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**The San Pablo Dam Road Commercial District
in El Sobrante, California: Baseline Study**

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The San Pablo Dam Road Commercial District in El Sobrante, California

Elizabeth Deakin, Chris Ferrell, Tanu Sankalia, and Patricia Sepulveda

Summary

Over the past forty years, El Sobrante, California, has changed from a small rural center in the midst of grazing land to a mostly-developed residential suburb. Both San Pablo Dam Road (the main roadway through El Sobrante) and the commercial district stretching along that roadway also have changed. San Pablo Dam Road now serves as a regional arterial as well as El Sobrante's "Main Street." The commercial district has attracted new customers from the growing population, but faces new competition from shopping centers and super-stores located off nearby freeway interchanges.

Current planning efforts for El Sobrante aim to balance local and regional traffic needs with the needs of the commercial district for economic revitalization. This study was designed to support those planning efforts. Information was assembled on the district's development history and an inventory of its current land uses and building stock was carried out. The design and operation of San Pablo Avenue was reviewed, and an inventory of parking was carried out. Overall urban design quality was assessed, considering architectural qualities of the buildings, diversity of uses, building-street relationships, and landscape quality. Assessments of activity in the district and its popular image were carried out by means of a merchant survey, a shopper survey, and a resident survey. Finally, preliminary suggestions on alternative ways to improve the district were developed.

The study found that the El Sobrante commercial district has a number of assets. Businesses provide a variety of goods and services to local residents. Customers do business in the district not only because it is convenient, but also because they enjoy good quality at good prices and appreciate the friendly, small-town atmosphere. San Pablo Dam Road is part of the commute route for many residents, making it convenient to stop in the district on the way to or from work. The steady traffic provides businesses with access to a large number of customers.

Still, there are problems. A number of the district's businesses wish they were doing better. Competition from larger, newer shopping centers wins the majority of shopping trips from the area. Some feel that the

buildings and streetscape are less attractive than they should be. Traffic levels have reached the point where turning movements, biking, and walking can be uncomfortable for some.

Complicating matters are the mixed reactions of business owners and customers to current and emerging conditions. Some call for significant changes to land use, urban design, street layout, and traffic management, while others are satisfied with the present situation. The lack of a united vision for San Pablo Dam Road and the commercial district presents a difficult challenge, since future design and redevelopment efforts hinge on the consistency and clarity of such a vision.

A vision for the future must be developed with broad community input as well as sound data on current and anticipated conditions. Efforts to develop a vision for El Sobrante are currently being planned as next steps in the revitalization planning efforts. Additional traffic studies and market assessments are other items that would help make the vision well founded and attainable. A vision, or clear sense of direction to be taken, would then help in the development of specific design and revitalization actions.

The study identified a large number of possible actions, some from business leaders, some from shoppers and clients of the area, and some from the study authors. They include:

- Develop and implement a program to improve building maintenance and coordinate materials, colors, signage, and landscaping, either through public actions or through a public-private business district
- Develop a plan to achieve a distinct design character for the district, addressing existing development, roadway design, landscaping, and new growth
- Invest in well-conceived plantings of street trees and other landscaping to help create a beautiful street frontage
- Promote selective infill of new buildings to create a more continuous street frontage
- Revise zoning codes, as necessary, to promote consistent building setbacks and orientation to the street
- Develop a program to attract and retain desired businesses, using market studies to help identify realistic objectives
- Revise zoning codes, as necessary, to restrict undesired uses

- Restore the creek and make access improvements for its public use and enjoyment
- Orient some land uses to take advantage of a restored creek and other valley views
- Explore the possibility of creating a public space as an amenity for the commercial district and the community
- Develop a parking district or program to improve off-street parking and reduce curb cuts through shared parking agreements and driveway consolidation
- Add bike lanes and bike parking
- Restore on-street parking through street redesign and traffic management
- Add sidewalks where they are missing, improve existing sidewalks
- Increase pedestrian crossings with mid-block signals
- Enforce the speed limit
- Re-enforce the speed limit through traffic-calming street design
- Create places for safe reversals of direction along the roadway
- Evaluate the possibility of providing an easement behind buildings to provide local movement through the commercial district
- Develop or review traffic estimates for the next twenty years and evaluate the full set of options for dealing with it (demand management, new facilities, new technologies.)

An urban design study aimed at generating new designs for the entire study area could build on these ideas and others generated in a public process to help El Sobrante residents and merchants develop a shared vision and plan for the commercial district. Such a study is strongly recommended.

Introduction

The San Pablo Dam Road Commercial District in El Sobrante, California, has long been the commercial center of El Sobrante. Over the past forty years, El Sobrante has changed from a small rural center in the midst of grazing land to a mostly-developed residential suburb. As the surrounding community and region changed, so did San Pablo Dam Road and its commercial district. To accommodate growth in El Sobrante and other communities, San Pablo Dam Road was redesigned to serve as a regional arterial, connecting commuters in El Sobrante, Richmond and other areas in Contra Costa County to Interstate 80. The commercial district attracted new customers from the growing population, but also faced new competition from shopping centers and super-stores located just off the nearby freeway interchanges.

Like many arterial streets, San Pablo Dam Road now performs dual roles. It provides access to the region and it provides access to the abutting land uses. San Pablo Dam Road is currently performing well as a regional arterial roadway. Conversely, some residents and property owners in the El Sobrante area are concerned that the roadway is providing poor access to the commercial district. Concerns include pedestrian safety, speeding along the road, inadequate sidewalks, and parking restrictions.

Similarly, some residents and property owners are worried about the health of the commercial district. Concerns include the design and maintenance of buildings in the district, landscaping and signage, the mix of uses, the impact of traffic and parking restrictions on businesses, and long-term viability of the district in the face of competition from nearby commercial centers.

Current planning efforts for El Sobrante aim to balance local and regional traffic needs with the needs of the commercial district for economic revitalization. This study was designed to support those planning efforts.

Objectives of the Study

This study is designed to provide baseline data on the San Pablo Dam Road Commercial District in El Sobrante. The specific study area extends along San Pablo Dam Road from El Portal Drive to Appian Way. The work reported here is part of a series of studies, being conducted by the El Sobrante Chamber of Commerce and Contra Costa County, aimed at developing a plan to assist in the revitalization of the commercial district.

The objectives of this study are to support the larger effort by gathering together background information on the area and by conducting a preliminary assessment of the character and image of the district. To meet these objectives, information was assembled on the district's development history, and data on transportation, land use, and activity patterns were collected.

Specific tasks included the following:

The design and operation of San Pablo Dam Road were reviewed, drawing upon earlier studies as well as field observations. On-street and off-street parking was inventoried and mapped.

An inventory of current land uses and building stock was carried out. Overall urban design quality was assessed, considering building design and layout, street design, building–street relationships, and landscape quality.

Activity in the district and its popular image were assessed by means of surveys of businesses and shoppers. A small set of interviews also was carried out with local residents who rarely visit the El Sobrante commercial district.

Finally, suggestions on alternative ways to improve the district were developed.

The work is documented in the maps and figures presented here and in survey analyses documented under separate cover.

Background on El Sobrante

El Sobrante is located in the western reaches of Contra Costa County, in the northeast section of the San Francisco Bay Area (Figure 1.) The area is an unincorporated portion of the county (Figure 2); the City of Richmond lies adjacent to El Sobrante to the west, south, and east. The City of San Pablo is also to the west. The City of Pinole lies to the north and El Cerrito, Berkeley, and Oakland are to the south.

Figure 1. Regional map

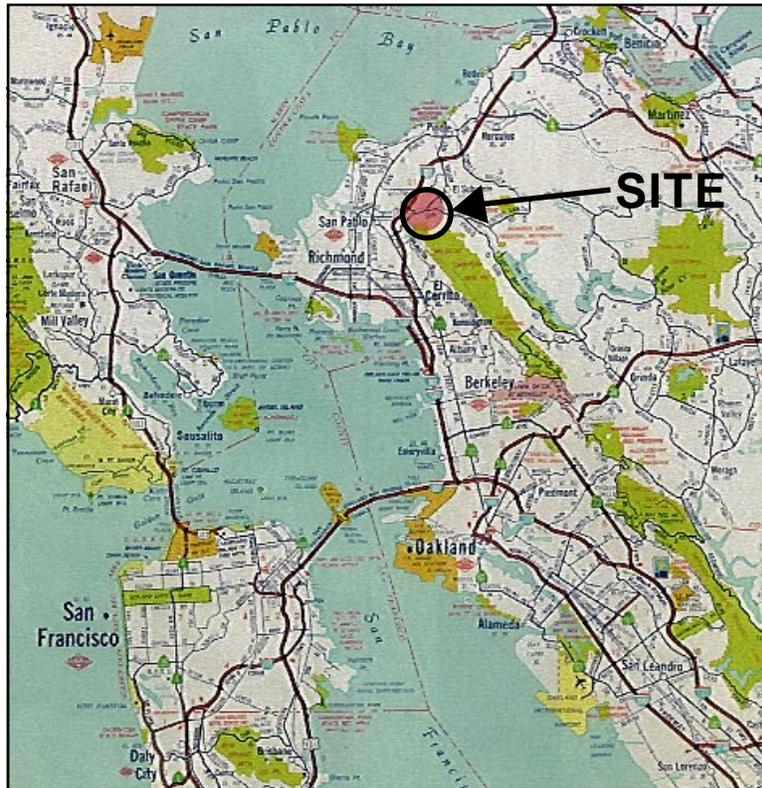
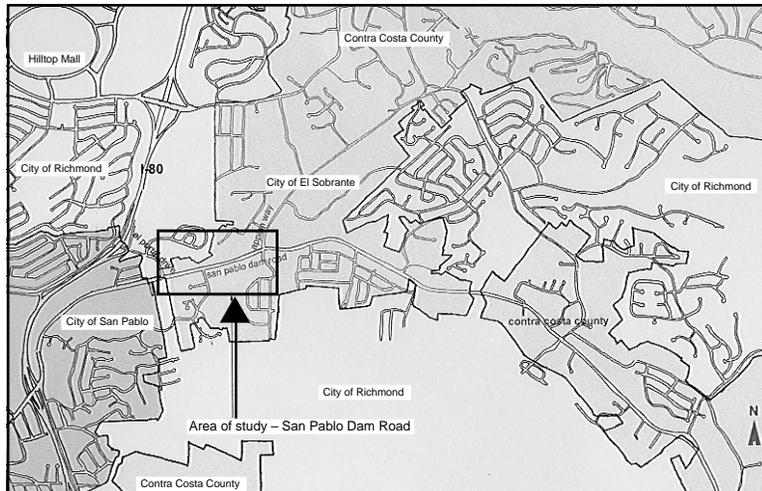


Figure 2. County jurisdiction map



El Sobrante today is a predominantly residential community. It experienced tremendous growth in the period from 1960–1980; since then, growth has moderated though new development still continues. Growth in El Sobrante and surrounding areas has changed the character of the community and the services that it requires.

Development History

A series of maps of the area's street system illustrate the rate and form of development in El Sobrante (Figures 3–7). El Sobrante and the surrounding regions to the north and east were largely rural grazing lands in 1947. San Pablo Dam Road generally followed the contours of San Pablo Creek and served as the east–west connection to San Pablo Avenue, then the major north–south thoroughfare near the East Bay shore.

By 1959, Interstate 80 had been built and had greatly increased access to the area. The interstate allowed El Sobrante and surrounding areas to attract residential subdivisions designed to serve the rapidly expanding population of the region. The housing developments were located on new streets branching off the existing collectors and arterials, including San Pablo Dam Road, Appian Way, and Valley View Road. Each new subdivision was laid out largely independently of the others; each subdivision's street system connected to the nearest major roadway but rarely connected to residential streets in nearby developments. In addition, the street design was mostly curvilinear or cul-de-sacs. This was a significant departure from the rectangular grid of the older residential development to the south and west. No new east–west connections through El Sobrante were built (Figure 4.)

Suburban development continued to boom in the area during the 1960s, filling in much of the area to the west of I-80, south of Hilltop Drive. Additional growth also occurred in the hills north of San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante and in Pinole. A suburban curvilinear street pattern continued to be favored by developers, and although linkages among the subdivisions increased and a few local through streets were established, no new arterials were built (Figure 5.)

Hilltop Mall, a major regional shopping center, opened in 1976 and the I-80 interchange at Hilltop Drive was redesigned to accommodate the new trips attracted to the area. Additional housing development occurred during this period in El Sobrante and the City of Richmond north of San Pablo Dam Road, but development was even greater in Pinole and other cities farther to the north and east (Figure 6.)

