

From: [REDACTED]
To: [City Council](#)
Subject: The Commons
Date: Friday, September 11, 2026 4:54:57 PM

Dear City Council Members,

I am writing to express my concerns about the proposed Commons project proposal to relocate city hall, the library and senior center to the O'Reilly campus. While on the surface this may appear to be a good move in regards to the potential cost and timing, I do not believe it to be in the community's best interest to relocate these civic institutions away from downtown.

The proposed relocation of these civic uses is contrary to a number of General Plan policies:

- **Policy LU1-2** – Avoid urban sprawl by concentrating development within the City limits; favor infill development over annexation.
 - The O-Reilly complex is the definition of sprawl and in my mind should never have been allowed to be built. It is a large office building complex fronted by an enormous parking out, literally on the edge of town. I believe the land that it is on was annexed to become part of the city. But that was before my time so I may be wrong about that. But by relocating these uses to that location, we would be doubling down on a bad idea and subjecting the citizens of Sebastopol to more car trips to reach this sprawling civic campus for decades into the future.
- **Policy LU7-2** – Maintain the Downtown as a focal point for West County- serving commercial, civic, and cultural uses.
 - This is fairly clear in stating that civic uses should be focused downtown. While the current locations of these institutions may not meet the current space needs, they are well-situated in town. These are services that many city residents use on a regular basis and their location emphasizes the importance of downtown. Trips to the senior center, library and city hall can be combined with other downtown destinations, of which we have many. Again, this move will require more driving by city residents to access services at this proposed edge-of-city location.
- **Policy COS1-1** – Strive to establish Sebastopol as a leader in environmental protection, environmental stewardship and sustainability.
 - Again, this sprawl location at the edge of city limits is a drive-to location. We all know we need to convert more car trips to walking and biking trips and this location does not encourage people to leave their cars behind and move through the city in a more environmentally responsible manner.
- **Policy COS7-1** – Improve air quality through continuing to require a compact development pattern that focuses growth in and around existing urbanized areas...
 - Encouraging more driving by city residents will not improve air quality, and this location is not reflective of 'compact development.'
- **Policy COS8-1** – Recognize that successful climate action planning efforts are dependent upon a wide range of factors and strategies detailed throughout this General Plan, including:

A compact development pattern that promotes and encourages a mix of land uses and densities

- Circulation policies that reduce vehicle trips and increase the use of non-vehicular modes of transportation
 - Again, the General Plan notes the importance of compact development patterns.
- **Policy COS8-5** – Encourage public transit, ridesharing and van pooling, shortened and combined motor vehicle trips to work and services, use of bicycles and walking. Minimize single passenger motor vehicle use.
 - And again, this location will not minimize vehicle use. There is some thought that bus service will be improved and allow more direct access to the proposed center. This is highly unlikely to ever happen. We just don't have the population density or transit ridership to make increased frequency and better routing of public transit. There is also an idea that there could be a shared use path running the length of the 116 corridor through the city. This will be a long time in the future, if ever, and even then, the north 116 corridor is not a good walking environment. If you haven't walked it, I encourage you to do so. It is downright hostile. And it will take A LOT of redevelopment to make it better. There are obviously a good number of people that live outside of the city limits that access these services and their only means of travel is in a car. They will be driving no matter where these civic uses are located. But now you are subjecting the rest of us that live in town and currently walk and bike to the senior center, library and city hall to have to get in our cars. The only neighborhoods that will have decent walking/biking access are Belmont Terrace and the new canopy project which are a fraction of the current population that is within walking/biking distance to the current locations.

I have attended a Creating The Commons committee meeting and the public event at St. Stephen's church to learn more about the project. I can understand why the committee is advocating for the O'Reilly campus. It appears to be the least expensive, quickest and least complicated option explored. It is a lot of space and provides room to continue to grow. The space is relatively new and 'nice.' The financials however seem to rely a lot on wishful thinking like renting A LOT of office space to an unknown entity (the buildings have been largely vacant for years so who are these mystery businesses that want to rent the space?). And maybe it is the least expensive, quickest and least complicated option. But this does not necessarily make it the best option.

