

Laney Tea

Twelve Laney College students and a couple staff members attended the Laney Tea Focus Group meeting on March 17, 2011 from 3:00 to 5:00 pm at the Laney Bistro to discuss their concerns, goals, and vision for the Lake Merritt Station Area. Marco Menendez, Dean of Fine and Applied Arts/Communications/Physical Education welcomed the group and City of Oakland staff provided some background information on the Plan.

Students introduced themselves and shared what they are studying and how they access the school. Three indicated that they bike most of the time, three varied between driving and taking transit (bus or BART), four mostly drive to campus, and two primarily use BART.

The remainder of the meeting was opened to the attendees to discuss issues, goals and their vision for the Planning Area. Guiding questions were provided and the discussion was facilitated by City Staff and the project consultant, Dyett & Bhatia. A summary of the feedback received at the meeting follows.

EXPERIENCE OF THE PLANNING AREA

BART Site Development

Students were interested in the decision making process regarding development on the BART site, indicating that they have heard several different things about development on BART station parking lot and would like to know if there are any concrete plans to develop the lot. City staff replied that Oakland's City Council will make final decision on project.

Student Destinations and Activity

It was noted that many Laney students use BART or take bus to travel through the area, rather than stay in the area for other uses. Most students just come to campus to attend class and leave immediately when classes end. Students commute in from a variety of places, with many students walking into Chinatown to take bus to Alameda, and many students living in the Fruitvale area. Asian students, particularly the older students, tend to eat and shop in the Chinatown. Many community members also come to Laney to use campus facilities. Students also frequent Vietnamese restaurants on 5th Avenue and East 12th Street. Most people drive, bus or ride bikes, and sometimes walk there. The public library, McDonalds, and Subway on 14th Street are all destinations for students.

Participants wanted to see more shops around Laney and better pedestrian experience/connection between Laney to Chinatown. It was noted that it is currently not vibrant enough or close enough, and not a pretty walk to get to Chinatown. However, participants did indicate that they enjoy many assets of the area, including Chinatown, Jack London Square, Downtown, and Lake Merritt.

Safety

Several students expressed concerns about safety; in particular students noted they don't feel comfortable walking at night, because of poor lighting and bad reputation for crime in the area. Students also feel unsafe walking to bus stops (some students have to walk to Franklin to catch their bus) and to parking. There was also concern regarding homeless moving into the area and the presence of the homeless shelter nearby – while students noted that they didn't necessarily commit crimes, they make some people feel unsafe and create a feeling of discomfort.

As a result of safety issues, some students only schedule day classes to avoid nighttime danger. Nighttime students request “safety aids” (escorts) to walk them to their nearby destination after class. Further, some students have dropped out of Laney College because of parking shortage and safety issues.

Parking

It was pointed out that many BART patrons are already using Laney College parking lot, and there is concern that building a new parking structure on the Laney parking lot would impact the use of the parking lot for flea market/carnival, which provides a source of income for the college. There was also concern that a new parking structure would create another “commuter spot.” However, other participants disagreed, noting that a parking structure can accommodate more cars without requiring more space allocated to parking, which would free up more land for open space. One student noted that they signed up for an 8 AM class but dropped class due to lack of parking.

VISION FOR THE PLANNING AREA

Community Role for Laney

Participants want Laney to play a larger role in the community and foster more interaction between Laney students and community. Laney wants to be considered a community and service center and wants to emphasize that role. For instance, the ASLC is working on getting farmers market to happen on campus and wants to reach out/coordinate with the community.

Laney also has a role to play in job training and development, in that it not only offers classes but also green job development programs. It was noted that Oakland/East Bay is the trendsetter for green sectors in the nation and Laney is located at the center of this trend. There was an identified need for employment centers connected with job training program with offices/headquarters nearby to employ trainees/graduates from training program. While students have grand ideas for green development, they often lack opportunities to employ them. Laney would also like to be involved in an employment center connected with job training so students can transition immediately to a job, noting that even if the actual jobs aren’t here, at least the job coordination would be. Further, Laney would like to see the center connecting with other local agencies in this neighborhood and Oakland. Finally, while it Laney is doing a lot related to development in the Green sector, there is more growth potential in the Arts and Design emerging sector.

Student Housing

A recurring vision among students was the addition of more student housing in the area, not only for Laney students but the entire Peralta community, and particularly for international students. Participants felt that having more students living closer to campus would provide several benefits, including:

- Housing closer to campus will help students assimilate into community and participate in community activities/events.
- Guaranteed campus housing is very marketable to international students and can serve as an ‘usher’ or gateway when they first come to America to study by saving them time in the housing hunt, easing insecurities about housing before they arrive, and providing a convenient living location.
- Student housing would attract a lot of people to the area that would increase foot traffic in streets and increase demand for businesses.
- Currently, Laney becomes desolate after 4 pm when international students drive back home since they don’t want to stay late due to safety concerns. If there is student housing around Laney, more students will be willing to stay longer on campus, have more time to study, and there will be a need for more coffee shops, movie theaters, “hang out” spots for students.