Relatively few new streets were built in the area between 1980 and 1997 (Figure 7), although some new development continued along San

Figure 3. El Sobrante, 1947

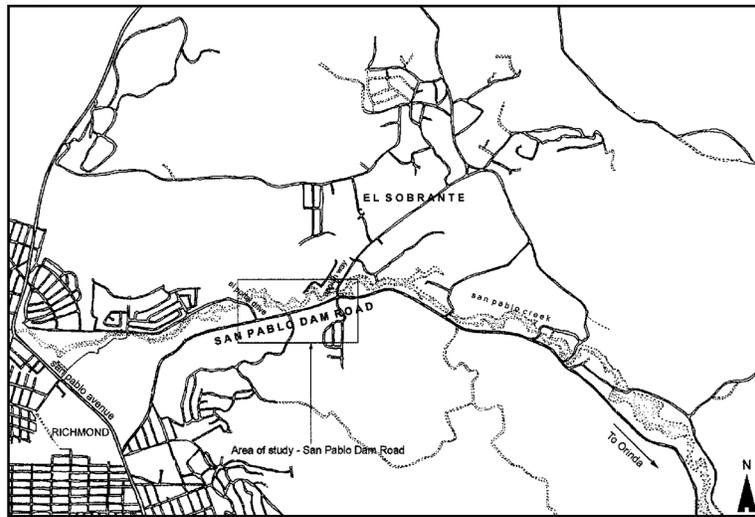


Figure 4. El Sobrante, 1959

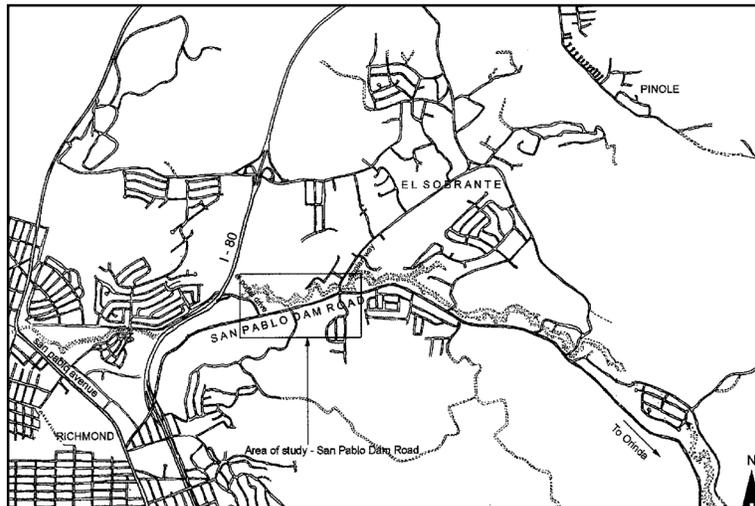


Figure 5. El Sobrante, 1968

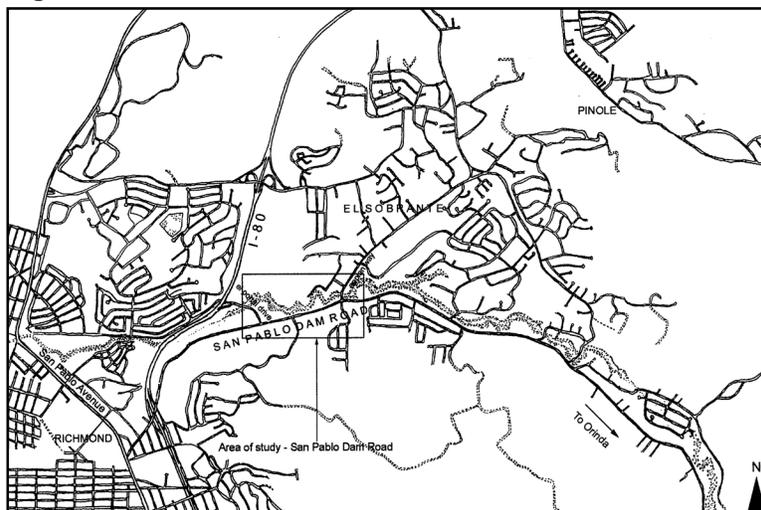


Figure 6. El Sobrante, 1980

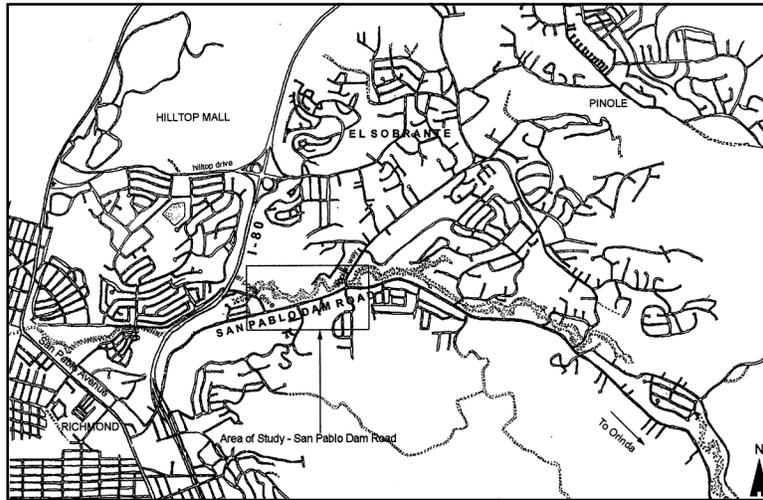
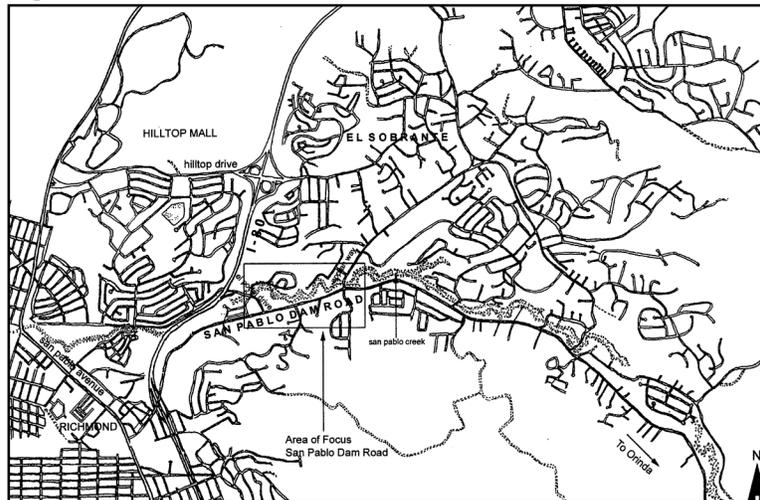


Figure 7. El Sobrante, 1997



Pablo Dam Road east of Valley View Road. The new housing introduced during this time included a number of multi-family units. San Pablo Dam Road remained the only major east–west connection in the area.

Over the past fifty years, El Sobrante has thus been transformed from a small commercial and residential center in a largely rural landscape to a suburban residential district enmeshed in a much larger pattern of suburban development. Today, moderate growth is continuing in El Sobrante, but the rate is much lower than was experienced in previous decades. Rapid growth is now concentrated in communities farther to the north and east.

Future growth in El Sobrante is likely to be modest, in large part, because there is little remaining land that is prime for development. Open space remains along the San Pablo Ridge, but due to steep slopes will likely be maintained in its present state. Further, Contra Costa's 1990 General Plan states that the El Sobrante area should preserve its semi-rural, single-family residential lifestyle, and much of the land zoned for development has recently been down-zoned to single-family residential. Growth through densification thus seems unlikely, at least in the near future.

Demographics

Two to four census tracts are included in planning documents for El Sobrante.¹ The two tracts included in the City of Richmond's planning documents are census tract 3630, adjacent to the City of Richmond, and census tract 3601, the more recently developed sections of El Sobrante. US Census² figures for these two tracts indicate that there were 15,065 residents and 5,249 households within El Sobrante in 1990. A broader definition of El Sobrante used in Contra Costa County's plans adds census tracts 3602 and 3610, with 1990 populations of 4,500 and 4,548, respectively. Inclusion of all four tracts brings the population of the broader area to a total of 24,113 (1990). In comparison, the 1990 population of the City of Richmond was 98,800, and the population of Contra Costa County was 803,732.

The area is experiencing significant changes in its ethnic make-up. Through the 1960s, El Sobrante's population was almost entirely white. With growth came a greater ethnic and racial diversity. Although whites remained the predominate group in 1990, the population was considerably more mixed than in the past and included a large population of Asians and Pacific Islanders when compared to Richmond and Contra Costa County. Furthermore, the average household size in El Sobrante, at 2.6 (2.7 including all four tracts), was higher than that of either Richmond (2.54) or the county (2.57). Household size in the more recently developed census tract 3601 was significantly higher, at 3. (Household size has been decreasing in all three areas, but it is decreasing more slowly in El Sobrante.)

Year 2000 population estimates are available for Richmond and Contra Costa County from the Association of Bay Area Governments

¹ The definition of El Sobrante as census tracts 3630 and 3601 is used in the City of Richmond's General Plan. Contra Costa County uses the broader definition including Tracts 3602 and 3610.

² 1990 US Census STF3A

(ABAG). Because ABAG does not separately estimate population for El Sobrante, a study prepared in 1997 by a private firm, Claritas Inc., is used to estimate El Sobrante's growth.³

Table 1 shows projected population growth for these areas.

Table 1. Population growth estimates

	El Sobrante	City of Richmond	Contra Costa County
Change in population between 1980 to 1990	25.3%	11.15%	20.36%
Change in population between 1990 to 2000 (projected)	3%	6.98%	15.57%

Source: 1990 US Census STF3A, ABAG Projections 1998, Claritas, Inc., Market Trend Report

The projected three percent growth rate for El Sobrante would give it a population of about 15,500 for the two tract area, or 25,000 for the four tracts.

Staff members at ABAG and Contra Costa County believe that El Sobrante's moderate population growth rate of the past decade is likely to continue over the next ten years. Some additional housing will be added, and turnover of homes to younger families may also increase the population. However, with little undeveloped land available for growth and community sentiments in favor of preserving the existing character of the area, major changes in the population base are not expected. Growth in neighboring jurisdictions, likewise, is moderating for similar reasons.

³ The Claritas study projected demographic changes for zip code 94803, which roughly corresponds to the El Sobrante area.

San Pablo Dam Road

San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante, between El Portal Drive and Appian Way, plays two distinct roles. The roadway serves as “Main Street” for the business district in El Sobrante, providing direct access to a wide variety of shops and services. The roadway also serves as major arterial facility, providing residents of El Sobrante, Richmond, and other communities access to regional destinations. These two distinct roles for this section of San Pablo Dam Road have created conflicts, and over the years, a number of studies have been carried out to identify and explore possible improvements.

Currently the roadway has a right-of-way varying from 84 feet to 94 feet, with 9-ft. sidewalks on the south and 10-ft. sidewalks on the north. The roadway is laid out with two traffic lanes in each direction, plus a center lane marked for dual left turns. Parking is allowed in some locations and is banned in others. Building setbacks vary; in some areas buildings front the sidewalk and in others they are set back a considerable distance. Some of the buildings have parking lots in front. Street trees have been planted along the roadway at varying distances from one another.

Figures 8–10 show in plan form the cross sections for three typical existing conditions along San Pablo Dam Road.

