

A Wellness District for the City of Ventura

Vicente del Rio, PhD

PhD; Professor, City and Regional Planning Department, Cal Poly.

Amir Hajrasouliha, PhD

PhD; Assistant Professor, City and Regional Planning Department, Cal Poly.

This article describes the work by a graduate urban design studio from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's CRP Department during the Spring Quarter, 2016. Under a contract with the City of Ventura's, the students explored the notion of a wellness district anchored by two major hospitals, and developed an urban design concept plan that is consistent with the General Plan and the city's economic strategy.

Communities across the nation are recognizing the critical link between the built environment and public health. Consciously improving the physical design of communities has the potential to reverse downward trends in people's overall health and life span. Designing and planning healthy communities is a process that involves bringing together a wide range of stakeholders who can incorporate community values and implement best practices to actualize them.

The City of Ventura's Planning Department was motivated to hire our studio to explore the notion of a wellness district following the results of the 2005 Midtown Charrette and the 2013 technical assistance workshop by the Urban Land Institute. They suggested the potential for a special district anchored by the expansion of two important hospital campuses located in proximity to each other: the Community Memorial Hospital and the Ventura County Medical Center. Totalling over \$600 million dollars of investment in facilities and infrastructure, the redevelopment of both sites together with the concentration of medical-related uses around them is generating an important community and economic hub in Ventura's Midtown.

The Midtown Ventura Wellness District Concept Plan focuses on the area bounded by Loma Vista Road, Telegraph Avenue, Thompson Boulevard, North Seaward Avenue and South Katherine Drive (Figure 1). The plan explores innovative urban design concepts to direct future development in a manner that preserves the existing physical characteristics that make the community unique while encouraging positive redevelopment.¹ The existing street network will be adapted to increase walkability and safety while encouraging alternative transportation. Zoning changes and housing strategies are suggested to attract mixed-uses, better serve the community, and respond to the needs of the workforce, leveraging

the economic and employment base of the hospitals. And because medical facilities have a distinct physical form and the area needs a character and an identity, the plan proposes distinct design ideas. Bringing together all of these important features, the plan seeks to promote the development of an active Wellness District through improvements to the built environment which reflect a sense of community vitality.

The process

Our work started by reviewing existing plans, documents, and data on Ventura and the project site, followed by meetings with the City of Ventura planning manager and other professionals, including representatives from both the Community Memorial Hospital and Ventura County Medical Center.

Figure 1: The project site showing the Community Memorial Hospital (1), the Ventura County Medical Center (2), and the proposed Core anchor area (3).



¹ The complete Midtown Ventura Wellness District Concept Plan can be downloaded from www.vicentedelrio.net



Figure 2: Word cloud depicting the community responses to a survey question: *What comes to mind when you think of a Wellness District?*

While in the field, the class conducted several tasks to fully understand physical and spatial conditions, but also the community’s needs and expectations. These included an awareness walk when students annotated and photographed the project area and general uses and behaviors, a thorough parcel-by-parcel survey of development conditions, as well as interviews with area users and community members. The awareness walk informed a Walkability Score², and the parcel surveys helped to determine developable lands. This method helped the students assess the quality of the walking environment through variables such as complexity, transparency, legibility, enclosure, and human scale.

The students performed a total of 86 on-street survey interviews in the project site and the downtown to understand the community needs and expectations for the area. The same survey was used for an on-line platform that was widely announced, allowing the class to collect 52 responses from a wide range of stakeholders.

All this material allowed the class to conduct a thorough and comprehensive SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) for development.

Broad targets which quickly coalesced in the project’s early stages included housing for all segments of the population (particularly to the workforce employed by the hospitals),

² The Walkability Score was based on Ewing, R. & Clemente, O. (2013). *Measuring Urban Design - Metrics for Livable Places*. Washington DC: Island Press.

support for existing businesses, strategies to help community members remain successful, access to parks and open space, and increasing safety, appeal, and aesthetics. It became clear that developing a vision statement and goals around the concept of wellness could provide a platform to improvements for both existing residents and newcomers - in an effort to preserve the area’s best features and characteristics, as well as foster positive change.

The Proposal

Following the Site Assessment, a vision statement for the Wellness District was identified, as well as eight goals, several corresponding objectives, and a series of strategic design concepts and policy recommendations. These policies set forth broad strategies to guide urban planning and design within the Wellness District, as well as more specific proposals for the District’s core area.

The Midtown Wellness District Urban Design Concept Plan is guided by the following eight goals associated with wellness as identified by the Cal Poly team. The first letter of each goal, put together, help us remember the overall guiding principle of the future quality of life in the area.

