

Chapter 5

Case Study No. 1: Downtown Redevelopment in Suisun City, California

Community Redeveloped

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In a sense, there's no miracle to Suisun City. All it shows is that an American town, however dilapidated and besieged, can revive. But it has to build on its strengths and shake up major parts of local government to reflect new realities. Government and citizens need to remember that physical design is critical, and insist that it fit their city's special character.
-- Neal R. Peirce¹

Suisun City Redevelopment Agency.

Community History and Demographics

Suisun City is located midway between San Francisco and Sacramento in Salano County, just south of Interstate 80 and north of Suisun Marsh. The Suisun Channel, which has

been incorporated into the redeveloped downtown, winds through the Suisun Marsh and then opens to Suisun and Grizzly Bays, where the Sacramento River meets the San Francisco Bay.

The settlement called Suisun, which means “west wind” in the language of the Patwan Indians, was founded in 1848 and incorporated in 1868 because of its proximity to water. It was a

Industrial warehouses and other structures along the Suisun City harbor before redevelopment. Suisun City Redevelopment Agency.

“jumping off point” for miners heading for the Gold Rush, as well as a trans-shipment point for mining provisions arriving by ship from San Francisco.² After the Gold Rush, the town continued to be a

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New higher density single-family development next to Victorian Harbor complements traditional residences with attention to detail. S. Buntin.

break of bulk point, where goods were moved from ship to land for inland settlers, and where agricultural products were moved to ships for Bay Area markets.

By 1869, one of California's oldest towns hosted a stop on the

transcontinental railroad, wooden sidewalks, streetlights, steam-powered flour and lumber mills, canneries, and a busy waterfront. Main Street was lined with shops, restaurants, banks, and other commercial businesses, including hotels.

Suisun City's prosperity lasted through World War II, but was severely hindered with the opening of Interstate 80 in Fairfield two miles north of the city in 1963. From then on, commercial development centered around the Interstate and Fairfield, and because the city was already geographically limited by Fairfield, Suisun Marsh, and Travis Air Force Base (to the east), it could not

expand its boundaries to capture the growth and associated economic development.

Though typical sprawled "bedroom community" development occurred on Suisun City's edges in the 1970s and 1980s--and in fact the population exploded 333 percent during those two decades--the Old Town center and harbor became areas of disinvestment.³

Suisun City Population Percentage by Race

Race
White
Asian American
Hispanic
African American
American Indian
Other

Today, the city finds itself in the Bay Area's fastest growing county. In the next twenty years, population is projected to increase 40 percent, jobs increase 68 percent, households increase 46 percent, and employed residents increase 55 percent.⁴ Though the population has grown dramatically, the city is still racially and ethnically diverse--see table, previous page.

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110,000 people live within a five-mile radius of the 3.6-square-mile city, 210,000 people live within a ten-mile radius, and the median family income is \$54,900.⁵ However, while the median family income is high, the city has a fairly large low-income population, demonstrated by the fact that in 1996 the Housing Department processed over 2,000 Section 8 rental assistance program applications while Suisun City only has 318 Section 8 housing allocations available.⁶

Political and Regulatory System

Suisun City's political and regulatory system is unique in that the functions of Planning, Housing, and Redevelopment were all combined--so that expertise and financial resources are pooled--in 1989 under the leadership of Mayor Jim Spering. In California, state law provides for a redevelopment agency--with a separate administration and budget--to be established in every city. While some cities choose not to activate it, Suisun City did. Historically, redevelopment agencies and planning departments are in conflict, as are redevelopment plans and cities' general plans.⁷ Integrating the

Landscaping and street furniture work to preserve the heritage of Old Town's historic structures. S. Buntin.

two agencies, as well as the Division of Housing, into the Redevelopment Agency allowed experienced planners to work together, the general plan and the redevelopment plan to be integrated, and funding to be allocated where most necessary. The agency also reports directly to the City Council, which "helps keep up the interest of the Council in redevelopment issues."⁸

Political leadership in the city is comprised of a Mayor, Vice-Mayor, City Manager, and City Council. Additionally, citizens' groups are used in an advisory manner, as with the 12-member Citizens Advisory Committee. These entities are then supported by a 16-member Redevelopment Agency staff.