Figure 8. Existing condition: plan/section

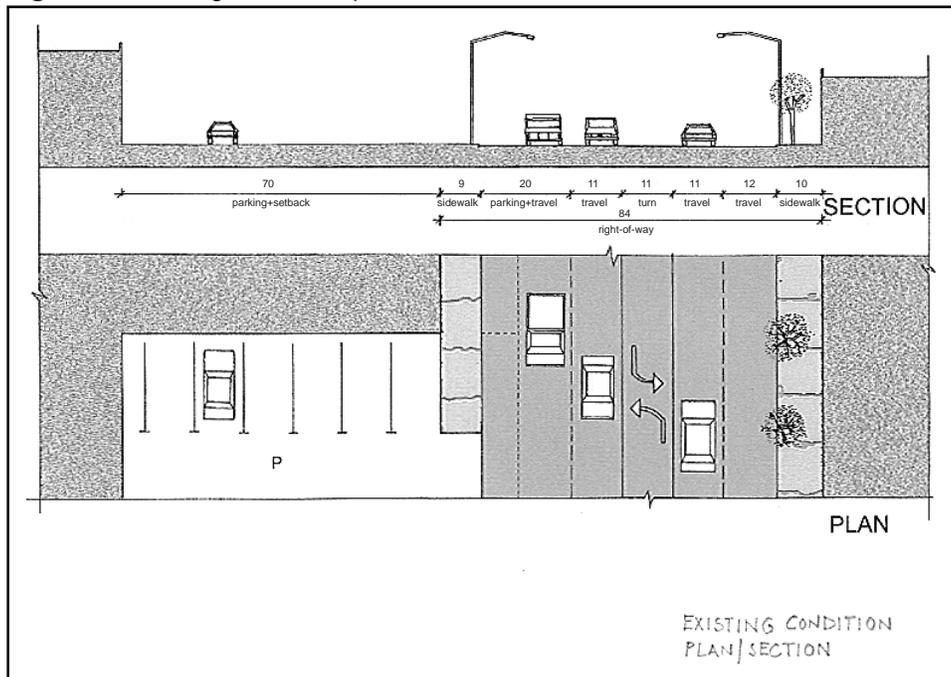


Figure 9. Existing condition: plan/section

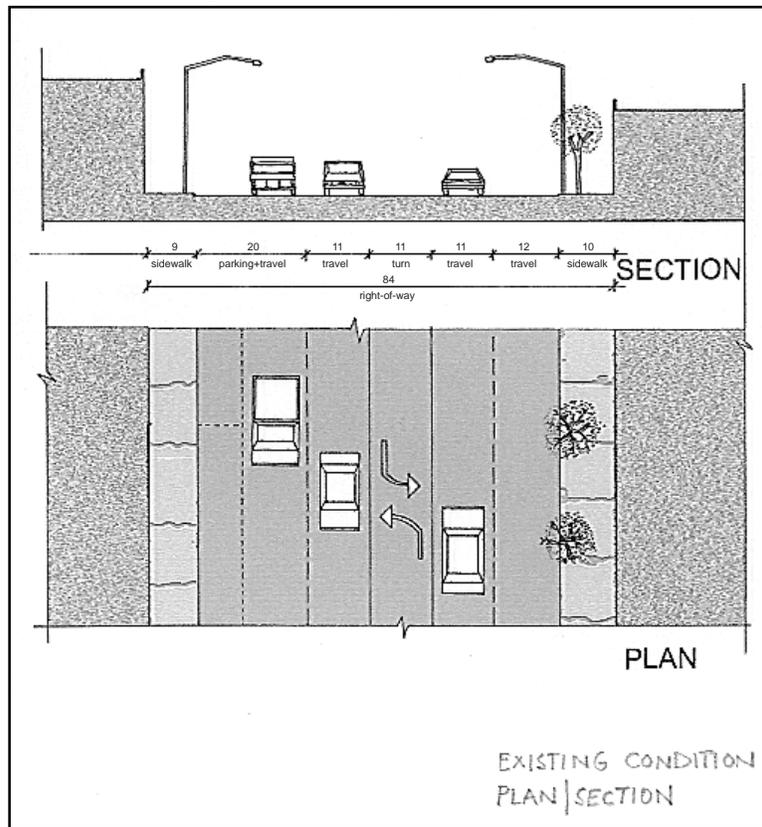
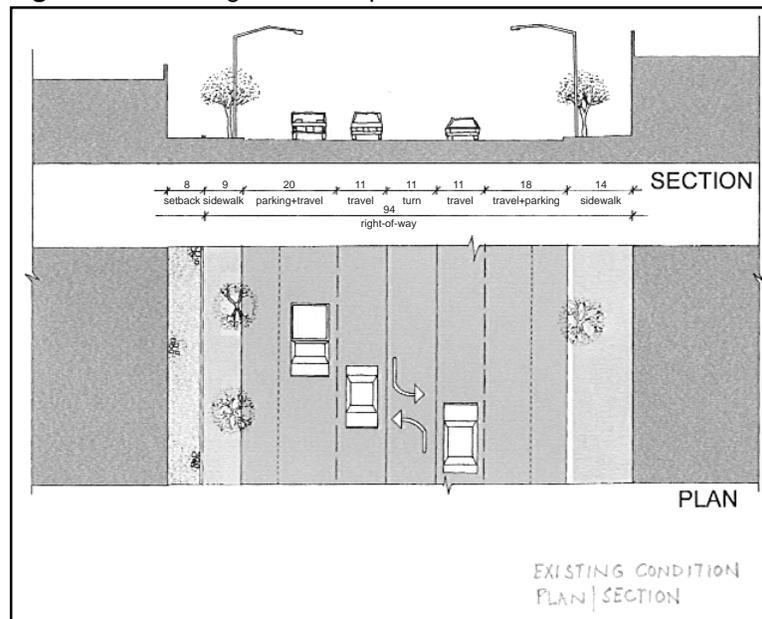


Figure 10. Existing condition: plan/section



The intersections with El Portal, Hillcrest, and Appian Way/La Colina are signalized; in addition, a pedestrian crossing is located about half way between the Hillcrest and Appian Way intersections (Figure 11). Where parking is allowed, it is time limited; both two-hour zones and twenty-minute zones have been established (Figures 12–14). The road is designated as a bike trail by Contra Costa County, but does not have bike lanes or other special facilities for bicycles.

Studies sponsored by local and regional agencies have identified the following issues concerning this section of San Pablo Dam Road:

- Traffic levels and traffic growth
- Street layout and design
- Pedestrian and bicycle safety and circulation
- Access to businesses located along San Pablo Dam Road.⁴

Traffic Levels and Growth

According to a 1998 study by Dowling Associates,⁵ current average daily traffic volume (ADT) along this segment of San Pablo Dam Road is in the range of 32,000–35,000 vehicles per day. This count includes both trips with a local origin or destination and through trips. (A breakdown of local and through trips was not available.)

Over the next decade, traffic increases are expected along the roadway due both to local and regional growth and to per capita travel increases. In its current configuration, a rough estimate is that the roadway would reach capacity at about 50,000 vehicles per day—an increase of about 50% over current levels. The Dowling study did not provide estimates of future average daily traffic for the roadway, but did forecast that the AM peak hour counts along San Pablo Dam Road east of Hillcrest would increase by about 10% by 2010, from 2,521 (March 1998) to 2,740. The study also projected that the PM peak hour counts along San Pablo Dam Road east of Hillcrest would increase by nearly 50% in the same period, from 2,503 (March 1998) to 3,360 by 2010.⁶ Although the accuracy of projections such as these can be debated, it seems unlikely that the roadway overall will reach an average daily traffic volume of 50,000 by the year 2010.

⁴ Dowling Associates, Inc. *San Pablo Dam Road and Camino Pablo Route of Regional Significance. Proposal for Adoption.* (Oakland, December 1998).

⁵ Dowling Associates, Inc., op. cit.

⁶ Dowling Associates, Inc., op. cit.

Figure 11 shows the location of signalized intersections and pedestrian crossings in the study area. As shown in Table 2, these intersections now function at level of service (LOS) A or B. The projected traffic growth will reduce the level of service somewhat. In particular, by 2010 the Appian–La Colina intersection is projected to function at a moderately congested LOS D in the AM peak hour. Other intersections are projected to still operate at good to very good levels of service, ranging from A to C.

While these level of service estimates suggest that the roadway provides comfortable vehicular movement through the area and will continue to do so in the near future, it is important to note that local residents and business owners complain about current traffic congestion. Their complaints may be a reaction to the growth in traffic—the road is “congested” compared to its operation in the past, regardless of its comparative LOS. Alternatively, the complaints may refer to short-term conditions (e.g., traffic between 5 and 5:30 PM) that are not reflected in “average” traffic data.

Figure 11. Signalized intersections, pedestrian crossings

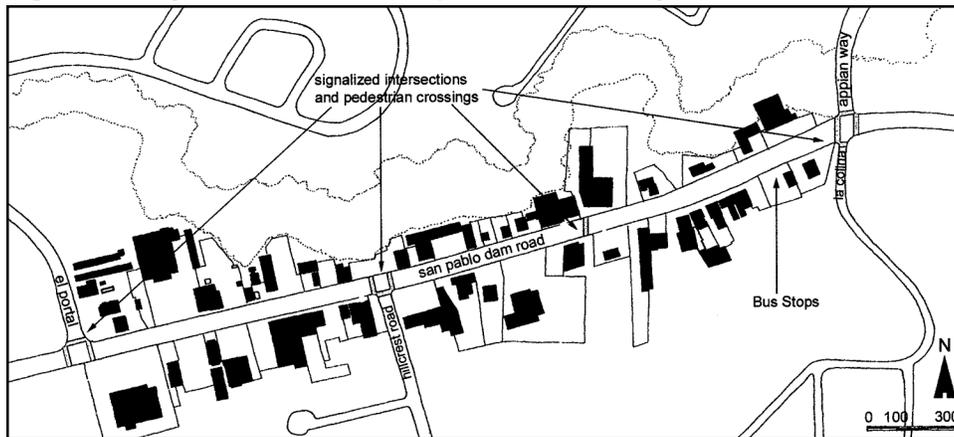


Table 2. Current and future LOS⁷

Cross Street	AM Peak Hour				PM Peak Hour			
	Existing		Year 2010		Existing		Year 2010	
	VC	LOS	VC	LOS	VC	LOS	VC	LOS
El Portal	.5	A	.69	B	.48	A	.67	B
Hillcrest	.43	A	.59	A	.54	A	.7	C
Appian–La Colina	.62	B	.81	D	.62	B	.78	C

Street Layout and Design

The layout and design of San Pablo Avenue and other streets in El Sobrante have been long-standing issues. Nearly twenty-five years ago, a traffic study by DeLeuw, Cather & Co.⁸ suggested a number of measures for improving traffic operations in the area. Some of the measures have been implemented; others continue to be discussed.

The DeLeuw Cather study anticipated significantly higher traffic growth than has been experienced along the Dam Road—it projected that average daily traffic volume would reach 54,000 vehicles by 1995, versus the 32,000–35,000 currently on the roadway. The measures it proposed were intended to help manage such high volumes and mitigate their adverse impacts. Among the proposed measures were a dual left turn center lane for San Pablo Dam Road, several intersection redesigns, new bicycle lanes, and several street extensions and a new roadway intended to increase capacity through El Sobrante.

⁷ Dowling Associates, Inc., op. cit.

⁸ DeLeuw, Cather & Co. Engineers and Planners. *El Sobrante Area Traffic Study* (San Francisco, March 1975)

Of the DeLeuw Cather recommendations that have been implemented, the dual left turn lane, which facilitates access to the many driveways along the Dam Road in the business district, is probably the most significant. It was added at the cost of removing half of the on-street parking that was previously located along the roadway. In addition, left turn lanes were added at the intersection of El Portal Drive and San Pablo Dam Road. However, the DeLeuw Cather proposals for bicycle lanes were not adopted and neither were the proposals to redesign the intersection with Appian Way, widen Appian Way, extend Humboldt Avenue, or extend Morrow Drive. Also left on the table was a proposal to construct a new roadway parallel to and south of San Pablo Dam Road between El Portal Drive and Appian Way, to serve as the eastbound road coupled with a westbound-operating San Pablo Dam Road, narrowed to three lanes. High costs and potential opposition from affected property owners and neighbors are among the reasons for not acting on these latter proposals from the 1975 study.

Some of the same issues and options reappear in the Contra Costa County General Plan (1995–2010), however. The General Plan designates the El Sobrante section of San Pablo Dam Road as a Special Concern Area and states the need to develop a Specific Plan for the area. Two objectives listed for such a plan are to increase parking for shoppers and to increase roadway capacity for through traffic. The General Plan discusses an “alternative traffic corridor” south of and parallel to San Pablo Dam Road; the corridor would be connected to San Pablo Dam Road by a series of lateral roadways. The new roadway would serve primarily for through movement. The alignment is similar to that proposed twenty years earlier in the DeLeuw Cather study, but in the General Plan, San Pablo Dam Road would continue to carry both eastbound and westbound traffic. The future cross-sections of the two roadways are not defined.

The Dowling Associates traffic study cited earlier also identified several street redesign options. The study recommended that the following measures be evaluated:

- Limit or reduce the number of driveway access points along San Pablo Dam Road between Appian Way and El Portal
- Improve side street access and intersection configurations in the residential and commercial portions on San Pablo Dam Road
- Improve the Interstate 80 interchange with San Pablo Dam Road

However, the Dowling study did not specifically recommend the construction of new roads—actions that, according to its LOS calculations, would not be needed to maintain traffic flows. Instead, the Dowling study suggested actions intended to moderate traffic growth on San Pablo Dam Road by encouraging travelers to use transit or join carpools instead of driving alone. The following strategies were recommended to support these mode shifts:

- Improve high occupancy vehicle (HOV) facilities along I-80 and transit capacity along San Pablo Dam Road
- Study the feasibility of installing additional park and ride lots and HOV bypass lanes at critical congestion points
- Increase the frequency and connectivity of bus service for people traveling between City of Richmond, San Pablo, El Sobrante, Pinole and Orinda

The extent to which such measures would reduce traffic levels was not estimated, but experience elsewhere in the region suggests the effects would be modest. And while the Dowling study suggests that traffic operations will not be a serious problem for at least a decade, in the longer run traffic growth may necessitate reconsideration of a full range of traffic management measures. Operations improvements, promotion of alternative modes, and new construction may all have to be considered again to maintain acceptable traffic conditions on San Pablo Dam Road. Finally, the Dowling study did not specifically consider whether alternate street designs could improve the environmental quality of the shopping district while still maintaining its function as a regional commute route; this topic remains for future analysis.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety and Circulation

Although the level of service along San Pablo Dam Road may be working well for through traffic, there are concerns that pedestrians and bicyclists are less well served. Pedestrian and bicycle safety and circulation issues along San Pablo Dam Road and intersecting streets stem both from high levels of traffic and that traffic's high speed.

Field observations conducted for this study indicate that improvements are needed. Currently, traffic along San Pablo Dam Road does not respect the posted speed limit; floating car runs in February 1999 indicated that the average vehicle was exceeding the posted limits by about 15 mph. Heavy truck traffic adds to the noise in the area. Sidewalks are narrow, and frequent curb cuts break up sidewalk continuity and introduce conflicts for both pedestrians and vehicles. With on-street parking prohibited in many

areas, there is little buffer from vehicular traffic. Further, the width of the street, the absence of center islands, and long spaces between signals combine to make it difficult for pedestrians to travel from one side of the street to another. The result is a street environment that is not very attractive or inviting for pedestrians.

Pedestrian safety is especially a concern at the intersection of Appian Way and San Pablo Dam Road, as there are no sidewalks available along Appian Way and the sidewalk along San Pablo Dam Road ends at this intersection. Pedestrians were observed walking along the shoulder of the roadway in these areas, very close to the moving traffic.

The situation for bicyclists is mixed. Because it offers good access to recreational facilities and open space, San Pablo Dam Road is a popular regional thoroughfare for bicyclists, especially on weekends. The Contra Costa County General Plan designates the section of San Pablo Dam Road between El Portal and Appian Way as a bicycle trail. However, bike lanes have not been implemented, and in El Sobrante cyclists enter the vehicle mix without any special treatment.