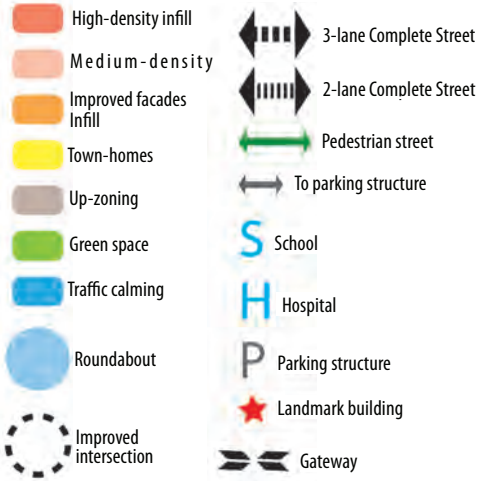
- W**alkability,
- E**ngagement,
- L**ocal Identity,
- L**inkages,
- N**atural Environment,
- E**conomic Vitality,
- S**afety,
- S**trategic Housing

The class was sub-divided into three groups of students so that each could concentrate and develop their studies and proposals for the Public Domain, the Private Domain, and the District’s Core. As there were many significant issues relative to the public right-of-way, they required extensive technical analysis, planning, and design care particularly concerning accessibility and safety. Alternative land use strategies were identified as opportunities for private sector development.

The efforts and strategies of the three groups combined work to implement the interrelated objectives contained in W.E.L.L.N.E.S.S. goals. Key proposals include:

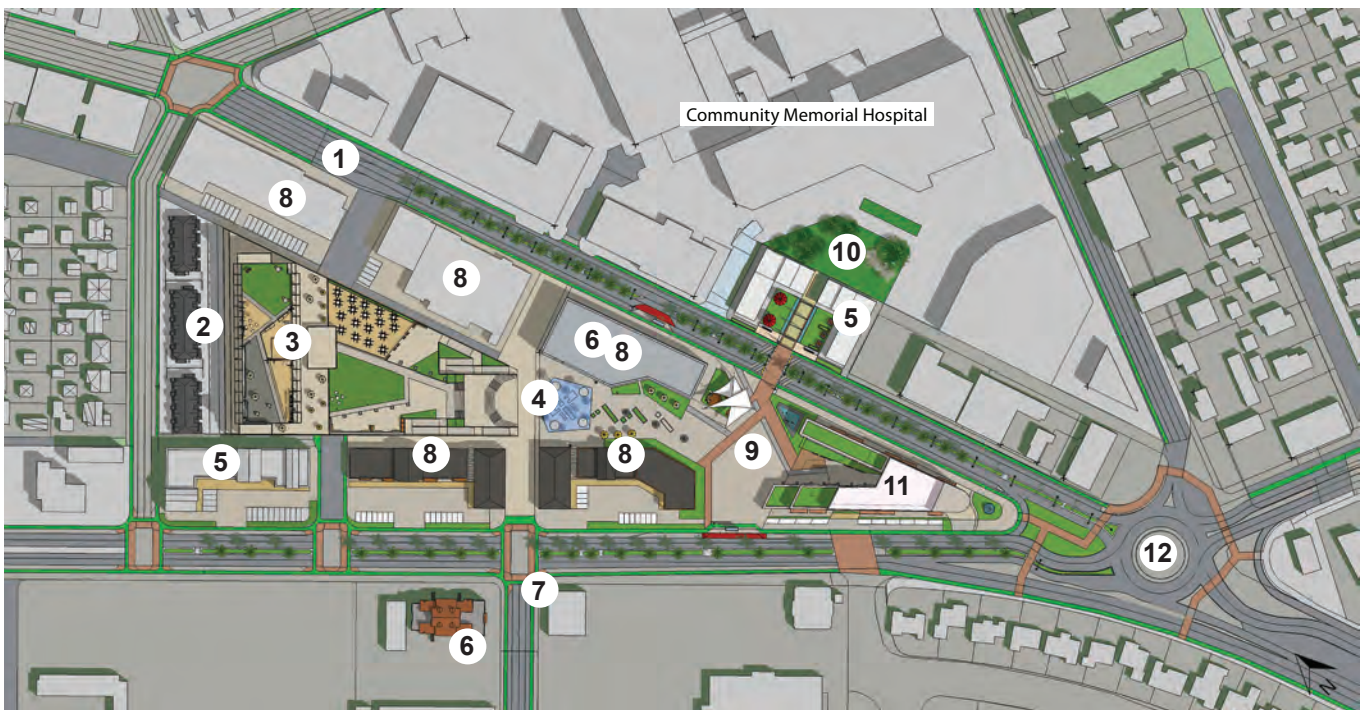
- Major circulation and pedestrian safety improvements including a roundabout at the “5-Points” intersection of Main Street, Thompson Boulevard, and Telegraph Road.
- Redesign of several intersections to improve safety for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Figure 3. Concept Diagram.