One good location for student housing was identified on Oak and 6th streets; it was noted that simple dorms would be sufficient. However, participants also noted that it could potentially be difficult to implement, referring to plans for international housing that were shot down for political reasons at Berkeley City College.

In terms of other housing in the area, some participants expressed concern about more low-income housing in the area, noting that the low income group would not sustain the community, and that the area really needed to be a more mixed income area.

More Active Uses

More Restaurants and Shopping

Participants indicated that they hoped to see more active uses in the area to increase foot traffic and the presence of people. Participants' suggested mixed-use development, more shopping and dining, and revitalized night life noting that businesses such as restaurants or a major market should be open past 9:00 p.m. Currently the nearest eateries to campus closes at 2:30 p.m. It was acknowledged that it needs to be a partnership: that the community has to be ready to stay late and businesses ready to stay open – has to be both.

It was noted that the area needs a broader spectrum of commercial uses to get people to come more often and make it more active and therefore safer. It was noted that there should be a range of businesses and not just community driven services. Some specific suggestions included coffee houses, a Trader Joe's, and a Farmer's Market on campus.

In particular, participants wanted to bridge the gap between Laney and Chinatown, noting that better connections will keep people around and help to reduce people's reluctance to linger. Currently the gap between Laney and Chinatown feels like a high danger zone because the streets feel deserted, which keeps people from going out. This connection needs more businesses and more lighting.

There was some discussion of whether they would prefer to see Chinatown businesses moving toward Laney or push the college environment out toward Chinatown. It was noted that it could take years for Chinatown businesses to grow closer to Laney. Also, some participants felt that Chinatown doesn't need diversification, but that new businesses are needed outside of Chinatown.

Parks and Open Spaces

Participants noted that there are currently many empty parks and that there is a need to revitalize Madison Square Park and redevelop the administration building site. One participant also noted that they want a place for community facilities such as a community center at Madison Square Park. There is also a desire to create a place for lingering at the BART Station.

Kaiser Convention Center

It was noted that currently the Kaiser Convention Center is a dead area that needs to be revitalized. Revitalizing the Kaiser Convention Center could help bring more business to the Oakland Museum of California and other areas. Marco Menendez noted that the district is looking to buy and renovate Kaiser Convention Center; however, while Laney can afford to purchase the property, it lacks funds to renovate and maintain it. Laney would plan to keep Kaiser as a public as well as instructional space (a shared space for students and community members).

Safety

Students advocated more activity for increased safety, but also suggested a partnership between police, businesses, and students to improve safety issues.

Health

Participants also expressed concern about environmental injustices in the area as it has ragged roads, I-880 cuts through the area, and it is a food desert. However, they also noted that the Warehouse district, which is attractive to higher incomes, also has poor air quality due to I-880.

Street Improvement

Participants expressed a need for better access for students to get around community and noted several improvements to streets, with one comment that all the streets need to be improved. Specific improvements or concerns include:

- Convert one-way streets to two-way.
- No safe crossing on Fallon Street, which needs stop signs or a traffic light. Need crosswalks between 8th and 7th Streets and better crosswalks at Fallon and 8th and 10th (major blind spot at 8th).
- Cars drive too fast.
- Narrow 10th Street.
- Angle parking creates blind spots; many cars can't see pedestrians from behind.
- Idea to close half of 7th west of the bridge and move to 6th to connect Laney to Parking.

Building Types/Use

Participants voiced a range of opinions regarding building heights. Some participants felt small buildings were appropriate given the number of vacant lots currently. Others felt 4 to 6 story mixed use buildings would be most appropriate, no more than 8 stories. Others felt that height should vary by district or subarea. There was also concern about the economic viability of tall buildings. One participant noted that 20 stories fine if it is designed well, fits in, and is market supported.

PRIORITIES

At the end of the meeting, students were asked to share their top priorities/what they would really hope to see change in the Lake Merritt Station Area over the next 25 years. These included:

- Street and light improvements throughout, including lighting at night around Laney, in the parking lot, and on streets; and addressing safety issues at crosswalks.
- Student housing, which would add demand for businesses and make the area livelier.
- More diverse retail, including shopping, restaurants, and cafes.
- Revitalize the area and get rid of the dead zone between Laney and the rest of the community, recognizing that now security is a key concern and that if it becomes safe and lively, the rest will follow.
- Integrate Laney with general community so it can better act as a community center and can offer more services, including greening the Laney campus and making it more inviting.

More bike lanes and paths through campus, through the Kaiser Center, and on streets.