During the weekdays and in peak periods, heavy traffic and high speeds along the roadway makes biking in the area uncomfortable for many cyclists. Younger and less experienced cyclists were observed riding (illegally) on the sidewalks rather than braving the traffic.

The Dowling traffic study recognized these problems and recommended the following:

- Improve and/or add sidewalks and/or pedestrian pathways along San Pablo Dam Road
- Install bicycle lanes as part of roadway improvements along the corridor.

Residents and local business leaders have suggested other possibilities, including a more extensive redesign and reorganization of the street, sidewalks, and parking. The objective would be to use street redesign to reduce traffic speeds, facilitate pedestrian movements, increase bike safety, improve the commercial district's aesthetics, and improve local circulation, while continuing to accommodate through traffic.

Access to Businesses

Concerns about access to businesses located along San Pablo Dam Road stem from the problems described earlier: heavy, fast moving traffic flows; a lack of parallel routes; parking restrictions; and the traffic and pedestrian conflicts resulting from multiple curb cuts.

Heavy traffic and the high speed of traffic during much of the day not only are discomforts to pedestrians and cyclists, but can create difficult conditions for motorists turning into or out of a parking lot, parking in on-street spaces, or slowing to look for a particular business address. This is especially problematic for older drivers in the area. While the dual left turn lane does facilitate movement into and out of off-street parking, it does not eliminate the discomfort of heavy, fast traffic along the street.

The lack of parallel routes concentrates traffic on San Pablo Dam Road and means that through traffic, intent on getting through the area without stopping, mixes with local traffic entering and exiting the traffic flow and making stops and turns. Business leaders have expressed concerns about aggressive driving through the commercial district. They remain interested in the possibility of a bypass or alternate route that could divert regional or through traffic away from the business district, believing those drivers to be more likely to speed impatiently through the area. The lack of parallel routes also makes it difficult for motorists to reverse direction along San Pablo Dam Road—there is no straightforward way to go around the block and U-turns are difficult in the traffic.

While recognizing the functionality of the center left turn lane, business leaders also rue the loss of on-street parking that accompanied its implementation. As shown in the three detail plans for the roadway (Figures 12–14), much of the street frontage along San Pablo Dam Road is red-curbed (no parking allowed). Bus stops are located along several of these stretches of the road, indicated on the figures by red squares.

Time-limited parking is allowed elsewhere along the roadway. Both short-term (20-minute) parking zones and two-hour parking zones have been established, as indicated in the figures. Field observations conducted on several occasions in spring 1999 indicated that the time limits were not being strictly enforced, however. A small amount of on-street parking is reserved for the handicapped, indicated in blue on the figures.

Both merchants and shoppers consider on-street parking to be a significant convenience, especially when the stop is merely to pick up or drop off an item or two. Hence, the red-curbing of long stretches of the road is problematic. The lack of on-street parking is especially a concern to merchants and shoppers near the intersection of El Portal Drive and San Pablo Dam Road and at the Appian Way end of the district, where almost no on-street parking is permitted.

Off-street parking partly compensates for the on-street restrictions. A field survey conducted for this study counted nearly 800 off-street

Figure 12. Street detail plan

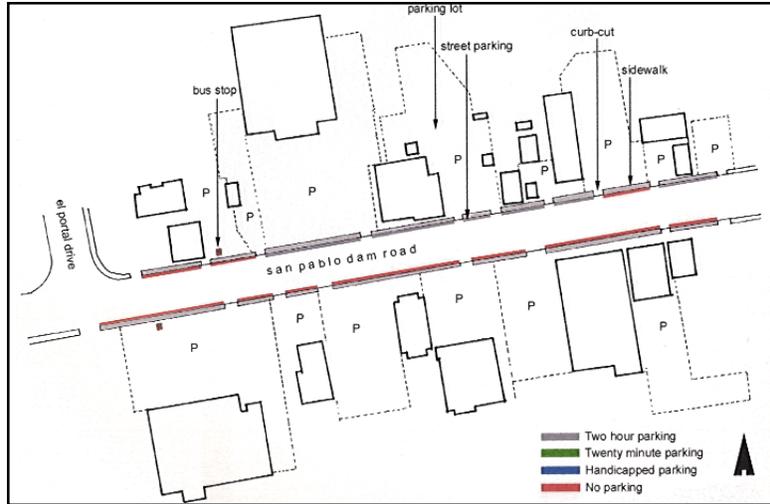


Figure 13. Street detail plan

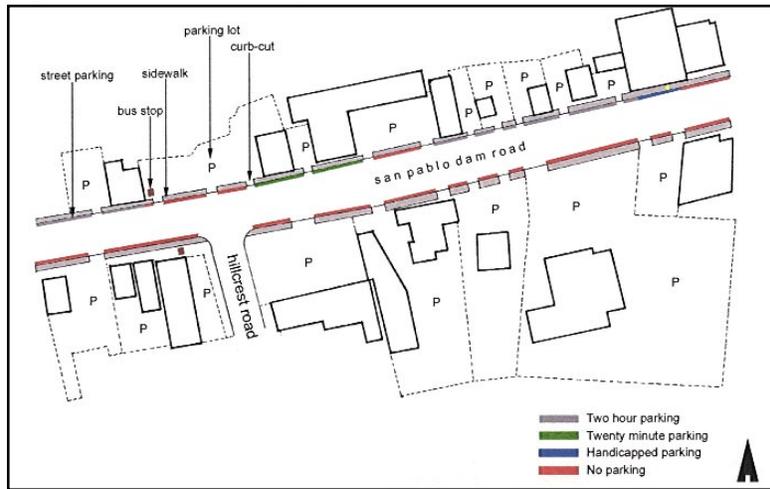


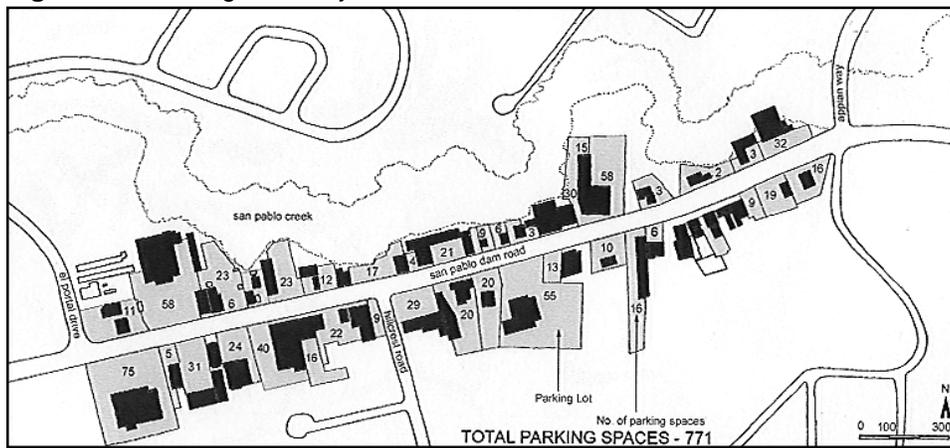
Figure 14. Street detail plan



parking spaces in the El Sobrante commercial district, fairly evenly split on either side of the San Pablo Dam Road. Specific lot counts are shown in Figure 15. It should be noted that most of these spaces are located in individual private lots, with the implication that motorists should move their cars after visiting each establishment rather than park in one of the lots and walk to several different destinations.

The numerous curb cuts providing access to parking lots are also problematic. The curb cuts, shown in the roadway detail plans as gaps in the sidewalk, consume considerable space along the street and seriously break up the continuity of the sidewalk for pedestrians, who must be on continual lookout for cars turning in or out of the driveways.

Figure 15. Parking inventory



Assessment

Considering the situation overall, access to businesses is mixed. For the nimble pedestrian, the experienced cyclist, and the aggressive driver, the street probably functions reasonably well. For others, however, conditions are less attractive than they could be. Steps have been taken to accommodate vehicular turning movements, but with heavy and fast moving traffic flows, turns, on-street parking, and slower travel are still uncomfortable for many motorists. Traffic is often considerably faster than the speed limit. Reversing direction is hard because of the traffic conditions and the limited street network. Pedestrian access is partly addressed by sidewalks and crossings, but the sidewalks are fairly narrow and broken up by curb cuts, there are still places where sidewalks are missing, and the locations for crossing the roadway are widely spaced. Bicyclists often use the sidewalks as a safer path than the roadway. Redesigns that simultaneously handle the traffic needs and improve conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists would seem worthy of investigation.

The San Pablo Dam Road Commercial District

The San Pablo Dam Road Commercial District, as its name implies, stretches along San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante. Most commercial buildings and civic uses front on the main thoroughfare, although businesses are also located on El Portal and Appian Way, the two termini of the area considered in this study. Most buildings are one story in height and are of wood frame construction, with varying surface materials, colors, and signage. Their age varies and no particular style of architecture stands out, although some buildings have distinctive features.

Behind the commercial buildings to the north, runs San Pablo Creek and its leafy riparian area. Access to the creek is limited by steep banks and fencing. Beyond the creek to the north, and just behind the commercial buildings to the south, are residential streets. Housing is mostly single-family detached. Other than the creek, remaining open space is largely on very steep hillsides. Figure 16 shows an aerial view of the study area.

Both the land uses in the commercial district and the urban design qualities of the district are important factors affecting its current function and its possibilities for the future.

Figure 16. Aerial view



Land Uses

Land parcelization, shown in Figure 17, is highly varied, with a few large parcels and a number of smaller, irregular ones. Building footprints, shown in Figure 18, also vary in size, shape, and lot coverage.

Figure 17. Land parcelization

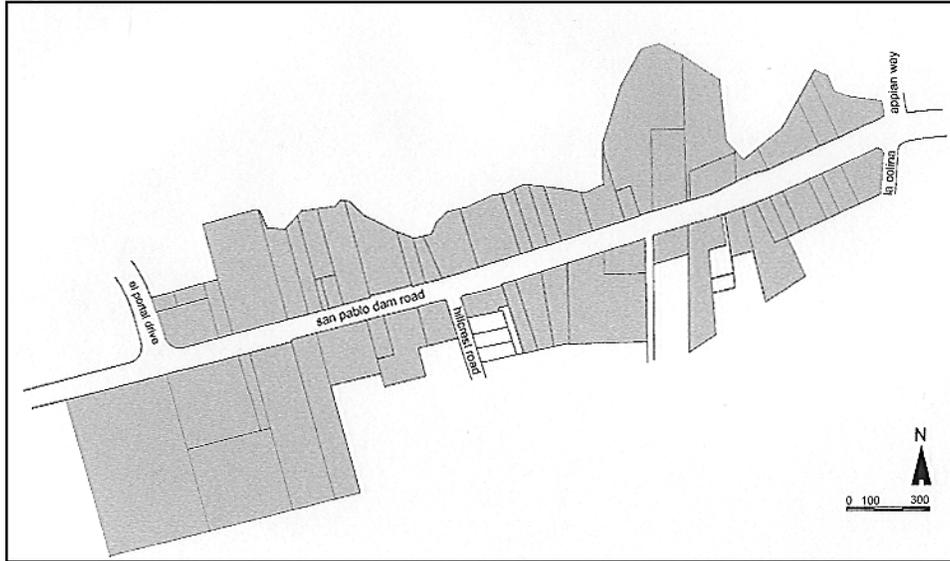
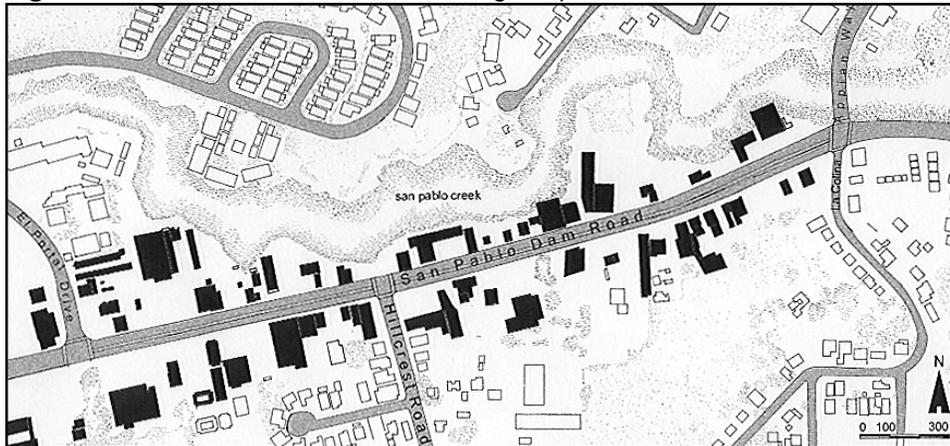


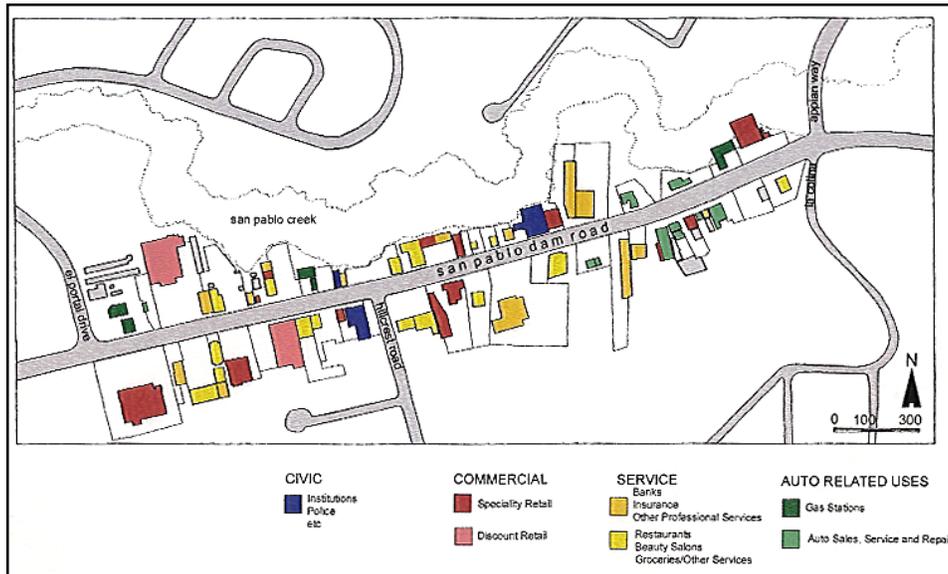
Figure 18. San Pablo Dam Road, building footprints



Specific land uses in the commercial district are a mix of civic, retail, service, and auto-related uses. An inventory done for this study in spring 1999 found 77 businesses located along San Pablo Dam Road between El Portal and Appian Way. These businesses provide a wide assortment of goods and services. Specific uses include both specialty and discount retail stores, banks, insurance, real estate and other professional services, restaurants and food sales, and gas stations and auto repair. Civic

buildings including a police station and religious, educational, and health care institutions also are located in the district. Figure 19 maps the land uses by category, showing each building's predominant use at the time of the survey.