At these events I've heard a lot of people express enthusiasm for the amount of parking, proving that people will drive to that location. And those are probably people that drive to the current locations. And you also know how I feel about parking downtown. We have plenty of parking. I understand that the lot between the library and senior center is often full. But there is a lot literally two blocks away, across from the Center for the Arts, that pretty much always has available spaces. And the lot behind the Chamber of Commerce, another block away, always has space. Now maybe some seniors can't walk that far. Maybe we need more accessible parking in the lot next to the senior center. But most of us are capable of walking 3 minutes. Let me reiterate, we do not have a parking problem downtown. The fact that people are excited about abundant free parking shows how seriously we take addressing climate change as a society.

You all know that I have been involved in a number of initiatives over the years to help improve the vitality of downtown. Downtown Sebastopol is the economic engine of our community. We have numerous planning documents, including the General Plan, that point to the fact that downtown is and should remain the Core of our community. I'm sure the SDAT team would advise against this move. We just completed a visioning/planning process through the Caltrans Sustainable Transportation Planning Grant to reimagine the downtown circulation system with a focus on walking and biking and getting people out of their cars. Most of the council was very supportive of this concept. I feel we are really making strides to make downtown a thriving people-oriented place. The civic uses that are proposed to being relocated to the edge of town are an important part of the downtown ecosystem and downtown will suffer if they move away.

I have heard committee members say they have done surveys and that people don't combine trips to the library and senior center with visits to other downtown businesses. I find this truly hard to believe. When you go downtown, do you only visit one location at a time, or do you combine destinations in a single trip? I know I combine trips. And I can't image others do not. You don't think kids go to Honey Moon combined with a trip to the library? I've seen city staff in Retrograde. No one stops in at the Cookie Company after a trip to the senior center? I do believe downtown businesses will feel the loss if these organizations abandon downtown. It is common sense.

And what about library access for the children of our community. Strangely, one of the reasons the O'Reilly campus was noted as a good location in one of the slide shows I saw is because of its proximity to Analy High School. I checked Google Maps. Analy is a 10 minute walk from the current library location. O'Reilly is a 28 minute walk. Almost three times farther. This tracks for others schools in the city as well.

- Parkside – currently 5 minutes; proposed 32 minutes(!), and not a pleasant or safe walk for elementary aged children
- Brookhaven – currently 18 minutes; proposed 21 minutes if you walk on 116 (again, not a great walk), or 24 minutes if you walk on Norlee.
- Sun Ridge – currently 15 minutes; proposed 48 minutes(!)

The only school to benefit from the new location is the Charter School. They are probably very enthusiastic about the prospect. But let us remember, they intentionally moved themselves outside of the city to a non-walkable location, against the wishes of the council at that time. The children from those other schools will not be walking to the library after school anymore.

The committee has also suggested that by vacating the downtown location the current city hall, library and senior center sites could be redeveloped and make money for the city. I will say as someone involved in development, we would need to make some significant changes to our Zoning Code in order for this to happen. The Zoning Code is too restrictive to make those properties attractive to a developer. I also question the loss of property tax revenue if the city buys the O'Reilly campus. That facility must pay a reasonable amount of property taxes that the city will lose if it becomes the owner of the property.

While I like the idea of the Commons, I don't think it is strong enough of a concept for the existing civic functions located downtown to abandon downtown. I realize the options the committee explored downtown are possibly more complicated and expensive, but in the long run, I think the downtown locations will be better for the city. In architecture, we often say you can have something cheaper, faster or better, but not all 3. You have to pick two. I feel what the committee is proposing is *possibly* faster and cheaper, but we're losing out on better. From a planning and urban design perspective, I am all about making Sebastopol a better place. If it takes longer and/or is more expensive for us to get better, I will still advocate for better. Better has more positive long-term impacts for the city. Better is a thriving, vibrant, rich city. That is my dream for Sebastopol. The Commons at O'Reilly is not a part of a thriving, vibrant rich future. If this idea moves ahead, I believe we will look back and regret it.

As always, happy to discuss any of this further with you.

Cheers,
Paul



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