Initiative for Redevelopment

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In January 1988, the *San Francisco Chronicle* released its survey of the quality of life in the Bay Area's 98 municipalities. Suisun City ranked last.⁹

"You'd tell people where you lived," said Mayor Spering, recalling the city's stigma before redevelopment, "and they'd say, 'Oh, you're from Suisun.' And that really was a problem for just about everybody.... When people traveled around they'd all say they were from Fairfield. But when you'd get to talk to them, they'd say, 'Well, I live in Suisun,' kind of like, 'Don't tell anybody.'"¹⁰

Suisun City redeveloped for many reasons. The Crescent neighborhood northeast of Old Town was infested with drug dealers, was a high crime area, and was composed of fourplexes which were quickly falling apart. Residents were scared to go to the part of town that consumed half of the city's police resources, and for good reason. It is little surprise, and quite revealing, that some residents proposed building a wall around the seemingly hopeless area.¹¹

The harbor and inlet to Suisun Marsh were choked with soil, surface water, and groundwater pollution and surrounded by dilapidated industrial warehouses. Because the land directly adjacent to the water was privately owned, public access to the potential amenity had been denied for more than fifty years.

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Old Town faced a serious lack of economic investment as retail and other commercial businesses favored locations adjacent to Interstate 80 in Fairfield, and residential development favored

A historic building undergoes renovation on Main Street. S. Buntin.

"greenfield" sites outside of the city's downtown. In fact, while 500 homes a year were being built within the city limits, they provided only minor revenue thanks to California's Proposition 13, which limits property tax increases to one percent of market value per year.¹² Though developer fees were imposed on new residential developments, they barely covered the costs of new infrastructure, and provided no revenue for long-term maintenance and other necessary city services. Additionally, Main Street was littered with vacant lots, boarded up buildings, and auto repair shops.

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Downtown Suisun City's existing land uses in 1989. Suisun City

Amended Downtown Specific Plan.

Suisun City appeared to be at the brink of economic, environmental, and social collapse when the Mayor and other concerned citizens stepped in to do something about their city's ill conditions.

Fostering Sustainability through Redevelopment

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The Center for Livable Communities credits Suisun City's redevelopment success to "citizens who cared, a Mayor with imagination and leadership qualities, and a supportive City Council."¹³ Coupled with Camran Nojoomi, now City Manager, who was brought in to coordinate redevelopment efforts, the city--led by the newly reformed Redevelopment Agency--worked with citizens to develop the *Downtown/Waterfront Specific Plan* in 1982, which was fully revised in 1990. The *Specific Plan*, discussed in further detail in the next section and amended in 1995, identifies redevelopment opportunities, criteria, guidelines, and regulations for the entire redevelopment process.

The *Plan* is "a direct interpretation of the community's goals integrated with the financial constraints of the market place and the existing physical conditions and constraints of the project area. [It] is based on a significant notion: That downtown Suisun City has the opportunity to become a unique waterfront town that is pleasant to live in and at the same time serves as a regional destination."¹⁴ The citizens, city staff, and consultants who developed the *Plan* realized that any redevelopment should be based primarily on the city's two key assets: proximity to the waterfront and Suisun Marsh, and the city's cultural and historic heritage.¹⁵

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The *Specific Plan* is based on the following organizing elements:¹⁶

1. The entire downtown needs to be focused on the Suisun Channel which is its major and central feature.
2. The northern end of the channel must be expanded to accommodate a marina and create a stronger image of the waterfront.
3. The waterfront should maintain its extraordinary mix of natural wetlands and urban edge.
4. The commercial activities of the downtown should be integrated with an expanded new marina at its northern end and a town square at its southern end.
5. The existing Sheldon Oil site needs to be redeveloped as the center of the downtown commercial district and the waterfront.
6. The area east of the channel offers an opportunity for the creation of several new low-density residential neighborhoods.
7. The area west of the channel offers an opportunity for a medium-density residential neighborhood.
8. The downtown needs a more cohesive street system that allows for a greater distribution of traffic.
9. The downtown needs a cohesive open space system that enhances the pedestrian experience of the townscape and the waterfront.