Figure 19. Land use by category



The commercial category is defined as any shop selling goods and includes two subcategories, specialty retail and discount retail. Included within the commercial category are apparel stores, bicycle shops, and pharmacies. Fourteen shops, accounting for 18% of the uses located in the district, were classified as commercial establishments.

The service category includes both professional services (such as law and real estate) and other services (such as restaurants, groceries, beauty salons, and electronics repair). Twenty-four of the 77 businesses in the district, or 31%, were categorized as service establishments.

Civic and institutional uses located in the district include the El Sobrante Community Policing Annex, two churches, an adult day care center, and a Head Start center. Auto-related uses include several gas stations as well as shops specializing in auto sales, service and repair. Auto uses are located near major intersections with a concentration located near the Appian Way end of the district.

Most of the existing uses are local-serving; that is, they are the kinds of land uses that tend to attract most of their customers from nearby residential areas. Exceptions to this are the auto-oriented uses, whose customers may include both local residents and through travelers, and

certain professional and technical services which are likely to draw upon a larger market area. In addition, discount retail establishments tend to draw from a larger area than do specialty retail and service uses.

Urban Design

A number of urban design issues were identified in the course of field studies. The issues include the overall design and layout of the buildings in the commercial district, building maintenance, the design and scale of the street, building relationships to the street, and street trees and landscaping.

First, the commercial district lacks consistency in design and layout. Building architecture, materials, signage, and colors are for the most part unremarkable, but differ enough that there is little or no clear building style typifying the district and creating a memorable image. Also, as the building footprint maps and the plan drawings of street cross sections illustrate, building placement is inconsistent. About half of the buildings, located in small clusters, are oriented to the street, with narrow setbacks. The remaining buildings, irregularly spaced along the street, have large and irregular setbacks.

Second, the scale of the buildings is overwhelmed by that of the street. Even where the buildings are located close to the street, their height is too modest in comparison to the wide roadway to create a sense of enclosure. Street trees could help to offset too-low building heights, define the pedestrian space, and add an important aesthetic element, but here they are too sparse and mixed in character to serve these functions effectively.

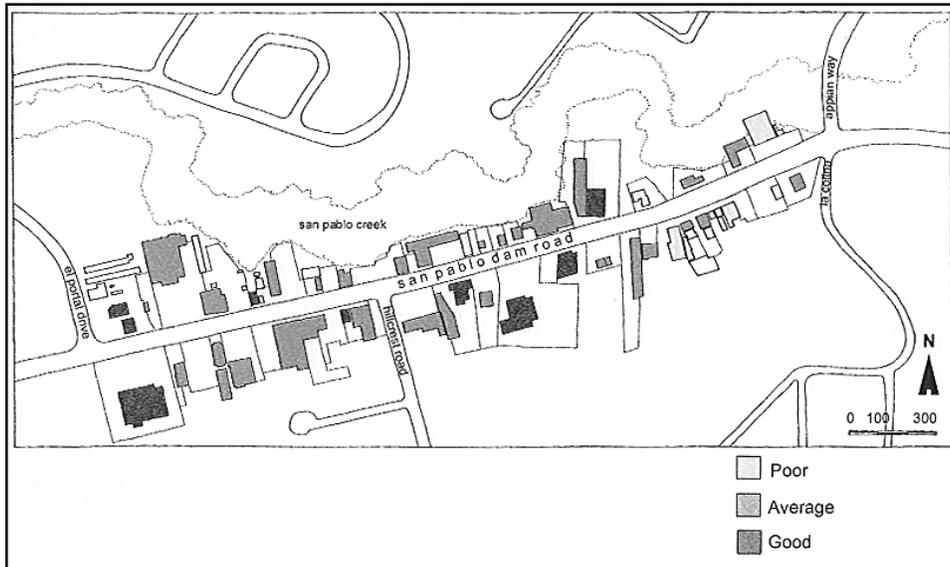
Third, the lack of enclosure, together with the irregular setbacks, interferes with the pedestrian environment. For long stretches of the road, a pedestrian would be isolated, lost between the automobile travel lanes and vast parking areas. The relative narrowness of the sidewalks accentuates this isolation.

Fourth, not only tree plantings but other landscaping is spotty, and some of it is unkempt, with weeds overtaking the plantings. Access to the creek, potentially a major landscape feature, is limited and of poor quality.

Finally, building maintenance is variable. Figure 20 presents the study team's evaluation of maintenance conditions as of spring 1999. This assessment suggests that better maintenance is needed for a number of buildings in the commercial district.

While the existing building stock will be slow to change, other urban design elements, including building maintenance and landscaping,

Figure 20. Building maintenance



could certainly be improved in the short term. More aggressive undertakings could include the following:

- Opening up the creek for public use and enjoyment
- Orienting some uses to take advantage of a restored creek or other valley views
- Implementing a program to improve building maintenance and coordinate materials, colors, and signage, either through public actions or through a public-private business district
- Selectively infilling new buildings to create a more continuous street frontage
- Improving parking layouts and reducing curb cuts through shared parking agreements and driveway consolidation
- Redesigning the street to increase pedestrian crossings and add bike facilities

However, just as the current street design reflects tensions between the desire to facilitate through traffic and the desire to accommodate local circulation needs, current urban design qualities reflect tensions over the function of El Sobrante's commercial district. Some elements respond to the use of the road as a fast moving through route, while others suggest possibilities for "Main Street" treatments and traffic calming. Resolution of traffic issues will need to be done in conjunction with land use planning and urban design in order to create a coherent plan for the future of the area.

Survey of Business Owners and Managers

The study team conducted a survey of business owners and managers in the El Sobrante commercial district in spring 1999. The primary purpose of the survey was to gather information on the businesses in the district and their owners' or managers' perceptions of the district, including business climate, customer base, mix of goods and services, physical design and maintenance, and traffic management. A second purpose was to provide business owners and managers an opportunity to suggest desired changes to the district.

Methodology

Survey researchers mailed a letter to business establishments located in the study area explaining the purposes of the survey, its sponsorship, and the schedule for its completion, and requesting their participation. Shortly thereafter, the researchers attempted to contact respondents by visiting the establishments. The researchers asked to speak with an owner or manager at each of the businesses. If neither was available, the researchers attempted to arrange a time to call back when the owner or manager would be in. Up to three attempts were made to meet in person with an owner or manager. When contact was made, the researchers introduced themselves and provided a brief description of the purpose, content, and anticipated use of the survey, and asked the owner or manager to participate. If the owner or manager agreed, the survey was administered orally. If the respondent preferred to fill out the survey at a later time, the researchers arranged to pick up the completed form, usually later the same day. When the owner or manager could not be reached after a third attempt, a merchant survey form was left at the establishment with a letter describing the survey and requesting that it be completed. All 77 businesses in the study area were contacted in this manner.

Results

The 77 contacts resulted in 24 completed surveys, for a 31% response rate. Of the those that did not respond, there were 17 outright refusals, 31 instances in which an owner or manager was not available at any of the visits and did not send in the survey left at the establishment, and five instances in which an owner or manager agreed to fill out the survey and return it later, but did not do so. Those who refused to participate included some businesses whose management policy forbids participation in local surveys and some businesses that did not wish to support the purposes of the overall study. In one instance, there was a language barrier, and one of the researchers translated both the survey and the responses given.

Due to the small sample size, responses for the most part are not statistically significant. On the other hand, the respondents were a good cross-section of the different businesses located in El Sobrante, which supports confidence in the results. The two groups that are not adequately represented are civic and institutional uses and gasoline and auto repair.

Characteristics of Business Establishments

The median time that respondent businesses have been located in the El Sobrante commercial district is 12 years. The average length of stay is 21 years, but that average combines a cluster of stores that have located in the business district within the past decade and another cluster of stores that have been in the district between thirty and fifty years.

Nineteen of the 24 respondents are renters. Of the 24 businesses surveyed, 18 are only found at this location. Four of the respondent businesses are branch offices, part of a franchise, or part of a chain, and two are one of several establishments under the same ownership.

Business Performance and Climate

Asked how well their business was doing at this location, 9 responded 'good,' 10 'fair,' and 4 'poor.' (There was one non-response to this question.) Several stated that they had been more successful in the past or had done better at other locations.

There is some relationship between the length of time that an establishment has been in El Sobrante and how well the respondent feels the business is doing. Those that rated business as 'good' had a mean length of time at their location of 16.7 years. The businesses that listed their performance as 'fair' had been at their location a mean of 21.8 years. Those that rated business as 'poor' had a mean length of time at their location of 26.5 years. The differences are not statistically significant for this sample, but nevertheless, may point to worse performance (or greater dissatisfaction) among the older businesses.

When asked to list the best things about doing business in the area, frequent responses included:

- Good location within El Sobrante
- Local residents are good, reliable clients
- Good social environment
- Safe/low crime rate
- Customer exposure due to level of traffic through the area

- Proximity to Interstate 80
- Presence of off-street parking
- Visibility from street
- Popular cycling thoroughfare

When asked to list the worst things about doing business in the area, frequent responses included:

- Speed of traffic
- Difficult to enter or exit driveway
- Insufficient off-street and on-street parking
- Unsafe for pedestrians and bicyclists
- Lack of pedestrian traffic
- Building quality, maintenance
- Vandalism
- Lack of police services
- Homeless population

Customer Base

Asked where their customers and clients come from, most respondents reported that they draw both from neighboring residential areas and from people just passing through the area. Most (21 of 24) felt that they had a good idea of where their customers live and reported that residents of El Sobrante make up the largest share of their customers or clients—50–80%. Residents of nearby Richmond and San Pablo are believed to account for nearly all of the rest. Most estimated that only five or ten percent of their customers or clients came from more distant areas of Contra Costa County or from other counties.

When asked why customers do business at their establishment, frequent responses included:

- Good service
- Customers trust us
- Reputation for quality
- Proximity to customer's home or office
- Unique goods or services

- Price
- Off street parking provided

Almost all respondents thought that their customers drove to their establishments, either alone or with others. Estimates of walk and bike access were in the 2–5 percent range and estimates of transit access were 1–2 percent. Nineteen responded that a number of their customers stop by on their way to or from work, and 22 responded that many of their customers or clients make a trip specifically to visit their business.

Many respondents were unable to comment on whether their customers or clients did most of their shopping in the El Sobrante commercial district. Of the 11 who did respond to this question, only two thought that their customers shopped primarily in El Sobrante.

Goods and Service Mix

Local business owners are quite content with the types of goods and services offered in the El Sobrante commercial district. When asked if there were any establishments not currently found in the district that they would like to see located there, 61% stated that there was nothing not currently being offered that they would like to see. Of those who thought that there were particular goods or services lacking, the desired additions included:

- Apparel stores (5)
- Upscale restaurants (4)
- Movie theater (3)
- Grocery store (3)
- Café (2)
- Antique or other specialty shops (2)
- Post office (1)
- Bakery (1)
- Department store (1)

Respondents were also asked whether there were any types of establishments that they felt would be inappropriate for the commercial district. Fifty-five percent stated that they could not think of any. Those that listed uses as being inappropriate for the district named the following:

- More thrift stores (5)

- Strip clubs/pornography stores (5)
- Too many fast food places (3)
- Bars (2)
- Mechanical and auto repair shops (2)
- Big box retail (1)

Most respondents, 71%, are content with the prices of the goods and services offered in the district. A large majority, 81%, also think that the current hours of operation are fine.

Physical Design and Maintenance

Asked about the physical appearance of the commercial district, most respondents expressed dissatisfaction. Rating the quality of the buildings, only two stated that they were fine in their current state. Twelve found them in need of some improvement, and nine found them in need of major improvement. Along similar lines, four felt that the general maintenance of the buildings was fine, but eight said that it needed some improvement, and eleven thought that it needed significant improvement. Respondents who have been doing business in El Sobrante for a long time were the least happy with the current state of the buildings.