1. Redesigned main Street with planted median.
2. Market-rate townhouses.
3. Hotel with roof deck, YMCA, restaurant and plaza over two-story parking structure.
4. Park with steps up to the hotel plaza.
5. Commercial.
6. Senior housing.
7. Safer connection to existing school.
8. Residential over commercial.
9. Plaza with connection to Hospital.
10. Hospital plaza.
11. Landmark building.
12. Roundabout.

Figure 4: The Core's illustrative site plan.





Figures 5 A & B: The Core Area. Existing conditions at Main and Thompson (top) and proposed streetscaping and Landmark Building.



Figures 6 A & B: The Core Area. The existing city parking lot (top) replaced by hotel over YMCA, restaurant and plaza over a two-story parking structure . View from the mid-block plaza.



- A redesigned Loma Vista Road including a planted median, bike lanes, specially designed bus stops, new street lights, safe parallel parking, comfortable and landscaped sidewalks with pedestrian facilities, and added crosswalks.
- A redesigned Main Street with appropriate sidewalks, bike lanes and pedestrian crossings.
- General quality streetscaping including landscaping, tree planting, planted medians, special street furniture, signage, public art and branding for a distinct and memorable district. The branding includes a new logo to be applied to signage and marketing materials.
- Increasing safe and alternative transportation options, particularly the use of bicycles.
- Specific ideas for augmenting park space and access to open space in and beyond the area.
- Expansion of the General Urban Zone and Urban Center Zone to serve the needs of existing and future residents, visitors, and property owners.
- Incentives to mixed-uses and a housing strategy that meets the needs of Ventura’s diverse population and the district’s workforce.
- Improvement to walkability throughout the area through encouraging more building transparency on the ground floor, redesigned sidewalks, new crosswalks, signalization, and public light.
- Protection of distant views and their valorization through the use of rooftops.
- Implementation of catalytic developments that could help meet the needs of the surrounding communities while serving the district itself.

The Core

The most important catalytic development proposed is the Core, corresponding to a triangular-shaped area defined by Main, Thompson, and South Katherine (Figure 4). This area’s existing development conditions, property ownership including two existing city-owned parking lots, and strategic location will facilitate the implementation of a special design concept that would help catapult the redevelopment of the entire district and the establishment of a strong identity.

The Core’s design is structured around a central public plaza and pedestrian connections. On the north side it is anchored by a three-story hotel with a roof bar and observation deck, and restaurant, an YMCA, and a public plaza, all on top of a two-story parking structure. The hotel serves the existing demand from both hospitals, and the central plaza will feature a small amphitheatre built into the steps to the hotel and plaza on top of the parking structure. The plaza offers opportunities for informal seating, a playground, and space for community events such as a Farmers Market. Along the Core’s perimeter

mixed-use buildings with ground-floor commercial use offer opportunities for live-work, affordable and senior housing.

The Core will be directly linked to the Community Memorial Hospital complex (east) and an elementary school (west) by pedestrian crossings enhanced by trafficking calming. With its proposed distinct landmark building, the Core's south edge will serve as the Wellness District's south gateway edged by the so-called 5-corners and the proposed roundabout.

Final remarks

The ideas in the Midtown Ventura Wellness District Concept Plan were put to the test by the class, by applying the same Walkability Score and measuring the same variables used in the initial assessment of the existing development. Overall, the indicators point towards an improved pedestrian environment, indicative of a more attractive, lively and active streetscape with a diverse range of uses. The report concludes with a discussion on implementation, including matrixes relating goals, objectives and specific actions to help prioritize them.

Limitations to this work and report include the relatively short time span available for the project (ten-week quarter), the team's limited exposure to the project area, and the limited public engagement. Our work is meant as a contribution to the City's long-term planning efforts and as a platform for community participation. The team was encouraged by the city's planners to think "outside of the box" and develop ideas and concepts of what a Wellness District could be. The proposed actions are intended to prompt innovative planning decisions by the City of Ventura and relevant stakeholders.

The Midtown Ventura Wellness District Concept Plan provides a long-range guide for the development of strategic urban design concepts intended to promote vitality and well-being within the community. The class is grateful to the City of Ventura and its planning staff for the opportunity, and hopes that the ideas, concepts, and vision for a Wellness District may be useful in the development of a more vibrant, connected, and sustainable urban environment.



Figure 10: The logo proposed for the class helps build the Wellness District identity.



Figure 7: Aerial View of the Core from the Five-Corners intersection.



Figure 8: Pedestrian connection between the Core and the Memorial Community Hospital across Main Street.

Figure 9: Final public presentation to the City of Ventura and community members. In the foreground, City of Ventura's planning manager Dave Ward.

