanted in the City Center. Most of the residents who showed up at these meetings wanted City or cultural services, like an enlarged Library, a regional theater and art gallery, a Children's Museum, a City Hall, and a gathering place. At one point a swim center was thrown into the mix. Most of the people who came to those meetings objected to a lot of retail or commercialism. I expect to hear a hue and cry from that faction during the upcoming election later this year.

I liked the design selected by the City Council in 2001, and hated the design selected by the City Council in 2003. But essentially they both had the same components. This new City Center will have a City Hall and enlarged Library, but that's all. The Children's Museum has found a home in Dublin, and a 600-seat theater will be shared with Dougherty Valley High School, along with the Swim Center. So no longer are these facilities part of San Ramon's "downtown."

Instead the plan calls for two major Department Stores, which I expect will be different from the ones in Stoneridge or Walnut Creek, what sounds like an art-house movie theater, a big selection of restaurants at all price-points, 448 housing units, and tons of office space. This is a regional City Center, not a San Ramon City Center. It is intended to be regional, because it will need to draw shoppers in from all over. It is halfway between Walnut Creek and Pleasanton, and will have to provide something different from either of those shopping Mecca's to bring people in from points north and south of them. It will also have to draw shoppers away from planned developments in Livermore and Dublin. So what goes into these buildings is important.

I like the idea of an art-house movie theater, showing "small" movies that don't get much play in the multiplexes. Movies like *Half Nelson* and *June Bug* could be a regional draw as much as live theater would have been. A small movie theater wouldn't overpower the City Center as much as the proposed 1200-seat theater in the 2003 City Center plan. That building would have even towered over the 8 story buildings proposed for this new City Center, and could have cost the City over \$2,000,000 a year to run. The 600-seat theater at Dougherty Valley High is much more practical and cost effective, but it is disappointing that it is located away from the center of town.

The group that backed the 2001-2003 City Council has been dormant for the last 4 years. With an election coming up they are certain to come back out into the open and attack this plan. It is everything they didn't want, and most especially the involvement of Alex Mehran and Sunset Development, whom they attacked regularly when they were in control of the City.

In my opinion, Alex Mehran is the gold standard, no the platinum standard, no the diamond standard, well whatever is the highest possible standard of quality there is, he's it. As someone

at the meeting said, "We are lucky to have you." But there's a group that doesn't like Mehran and they will come out swinging.

I have mixed feelings about the size of this project, and that the City Offices and Library are almost lost in the middle of all the commercial elements. This would no doubt be a terrific downtown for a big city. San Ramon is expected to be 95,000 people by 2020 or sooner. So this may be appropriate, but I'm ambivalent about it. I don't like going to Stoneridge. Hacienda Crossings is a little better, but big mixed-use developments are not my style.

When folks here said they wanted a downtown with a gathering place, they were thinking about Hartz Avenue in Danville or Main Street in Pleasanton, quaint, old-fashioned downtowns. Frankly I don't like those either. They are hard to drive through or park in. They are a throwback to 50 or 100 years ago. The whole notion that a city must have a downtown is outdated.

San Ramon already has a central gathering place in the Community Center and Central Park, and the new Dougherty Station Center. These draw people from all over the city to attend events or just commune with nature in the park. When former Mayor Pat Boom told me at the meeting that the city needs a central gathering place, I said "This is it. We're sitting in it." She said we need something 24 hours, not just during the day. Why? Why do we need that? I don't need that.

But I would like more shopping options, more eating options, more movie options, and more revenue for the city to sponsor all the great parks and rec programs and keep the city looking good. So it's going to be a Big City Downtown, but if anyone has to do it, I'm glad we have Alex Mehran too.