The design and maintenance of public spaces fared no better than the private spaces in respondents' estimation. Sixty-two percent stated that the street design and layout needed significant change. Landscaping of the street space also was criticized, with 39% of respondents stating that the street landscaping could use some improvement and 44% responding that significant change is needed. On the other hand, relatively few respondents saw access to open spaces a relevant issue for the business community, and only six felt that better access to San Pablo Creek was in significant need of improvement.

Traffic Management

Opinions differed sharply on how automobile traffic is being managed along San Pablo Dam Road and other nearby streets. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents thought the traffic volumes were fine, while another 39% thought they were much too high. Asked about the speed along the roadway, 50% of the respondents said it was fine while the other 50% felt that it was in need of significant reduction. Those who had been in the district a long time were less concerned with speed than more recent arrivals.

A similar pattern was found when respondents were asked to comment about the convenience or comfort of driving to their establishment. Thirteen stated that it was fine, one stated that it needs improvement, and nine stated that it needs significant change. A number of those who expressed concern added that they or their customers and clients had difficulty entering and exiting their driveways or experienced annoying delays in making the turn.

Responses on parking availability also were divided, but in this case, the responses almost exactly reflected the respondent's own situation. About half of the respondents stated that on-street parking was fine as is, while the other half said it needed significant improvement. The responses mirrored on-street parking availability in front of the respondent's establishment, and whether or not the respondent had off-street parking. Views over off-street parking were also split largely according to the respondents' circumstances.

Although no respondent ranked bicycle and pedestrian activity as contributing significantly to their business, two-thirds expressed concern about the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians along San Pablo Dam Road. About half felt that convenience and comfort of walking or biking to their location needs improvement.

Desired Actions

Respondents listed a number of specific land use, transportation, and urban design actions that they feel would improve El Sobrante commercial district. These include:

- Improve the upkeep/maintenance of the buildings
- Reduce the number of liquor stores in area
- Attract a greater diversity of businesses
- Infill to reduce the space between businesses
- Develop a plan to achieve a distinct design character for the district
- Enforce the speed limit/slow traffic
- Re-evaluate previously made proposals for roadway improvements
- Increase the amount of on-street parking
- Increase the number of pedestrian crossings
- Add bicycle lanes
- Invest in street trees/landscaping
- Improve street lighting

Survey of Shoppers

To complement the survey of local businesses, a survey of shoppers in the El Sobrante commercial district was conducted. The primary purposes of this survey were to obtain information on who shops in the district and what businesses they visited, and to allow customers to report their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the district.

Methodology

A hand-out/mail-back survey was designed for the study in order to minimize interruptions for shoppers. The survey was scheduled for May 1999 so that good weather and daylight hours would prevail when the survey was being distributed. Shops in the El Sobrante commercial district were asked to support the effort by permitting their customers to be solicited for the survey. Customers of businesses that declined to participate were surveyed only if they also visited a shop that was a participant. However, the survey asked about all businesses in the area, including customer visits within the past year, so that an overall assessment of activity in the district could be obtained.

A major consideration was how to distribute surveys to appropriately represent both the mix of businesses in the district and the differing frequencies with which of businesses of various types are visited. To accomplish a reasonable representation of overall customer activity, first researchers used trip rates from the ITE trip generation manual together with the land use maps developed in this study to approximate the number of customers by each business type in the district. The number of customers to be solicited at each participating store was then determined, approximately in proportion to the number of customers estimated for the store's size and business type.

Surveys were handed out to customers in or exiting the participating establishments. Each survey included a cover letter explaining its purpose and requesting participation, as well as a postage-paid return envelope.

Results

Of the 500 surveys that were made available to customers, 381 were accepted. A total of 84 completed surveys were mailed back, of which two were rejected because of incomprehensible responses. Treating the 119 surveys not accepted by customers as refusals, the 82 valid surveys represent a response rate of 16.4%. While this rate is relatively low, the total is adequate to support a general statistical analysis of results. Because the sample frame was shoppers in the district rather than shoppers

in any individual establishment, the results are not meaningful for individual businesses.

Characteristics of Shoppers

Respondents were evenly divided between men and women. Respondents' household size averaged 2.7 (2.5 excluding two very large households reported to have 9 and 10 members respectively), similar to that of the area overall. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 80, with half between 25 and 50. They reported a variety of occupations, with retirees, professionals, office workers, craft workers and homemakers all represented.

Just under half of the respondents (48%) reported that they lived in El Sobrante; most of the rest resided in nearby Richmond, San Pablo, or Pinole. The vast majority drive alone to the El Sobrante commercial district on most visits; others share a ride. About 5% say that they frequently bike to the district, and about 9% say they walk. Slightly more than 1% of the respondents ride the bus as a usual mode of access.

Some 62% of the respondents reported that they often make a trip specifically to visit a particular business in the El Sobrante commercial district. Forty percent say they often stop on the way to or from work.

Types of Businesses Visited

The most frequently visited businesses in El Sobrante, according to the survey, were discount retail establishments, followed by restaurants and other commercial/retail uses. Local markets and gas stations also were common stops, although the frequency of visits was about half that of the first three uses. Personal and professional services and specialty retail attracted fewer trips. Civic uses had the lowest trip rates, at least on the survey days (weekdays and Saturdays.)

Specific businesses that were frequently patronized included banks, a hardware store, pharmacies, fast food purveyors, and a gas station.

Frequency of Visits

Fourteen respondents did not report their stops on the survey day, but of those that did, most visited one to three businesses. Twenty-nine respondents stopped at one establishment, 12 at two establishments, and 10 at three establishments. On the other hand, about a quarter of all respondents, and nearly a third of those reporting their stops, said they visited four or more businesses on the survey day.

Mix of Goods and Services

Asked to rate the types of goods and services offered in the El Sobrante commercial district, respondents had mixed reactions. About a third (35%) thought things were fine as is. Nearly half (47.5%) responded that the mix was OK, but improvement was needed. The remaining 17.5% rated the goods and service mix as needing significant change.

The district fared better in terms of the quality of the goods and services available. Over half rated them fine as is; 36.5% rated them OK, but needing improvement. Only 8.5% thought quality improvements were in serious need. Assessments of price were almost identical, with nearly 55% rating prices fine as is and just under 5% stating that improvement was urgent.

Although those surveyed are El Sobrante customers and clients, the El Sobrante commercial district fails to capture many of their shopping and personal business trips. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that they do not do most of their shopping and personal business in El Sobrante. Some split these trips between El Sobrante and other destinations, but more than half of the respondents, 51%, say they do most of their shopping and personal business elsewhere. Other shopping destinations frequented by respondents include the Pinole Valley Shopping Center, Fitzgerald Drive, Hilltop Mall, Pinole Vista Crossing, and San Pablo Towne Center, as well as shopping districts in Richmond and Berkeley.

Asked whether there were any establishments not currently found in the El Sobrante commercial district that they would like to see there, 43 respondents (56%) answered yes. The following kinds of businesses were suggested:

- Supermarket/major food store (7)
- Health food store (3)
- Quality restaurants, upscale cafes (13)
- More varieties of fast food (2)
- Department store (4)
- Upscale clothing (5)
- Other upscale retail (5)
- Movie theater (4)

Asked whether there were uses that they felt to be inappropriate for the commercial district, 26 said yes, and mentioned more bars and liquor

stores (12), pornography shops (7), casinos (2), and more gas stations (2).

Over half of the respondents reported that the best thing about El Sobrante was its convenient location; its small town character and friendly service also were frequently mentioned. Easy parking, reasonable prices, a variety of goods and services, a lack of crowding, and safety and cleanliness were other items listed as important characteristics of the area. On the other hand, a number of respondents said that improvements to buildings, street layouts, parking, and traffic conditions were needed.

Physical Design and Maintenance

Asked specifically to comment on the physical design and maintenance of buildings in the El Sobrante commercial district, many of the respondents said these needed attention. With regard to building quality, 28% felt the current situation was fine as is, but the remainder felt that improvements were needed, and nearly a quarter of the respondents felt that significant improvements were called for. Maintenance got similar marks, with about a quarter feeling that the current level is fine and the rest wanting to see improvements; 18% want significant change.

Street design and layout also got mixed reviews. About 37% feel things are fine as is; others want change. Thirty-two percent want some improvements and 29% say significant change is needed. Street landscaping received slightly worse ratings, with about 32% calling the current situation fine, 30% giving it a middling score and wanting improvements, and 35% wanting significant change.

Traffic Management

Reactions to current traffic conditions were contradictory. Forty-two percent thought volumes were a problem, and 39% were unhappy about current speeds. On the other hand, 34% thought volumes were fine as is, and a similar share thought current speeds were acceptable. A number of respondents added comments to the effect that either a bypass or a major redesign is needed to make San Pablo Dam Road function as they would like—i.e., with greater attention to local needs.

Despite concerns about traffic and speeding, respondents did not personally have serious problems with driving in the business district. Over 57% rated the current situation fine as is; 32% rated it OK, but in need of improvement. Only 10% thought significant change was needed.

The parking situation also drew mixed responses. Although 44% were satisfied with the off-street parking supply, significant improvements were deemed needed by 28%. Thirty-nine percent felt on-street parking

was fine, but 32% thought it needed significant improvement. Respondents appeared to be commenting primarily on the parking situation at the establishments that they visited.

Although few respondents ever walk or bike to the El Sobrante commercial district, almost half thought walking or biking to this location was convenient, and 40% also thought safety was good. The others—50% and 60% total, respectively—divided evenly between rating conditions OK but needing improvement, and rating them in need of significant change.

Desired Actions

Suggested improvements included beautification of the buildings and street, creek restoration and access, and traffic calming.

Assessment

Overall, the findings from the survey of shoppers was remarkably consistent with the findings of the survey of business owners or managers. Merchants estimated, and shoppers confirmed, that most shoppers in the district are local, from El Sobrante or nearby towns, and most come by car to the district. Both groups see El Sobrante's commercial district as offering an array of goods and services at reasonable prices. The reliability and service provided by local businesses is appreciated, as is the small town atmosphere.

Shoppers were somewhat more inclined than merchants to suggest changes that might be made along the San Pablo Dam Road commercial district. Many suggested that a supermarket, more restaurants, and more upscale shops would be desirable. Currently, they go elsewhere for much of their shopping and personal business, undoubtedly in part because these desires are better met in competing shopping areas.

Shoppers, like merchants, also have concerns about the quality of the built environment in the commercial district. Concerns include building design and maintenance and landscape quality. On traffic issues, however, shopper opinion was split, with almost equal numbers satisfied with the current situation, wanting moderate change, and feeling that major change is necessary.

Interviews with Other Residents

The survey of shoppers provides information on the attitudes and behavior of those who do business in El Sobrante, but a number of local residents are believed to make little use of the commercial district. Therefore, an effort was made to consider the views and concerns of this latter group. While resources available for this study were not sufficient to support a full survey of area residents, it was possible to interview a small sample of residents who rarely visit the commercial district.

The interview sample was drawn from telephone numbers selected by zip code. Up to three calls were made to each number; if no contact had been made after the third call, another number was selected. When contact was made, the researcher asked to speak to the available adult with the most recent birthday. A screening question (“How often do you shop or do business in the El Sobrante commercial district?”) was used to identify persons who infrequently make use of the district.

Twenty-seven numbers were called, resulting in twelve contacts with an adult household member. Ten of these twelve met the screening criteria and agreed to a brief (3–5 minute) interview. All were asked for their impressions of the El Sobrante commercial district, why they did not shop or do business there, and where they did most of their shopping.

Of the ten respondents, four said in varying terms that the El Sobrante commercial district made no strong impression on them, positive or negative. One added that he had not spent enough time there to really know the place. Three others described it as “nondescript,” “pretty beat up,” and “down at the heels.” Two said it was not as attractive as other places to shop in the area. One respondent said the district was “tired looking” and that the street was “over-engineered” and “messy.”

Reasons given for not shopping in El Sobrante were expressed in terms of preferences for other areas and shopping opportunities, as follows:

- Do grocery shopping in Pinole and other shopping at Hilltop (4)
- Buy groceries and clothing in specialty shops in other cities (2)
- Shop near work (2)
- Prefer to shop in more upscale places or on-line (1)
- Prefer to shop in discount stores (1)

However, two of the respondents added that their shopping choices

were matters of habit rather than fully considered evaluations of the options.

This small random sample is too small to serve as a basis for conclusions about those who have not chosen to shop or do business in the El Sobrante commercial district. Nevertheless, the concerns expressed are consistent with those voiced by business owners and managers and by current El Sobrante shoppers, and as such may underscore those concerns.

Future Steps

The El Sobrante commercial district has a number of strengths. The district has both long-standing businesses and new arrivals. Businesses provide a variety of goods and services to local residents. Customers do business in the district not only because it is convenient, but also because they enjoy good quality at good prices and appreciate the friendly, small town atmosphere. San Pablo Dam Road is part of the commute route for many residents, making it convenient to stop in the district on the way to or from work. The steady traffic provides businesses with access to a large number of customers, but is not so heavy as to be congested.