As with most specific or more detailed plans, they must comply with the municipality's general plan and zoning ordinances (and perhaps modify those, as appropriate). The 1990 *Specific Plan* evaluated the *Suisun City General Plan* to ensure compliance, as well as to accommodate its seven most relevant *General Plan* goals:¹⁷

1. It is the goal of the *General Plan* to preserve and enhance the quality of living by preventing the degradation of the natural environment, and by taking steps to offset the effects of that degradation which already have occurred.
2. The qualities and amenities of the Suisun Marsh environment should be made more accessible to people of the community, in conjunction with state action, while assuring their protection and enhancement in accordance with state policies governing the management of lands within and adjacent to the Marsh.
3. New development is to reflect higher levels of community design and image than have resulted often from conventional approaches to development in recent years. Development regulations are to be established which express appropriate concern for environmental quality through site planning, architectural design, use of signs, and the maintenance of public and private buildings and sites.
4. The Old Town area of the community should be made the target of intensive effort to preserve historic buildings, to preserve and enhance waterfront commercial and industrial functions which have existed since the early days of community settlement, and to capitalize on the potential for

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creating an historic village atmosphere for the benefit of residents and tourists.

5. The state and federal governments are to be encouraged to maintain navigable waterways.
6. Policies and proposals of the *General Plan* should seek to expand job-creating activities needed to support population growth, housing construction, and the delivery of public services. Opportunities for improving the economic base should be pursued.
7. Insofar as may reasonably be possible, policies and proposals of the *General Plan* should provide for equal opportunity in the availability of housing and public services and facilities needed by all people who choose to live in Suisun City.

Neighbors relax on a usable front porch at Victorian Harbor. Suisun

City Redevelopment Agency.

With amendment of the *Specific Plan* and involvement by the Citizens Advisory Committee, new goals were developed based on redevelopment experience up to that point. These effectively serve as the community's five principles of sustainable redevelopment:¹⁸

1. **Strengthen the economic viability of the historic Old Town, waterfront, and adjacent areas and the city as a whole.**

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2. **Preserve and enhance the historic character of the area.**
3. **Facilitate appropriate water-oriented and economic uses of the Suisun Channel and adjacent land areas.**
4. **Protect and enhance natural open space and recreational amenities of the Suisun Channel and adjoining areas.**
5. **Foster participation between the public and private sectors in carrying out a program of revitalization for the planning Area.**

In order to implement these goals, the *Specific Plan* puts forth nine objectives. While not community indicators per se, achievement of these objectives can be measured either directly or indirectly. Without their achievement, chances for overall success are greatly reduced. Sets of specific indicators of success could be developed for each of these objectives to help gauge the city's progress in its physical redevelopment efforts:¹⁹

Strengthen downtown as a place to live.

Enhance the image and identity of the downtown as the community focus of Suisun City.

Enhance the unique water-oriented recreational opportunities of the downtown.

Improve the streetscape environment to promote pedestrian circulation and cohesive development of the downtown.

Improve transit/commuter rail facilities downtown.

Preserve existing viable downtown neighborhoods.

Make available dried dredge material for appropriate uses.

Cooperate with regional agencies to establish other dredge disposal sites where feasible.

Establish a permanent funding mechanism for channel maintenance dredging.

Typical suburban development beyond the city center made

Suisun City rethink a better, more livable way for redeveloping Harbor Plaza retail pads are located between the Town Plaza, downtown, S. Buntin, waterfront, and Main Street. Suisun City Redevelopment Agency.

Redevelopment of the downtown area through such mechanisms as neotraditional housing (Victorian Harbor), preservation of open space (Waterfront Park and Suisun Marsh),

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pedestrian orientation and public spaces (town plaza and promenade), transit orientation (Suisun City train depot), mixed uses (Harbor Plaza and Delta Landing), and building reuse and historic preservation (Old Town and Main Street), was promulgated by concerted citizen and city staff efforts, as well as the *Conceptual Plan* developed by the Roma Design Group.

