

**Christopher Wrather  
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September 17, 2008

Dear Chair Carbajal and Supervisors:

As chair of LAPAC, I am writing this letter to share my personal perspective on the community planning process which resulted in the Draft Los Alamos Community Plan.

### LAPAC Background

The Los Alamos Planning Advisory Committee (LAPAC) was formed in August 2006 to make recommendations regarding updating the existing 1994 Los Alamos Community Plan. The primary motivation for considering an update to the Plan was the proposed Los Alamos Commons project which proposed to add 196 homes on 114 acres, 105 of which lie outside the urban boundary defined in the 1994 Community Plan. If approved, the project would increase the number of residences in Los Alamos by about a third from approximately 600 to 800. The Commons project landowner agreed to fund half of the operating costs of LAPAC for a certain time period, with the understanding that LAPAC would come to a recommendation on urban boundary expansion within that time period. Additionally, all parts of the 1994 Community Plan would be reviewed and updated.

### Community Goals and Constraints

Understanding the community's goals and available resources was LAPAC's first task, which we undertook through staff briefings, by public comment at meetings and by holding an all-day Saturday community workshop. The workshop was intended to educate residents, landowners and business people on facts about the community and its infrastructure limitations, and for LAPAC to understand what was really important to the community.

Two themes emerged. First, there was a strong consensus desire that Bell Street develop into an attractive and viable retail and commercial core. Second, wastewater disposal capacity limitations would limit residential growth.

Public opinion was split on the issue of urban boundary expansion, with a majority appearing to favor maintaining our existing urban boundary, a policy that was a central principle of the 1994 Community Plan.

### Urban Boundary Expansion: Costs and Benefits

In numerous marketing communications to local residents, both predating LAPAC and during the LAPAC process, the Commons project claimed that their development would achieve the first community goal: a thriving Bell Street. The project, they said, would push the town past the “tipping point” of critical mass where new resident serving businesses would find it economically advantageous to locate along Bell Street. Many supporters of the Commons project based their support on this claim.

LAPAC asked the question: Is the “tipping point” argument valid? To answer this question the County hired the retail and development economics analysts Strategic Economics to study the market for retail and restaurant development in Los Alamos. Strategic Economics concluded that the number of residences in Los Alamos would have to increase from the current 600 to 4700, a factor of 8, to support even a modest core of new resident serving retail. However, visitor serving retail and retail serving both the visitor and residential markets were feasible if the economics of new development could be improved, and if the character of the commercial core was maintained. *In the view of Strategic Economics, no acceptable number of additional residences would create sufficient demand to make a significant contribution to the viability of Bell Street.*

Another consideration was the impact the Commons project would have on wastewater resources. The new homes would practically use up the town's remaining wastewater capacity.

After much discussion and public comment, in April 2007 a motion was passed to maintain the existing urban boundary by a vote of 4 to 3.

#### A Plan for Bell Street

LAPAC turned its efforts to achieving the objective upon which there was wide consensus on LAPAC and in the community: encouraging development in the Bell Street retail commercial area. Using development economic models provided by Strategic Economics and design concepts provided by the architects Shubin and Donaldson, a new form-based development code and design guidelines were drafted for Bell Street. The form-based code and design guidelines are intended to create a more flexible and economically feasible development environment while maintaining a consistent and attractive pedestrian experience. A higher proportion of mixed-use residential uses was encouraged to enhance financial feasibility of the commercial development. The form-based code and design guidelines together constitute a substantial and innovative improvement to the development potential of Bell Street.

LAPAC unanimously approved the Draft Bell Street Form-based Code and Design Guidelines, choosing to use the remaining wastewater capacity in mixed-use residential along Bell Street where it would contribute to making commercial development feasible.

#### The Commons Project as an alternative within the EIR

After exhaustive analysis and significant deliberation LAPAC chose to draft a plan which leaves our urban boundary unchanged, confirming this fundamental land use policy contained in the 1994 Community Plan. Nevertheless, the Commons project landowner petitioned the Planning Commission (unsuccessfully) and now the Board of Supervisors to include their project as an “alternative” within the EIR. The reasons for this are obvious. At the conclusion of the EIR the lead agency can select any alternative it wants from among those studied in the EIR. The landowner hopes it can convince the Supervisors to approve its project at some future time, notwithstanding the community's wishes to the

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contrary as expressed in the Draft Los Alamos Community Plan. Under CEQA, an alternative to be studied should be consistent with the goals of the Community Plan. The Commons project is not.

I urge you not to include the Commons project as an alternative within the EIR.

You have received a letter into public comment from Ms. Laurie Tamura, representative of the Commons project, arguing their case. There are many inaccuracies in this letter. Among them are the following:

1. Ms. Tamura argues that the draft plan “results in little change to the community plan.” This is nonsense. The Draft Bell Street Form-based Code and Design Guidelines are a substantial regulatory response to the community goal of encouraging development along Bell Street.
2. Ms. Tamura argues that in regard to residential and commercial build out Los Alamos has “only achieved 75% of its goal.” This appears to suggest that the 1994 Community Plan has been a failure. There are no goals in the 1994 Community Plan regarding the achievement of growth rates. The numbers she refers to are maximum build out numbers, not goals.
3. Ms. Tamura implies that the Commons project is consistent with Policy LU-LA-1.1 of the existing Community Plan (requirements for extending the urban boundary line.) It is not, for reasons staff can explain.
4. Ms. Tamura suggests that there is sufficient wastewater capacity for the Commons project. In fact, there is not enough wastewater capacity for both the Commons Project and the new development possible under the Draft Bell Street Form-based Code and Design Guidelines.

Sincerely,



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Christopher Wrather, LAPAC Chair