Still, there are problems. A number of the district's businesses wish they were doing better. Competition from larger, newer shopping centers is heavy, and the competition wins the majority of shopping trips from the area. Some feel that the buildings and streetscape are less attractive than they should be. Traffic levels have reached the point where turning movements, biking, and walking can be uncomfortable for some.

San Pablo Dam Road's dual function as commute arterial and "Main Street" creates conflicts. Conflicts are sometimes visible between impatient through travelers and local traffic. Less visible, but equally acute, are the policy conflicts that remain to be resolved. Should San Pablo Dam Road through El Sobrante emphasize commute needs and freeway access? Should through traffic be calmed so that local businesses can do better? These issues have implications not only for the design of the street, but for appropriate future land uses.

Depending on the amount of traffic to be handled, solutions may be possible that both improve current conditions and accommodate through trips (at a somewhat lower speed). But if the decision is to accommodate major traffic increases, a realistic strategy for the district might be to emphasize auto-oriented uses and abandon efforts favoring pedestrians and cyclists. If, on the other hand, the decision is to moderate traffic in favor of existing uses, pedestrian and bike facilities could be part of the solution. In addition, however, alternate routes also may be needed.

What makes sense depends, as well, on business markets and competition. Building upgrades and better landscaping are unlikely unless profitability is sufficient to support them. Pedestrian friendliness could be somewhat improved with more street crossings and improved landscaping, but well-designed infill development might be needed to make major gains. Such development will go elsewhere unless there are market or other incentives present in El Sobrante.

Further complicating matters are the mixed reactions of business owners and customers to current and emerging conditions. Some call for significant changes to land use, urban design, street layout, and traffic management, while others are satisfied with the present situation. The lack of a united vision for San Pablo Dam Road and the commercial district presents a difficult challenge, since future design and redevelopment efforts hinge on the consistency and clarity of such a vision.

A vision for the future must be developed with broad community input as well as sound data on current and anticipated conditions. Efforts to develop a vision for El Sobrante are currently being planned as next steps in the revitalization planning efforts. Additional traffic studies and market assessments are other items that would help make the vision well founded and attainable. A vision, or clear sense of direction to be taken, would then help in the development of specific design and revitalization actions.

Earlier sections of this study suggested a large number of possible actions, some from business leaders, some from shoppers and clients of the area, and some from the authors of this study. The suggested actions include the following, presented here in terms of actions that could be taken:

- Develop and implement a program to improve building maintenance and coordinate materials, colors, signage, and landscaping, either through public actions or through a public-private business district
- Develop a plan to achieve a distinct design character for the district, addressing existing development, roadway design, landscaping, and new growth
- Invest in well-conceived plantings of street trees and other landscaping to help create a beautiful street frontage
- Promote selective infill of new buildings to create a more continuous street frontage
- Revise zoning codes, as necessary, to promote consistent building setbacks and orientation to the street
- Develop a program to attract and retain desired businesses, using market studies to help identify realistic objectives
- Revise zoning codes, as necessary, to restrict undesired uses
- Restore the creek and make access improvements for its public use and enjoyment

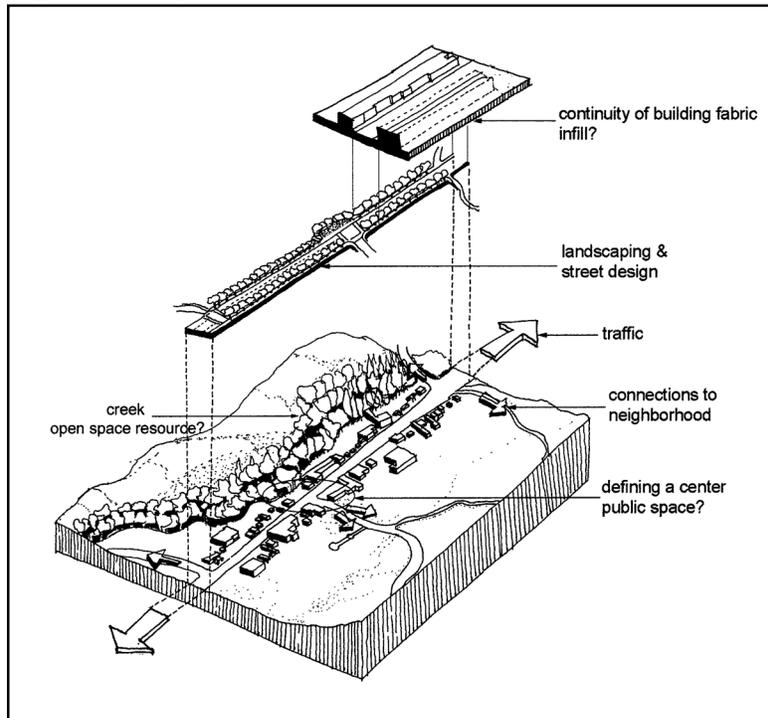
- Orient some land uses to take advantage of a restored creek and other valley views
- Explore the possibility of creating a public space as an amenity for the commercial district and the community
- Develop a parking district or program to improve off-street parking and reduce curb cuts through shared parking agreements and driveway consolidation
- Add bike lanes and bike parking
- Restore on-street parking through street redesign and traffic management
- Add sidewalks where they are missing, improve existing sidewalks
- Increase pedestrian crossings with mid-block signals
- Enforce the speed limit
- Re-enforce the speed limit through traffic calming street design
- Create places for safe reversals of direction along the roadway
- Evaluate the possibility of providing an easement behind buildings to provide local movement through the commercial district
- Develop or review traffic estimates for the next twenty years and evaluate the full set of options for dealing with it (demand management, new facilities, new technologies.)

Consideration of ways to consolidate and reduce curb cuts would be an important early step because a successful reduction in curb cuts might allow the dual left turn lane to be replaced by a smaller number of left turn bays. This, in turn, would make a variety of street design improvements feasible. Combining consolidated curb cuts with signalized pedestrian crossings might be another option worth exploring.

The following example is provided to stimulate discussion of the options.

Figure 21 illustrates some of the key issues facing the El Sobrante commercial district. As noted earlier, these include continuity of the building fabric, landscaping and street design, through traffic and neighborhood connections, and the possibility of creating a public space and using the creek as a resource for the district.

Figure 21. Key issues



Figures 22–25 show four proposals that illustrate some of the issues that would arise in redesign of the street within the existing right-of-way. Alternative 1, shown in Figure 22 for the narrower section of the roadway, restores on-street parking on both sides of the road and adds bike lanes on both sides as well. Four travel lanes are maintained, but they are narrower than the present ones by about one foot. The center dual turn lane is removed—assuming curb cuts are consolidated, turning bays would be provided where needed to enter and exit driveways. Sidewalks are quite narrow, although parked cars would add some buffering for pedestrians.

Alternative 2, also for the narrower section of the roadway, is shown in Figure 23. Here, in addition to bike lanes and parking, a narrow 4-ft. median is added. Such a median is often called a pedestrian refuge since it gives the pedestrian a place to wait for a break in traffic when crossing a wide street. The median would prevent turns across the roadway in this section (unless breaks were inserted), which also would improve traffic flow in the through lanes. The lane width is relatively narrow, at 10 feet.

Alternative 3, shown in Figure 24, omits the bike lanes but returns parking to the street and adds a wider, landscaped center median. Two travel lanes of 10 and 11 feet are provided in each direction, and left turn pockets are added where turns are to be permitted. Alternative 4 offers a

Figure 22. Alternative 1

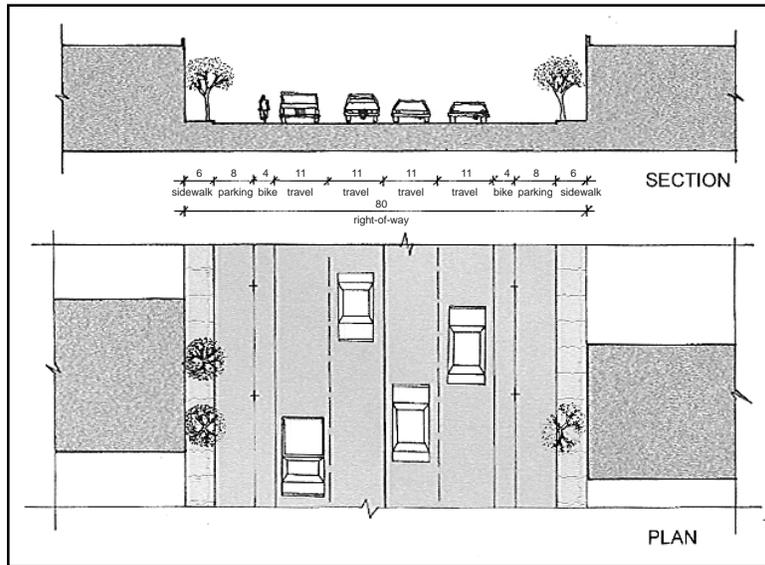
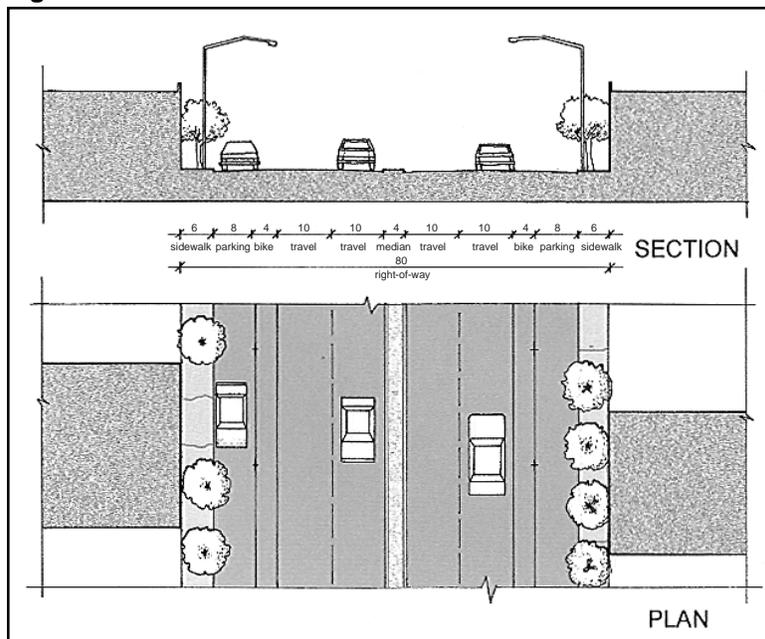


Figure 23. Alternative 2



slight variation on this concept, with somewhat wider sidewalks and all travel lanes at 10 feet.

Clearly, none of these alternatives is well developed yet; they are certainly not the only options that could be considered and may well not be the best ones. An urban design study aimed at generating new designs

Figure 24. Alternative 3

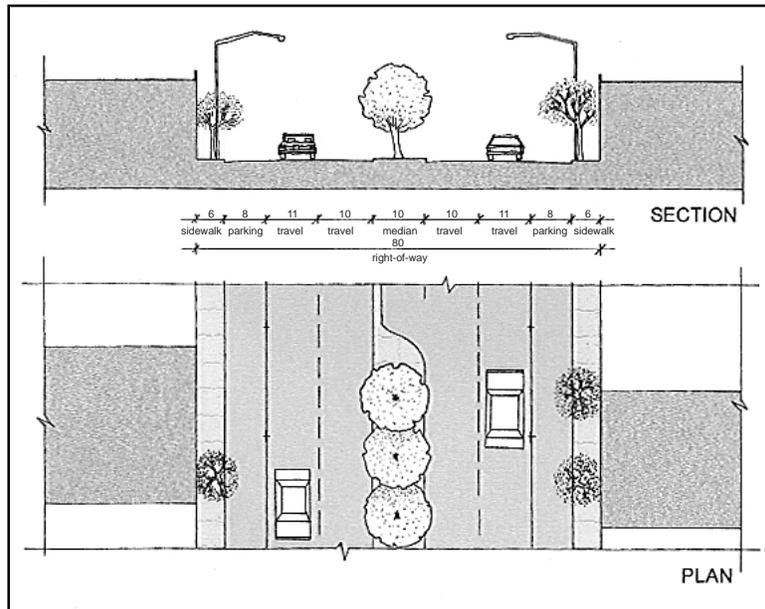
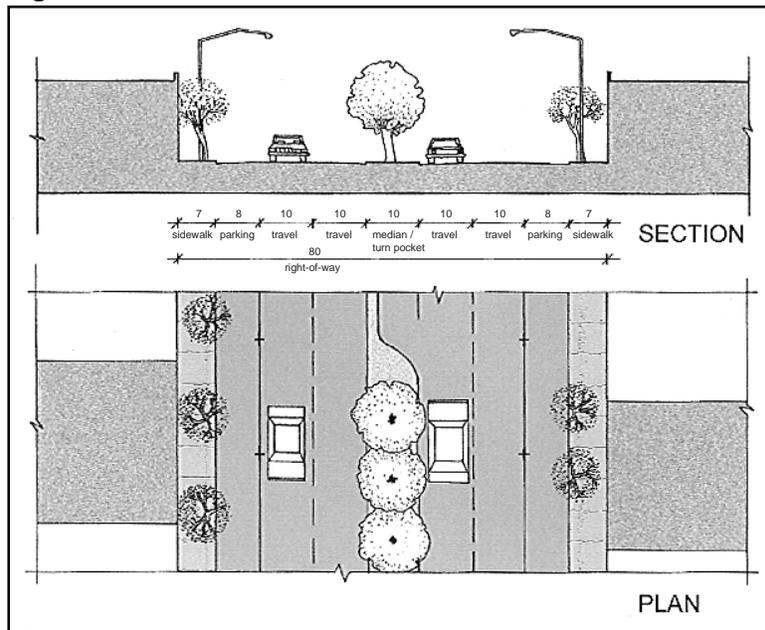


Figure 25. Alternative 4



for the entire study area could generate many feasible options for public consideration and help the public understand the pros and cons of each option. Such a study is strongly recommended.

Appendix 1

Census Data for El Sobrante

1990 Census data delivered in electronic format—
not included in this report.

Appendix 2

Survey Instruments

ON LETTERHEAD

April 1999

Dear El Sobrante Business Leader:

Our research group at the University of California at Berkeley is conducting a survey of businesses located along San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante, between El Portal Drive and Appian Way. We invite you to participate in our survey.

The survey is part of a larger study examining land use, transportation, and urban design strategies that could be used to revitalize the El Sobrante business district. Your responses will help us better understand current conditions in the business district and to identify ideas for improvements.

Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you may decide not to participate or choose not to answer particular questions if you desire. We will not quote you or otherwise reveal your identity or that of your business without obtaining your permission to do so in advance. We plan to publish the overall results of the survey and will make our findings available to all survey participants.

If you agree to participate in the survey, Patricia Sepulveda or Tanu Sankalia of UC Berkeley will interview you to obtain your responses to the survey questions. Completing the survey will take about 10 minutes. If you are NOT the best person to respond to this survey for your business, we would appreciate your directing us to the person you suggest we contact instead.

Any questions about the work should be directed to Prof. Elizabeth Deakin at the above address or at tel. 510 642-4749.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Deakin
Associate Professor

Interviewer: _____
Date: _____
Location: _____

El Sobrante Business Survey

Name of your business: _____
Your Name: _____
Job title: _____

1. How long your business has been at this location?
_____yrs.

2. Do you:
_____ own the building in which you are located
_____ rent or lease the building

3. Is this business:
_____ a branch office, franchise, or part of a chain
_____ one of several establishments under the same ownership
 -- list other locations: _____
_____ located only here in El Sobrante

4. What are the **three best things** about doing business at this location?
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____

5. What are the **three least desirable things** about doing business at this location?
a) _____
b) _____
c) _____

6. Overall, how well is your business doing at this location?

7. Now I am going to read you some statements that may describe your customers or clients. *Please check all that apply.*

_____ They stop at my business on their way to/from work.
_____ They make a trip specifically to visit my business.
_____ They do most of their shopping and personal business in El Sobrante
_____ They do most of their shopping and personal business in other shopping districts or malls - please list other locations: _____

8. Where do your customers/ clients live? Please estimate the percent who are:
- residents of El Sobrante
 - residents of Richmond or San Pablo
 - residents of other areas of Contra Costa County
 - residents of other counties (where?_____)
- 100%
9. How do your customers/clients reach your business? Please estimate the percent who:
- Drive alone
 - Drive with one or more other person
 - Walk here
 - Bike here
 - Take the bus
- 100%
10. Why do you think that your customers/ clients shop or do business here?
11. Are there particular types of shops or services **not currently found** in the El Sobrante business district that you would like to see located here?
- no
 - yes – What are they? (list):
12. Are there any businesses or services (whether they are here now or not) that you think are **inappropriate** for the El Sobrante business district?
- no
 - yes – What are they? (list):

13. Now I am going to read you a list of items that have been identified as possible concerns for the El Sobrante business district. Please indicate whether you think each of these items is :

- Fine as is
- OK, but needs improvement
- OR
- Needs significant change

	Fine as is	OK, but needs improvement	Needs significant change
Quality of the buildings – design and upkeep			
Overall maintenance of the buildings			
Street design and layout			
Street landscaping			
Access to the creek			
Types of goods and services offered			
Quality of goods and services offered			
Price of goods and services offered			
Hours of operation of businesses			
Traffic signals, stop signs, etc.			
Traffic volumes			
Traffic speed			
Convenience and comfort of driving to this location			
Parking availability off street			
Parking availability on street			
Convenience and comfort of walking or biking to this location			
Pedestrian safety			
Other?			

14. What kinds of improvements or changes would you like to see?

15. What improvements or changes do you think are the **three most important**?

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

That's all — thanks for your help.

ON LETTERHEAD

April 1999

Dear Customer:

Our research group at the University of California at Berkeley is conducting a study of the business district located along San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante, between El Portal Drive and Appian Way. We are studying who shops and conducts other personal business in El Sobrante, where else they shop and do business, and their views about the district. We invite you to participate in our survey.

The survey is part of a larger study examining land use, transportation, and urban design strategies that might be implemented in the El Sobrante business district in the future. Your responses will help us better to understand current conditions in the business district and to identify ideas for improvements. Completing the survey will take about 5 minutes.

Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you may decide not to participate or choose not to answer particular questions. Your responses will be used for statistical and planning purposes only and we will not release individual responses or any other information that could identify you. We plan to publish the overall results of the survey and will make our findings available to the public.

If you agree to participate in the survey, Patricia Sepulveda or Tanu Sankalia of UC Berkeley will interview you to obtain your responses to the survey questions.

Any questions about the work should be directed to Prof. Elizabeth Deakin at the above address or at tel. 510 642-4749.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Deakin
Associate Professor

Interviewer: _____
 Date: _____
 Location: _____

El Sobrante Customer Survey

1. Here is an alphabetical list of the businesses in the El Sobrante business district along San Pablo Dam Road between El Portal Drive and Appian Way. Please tell us how often you or members of your household visit these businesses. *Check all that apply.*

Business:	Visited/ will visit TODAY	visited in the past WEEK	Visited past MONTH	Visited in the past YEAR	NEVER visited
76 Gas Station					
Acro Gas Station					
Alpha Tax Service					
Alpha Tax Service					
AL'S Glass Co					
Anthony Real Estate					
Asia Bazar					
Bank of America					
Bethel Baptist Church					
Bill Mowery & Son Auto Hop					
Breakhouse Cafe					
Brite-N-Clean Cleaners					
Chef's Chinese Food					
Civic Center Auto Care					
Clancy's Saloon					
Dam Cycles					
Davis Mower & Saw					
E&G Fireplace and Spa Shop					
El Sabrante Florist					
El Sobrante Body and Fender					
El Sobrante Cleaner					
El Sobrante Community Policing					
El Sobrante Press Printers					
El Sobrante Professional Center					
El Sobrante Wheels and Brake					
El Tumi Restaurant					

Business:	Visited/ will visit TODAY	visited in the past WEEK	Visited past MONTH	Visited in the past YEAR	NEVER visited
Farmers Insurance Group					
Food Stop					
Guardian Adult Health Care					
H&R Block					
Hair Fashion Beauty Salon					
Head Start-Bay Vista ChildCare					
Hill View Electrolysis & Skin Care					
Irene's Apparel					
Jack in the Box					
Jasmine Gifts and Tobacco					
JO-BA-JA's Restaurant					
Koin Korner					
Landerland					
Law Office of Robert N. Sharp					
Library Four Square Church					
Liquor Store					
Martindale Cleaners					
Micro Easy Computer Repair					
Mission Motors					
More Care Company					
Neighborhood Donuts					
Nick and Marie's Italian Deli					
Oliver's ACE Hardware Store					
Pager Electronics					
Park Pharmacy					
Pool Doctor					
Rahi Baldey Insurance Agency					
Rancho Liquors and Lounge					
Rebate Reality					
Richmond Lodge – Elk Club					
Sal's Barber Shop					
Sam's Dog House					

Business:	Visited/ will visit TODAY	visited in the past WEEK	Visited past MONTH	Visited in the past YEAR	NEVER visited
Shell Gas Station					
Smith Lock Shop					
Snow's Printing Center					
Sound EF					
State Farms Insurance					
Subway					
Supermarket					
Tandoori Chicken USA					
The Goodwill Store					
The Mechanics Bank					
The Peddler Bike Shop					
The Wold Tae Kwan Do					
Thrift Town					
Tina's Creekside Café					
Trends Hair Studio					
Tropic Tan					
Twin Palms Touchless Wash					
Walgreens					
Wild Nature					

2. Are there particular types of shops or services **not currently found** in the El Sobrante business district that you would like to see located here?

_____ no

_____ yes – What are they? (list):

3. Are there any businesses or services (whether they are here now or not) that you think are **inappropriate** for the San Pablo Dam Road business district?

_____ no

_____ yes – What are they? (list):

4. What are the **three best things** about shopping or doing business in the El Sobrante business district?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

5. What are the **three least desirable things** about shopping or doing business in the El Sobrante business district?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

6. Now I am going to read you some statements that may describe your visits to the El Sobrante business district. *Please check all that apply.*

- _____ I stop in the El Sobrante business district on my way to or from work.
- _____ I often make a trip specifically to visit a business in El Sobrante.
- _____ I do most of my shopping and personal business in El Sobrante.
- _____ I do most of my shopping and personal business in other shopping districts or malls - please list other locations: _____

7. How often do you use each of the following modes of transportation to get to the El Sobrante business district? *Please check all that apply.*

	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Drive alone				
Drive or ride with others				
Bike				
Walk				
Bus				
Other: _____				

8. What kinds of improvements or changes would you like to see in the El Sobrante business district?

9. What improvements or changes do you think are the **three most important**?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

10. Now I am going to read you a list of items that have been identified as possible concerns for the El Sobrante business district. Please indicate whether you think each of these items is:

- Fine as is
- OK, but needs improvement
- OR*
- Needs significant change

	Fine as is	OK, but needs improvement	Needs significant change
Quality of the buildings – design and upkeep			
Overall maintenance of the buildings			
Street design and layout			
Street landscaping			
Access to the creek			
Types of goods and services offered			
Quality of goods and services offered			
Price of goods and services offered			
Hours of operation of businesses			
Traffic signals, stop signs, etc.			
Traffic volumes			
Traffic speed			
Convenience and comfort of driving to this location			
Parking availability Off street			
Parking availability on street			
Convenience and comfort of walking or biking to this location			
Pedestrian safety			
Other?			

ON LETTERHEAD

April 1999

Dear Resident:

Our research group at the University of California at Berkeley is conducting a study of the business district located along San Pablo Dam Road in El Sobrante, between El Portal Drive and Appian Way. We are surveying a randomly selected sample of residents who live near the business district to ask about their views about the district. We invite you to participate in our survey.

The survey is part of a larger study examining land use, transportation, and urban design strategies that might be implemented in the El Sobrante business district in the future. Your responses will help us better to understand current conditions in the business district and to identify ideas for improvements. Completing the survey will take about 5 minutes.

Your participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you may decide not to participate or choose not to answer particular questions. Your responses will be used for statistical and planning purposes only and we will not release individual responses or any other information that could identify you. We plan to publish the overall results of the survey and will make our findings available to the public.

If you agree to participate in the survey, please mail it back TODAY in the enclosed envelope. We hope to have the survey completed by the end of this month, so your prompt reply would be greatly appreciated.

Any questions about the work should be directed to Prof. Elizabeth Deakin at the above address or at tel. 510 642-4749.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Deakin
Associate Professor

2. What are the **three best things** about shopping or doing business in the El Sobrante business district?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

3. What are the **three least desirable things** about shopping or doing business in the El Sobrante business district?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____

4. Now I am going to read you some statements that may describe your visits to the El Sobrante business district. *Please check all that apply.*

- I stop in the El Sobrante business district on my way to or from work.
- I often make a trip specifically to visit a business in El Sobrante.
- I do most of my shopping and personal business in El Sobrante.
- I do most of my shopping and personal business in other shopping districts or malls - please list other locations: _____

5. How often do you use each of the following modes of transportation to get to the El Sobrante business district? *Please check all that apply.*

	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Drive alone				
Drive or ride with others				
Bike				
Walk				
Bus				
Other: _____				

6. Now I am going to read you a list of items that have been identified as possible concerns for the El Sobrante business district. Please indicate whether you think each of these items is:

Fine as is
 OK, but needs improvement
 OR
 Needs significant change

	Fine as is	OK, but needs improvement	Needs significant change
Quality of the buildings – design and upkeep			
Overall maintenance of the buildings			
Street design and layout			
Street landscaping			
Access to the creek			
Types of goods and services offered			
Quality of goods and services offered			
Price of goods and services offered			
Hours of operation of businesses			
Traffic signals, stop signs, etc.			
Traffic volumes			
Traffic speed			
Convenience and comfort of driving to this location			
Parking availability Off street			
Parking availability on street			
Convenience and comfort of walking or biking to this location			
Pedestrian safety			
Other?			

7. Are there particular types of shops or services **not currently found** in the El Sobrante business district that you would like to see located here?

_____ no

_____ yes – What are they? (list):

8. Are there any businesses or services (whether they are here now or not) that you think are **inappropriate** for the San Pablo Dam Road business district?

_____ no

_____ yes – What are they? (list):

9. What kinds of improvements or changes would you like to see?

10. What improvements or changes do you think are the **three most important**?

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

For statistical purposes only, I would like to ask some questions about you and your household.

11. Where do you live? Please list your city and zip code:

_____ City

_____ Zip Code

12. How many people INCLUDING YOURSELF live in your household? _____

13. Your age _____

14. Your sex: M F

15. Your occupation: _____

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

That's all — thanks for your help.