Summary of Redevelopment

The Suisun City Redevelopment Agency has, since 1989, worked with citizens, the City Council, and the San Francisco-based Roma Design Group to redevelop major portions of its 200-acre downtown in a manner which is economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable.

The first and perhaps most symbolic step was to build a new city hall on the eastern shore of Suisun Channel. “Before the

Suisun City’s Civic Center abuts the Suisun Channel, a developing Waterfront Park, the marina, and the Suisun Marsh. S. Buntin.

city

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Suisun City Downtown Redevelopment Plan. Suisun City Amended Downtown

Specific Plan, modified by S. Buntin.

Spring, “its offices were located in a group of mobile trailers. We had the only city hall in California that was registered with the Department of Motor Vehicles.”²⁰

Other redevelopment efforts to date fall into five categories: the Victorian Harbor neighborhood, Main Street improvements, the town plaza, waterfront improvements, and the train depot.

Victorian Harbor Neighborhood

The Victorian Harbor neighborhood replaced the run-down Crescent neighborhood, which was comprised of fourplexes on

Victorian Harbor neighborhood. S. Buntin.

built its new Civic Center as one of the first steps in Suisun City’s revitalization,” recalls Mayor Jim

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single-family lots built in the mid-1970s as an attempt to bring life into Old Town. At the same time, the city helped private developers fund land purchases on the provision that it house low-income families. While 106 units just south of the new, neotraditional housing development were salvaged, and another 52 were rehabilitated, 470 units in all were demolished while 2,000 residents were relocated.²¹ See the Redevelopment Process section for more information.

The neighborhood which replaced Crescent is a direct attempt to capture the turn-of-the-century flavor of Old Town in a pedestrian-oriented manner. The single-family homes all have front porches, Victorian-style architecture, lushly landscaped front yards, garages relegated to landscaped back alleys, and small lots. The neighborhood incorporates pedestrian-friendly, traffic-calming elements such as roundabouts, traffic circles, narrow streets, and cutout curbs for on-street parking. Sidewalks are separated from the streets by grass, flowers, or shrubs and trees, and traditional streetlamps ensure nighttime safety without creating a flood of light pollution.

By the end of 1993, 94 homes were built, and an additional 206 Victorian-style homes have been added since.²³ Additionally,

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nearby residential developments have incorporated the neotraditional approach. And all are within walking distance of the train depot, Civic Center, Old Town, marina, and other amenities.

Historic preservation and facade improvement along Main Street

S. Buntin.
The Victorian Harbor neighborhood replaced the Crescent neighborhood, which according to Mayor Spering, “At night... looked like a macabre Christmas scene with the flashing red and blue lights of the patrol cars.”²² S. Buntin.

Main Street Improvements

Main Street’s improvement is actually a series of programs promulgated by the Redevelopment Agency. The city’s Historic Facade Improvement Program, for example, has allowed

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businesses along Main Street to restore facades through city funding, thereby attracting additional customers.²⁴ Infill projects that meet the city's design guidelines for historic structures are also encouraged, and construction is underway for several buildings on Main Street.

The city has also fostered the conversion of a number of buildings to uses--and even locations--that benefit the residents. In a last-ditch effort to save the circa 1855 Lawler House--once slated for torching as a fire department demonstration--it was moved from the eastern end of town to an area just east of Main Street, adjacent to the town plaza and waterfront redevelopment.²⁵ It has been fully restored and now houses office uses. Others have been similarly restored (though not relocated): the circa 1876 Bank of Suisun is now a coffee shop, and the old post office is home to a microbrewery and pub.²⁶

A former grocery store east of Main Street is the new home of Solano Community College's drama department and theater, as well as the Harbor Theatrical Group. The building is being converted into the 170-seat performing arts Harbor Theater which includes classrooms, several small stages, and a main stage.²⁷

In anticipation of increased business along Main Street, the city has also constructed 300 landscaped parking spaces and installed new infrastructure including water pipes and storm sewers.²⁸

Town Plaza

In order to provide public space and a true community center, Suisun City built a town plaza along Suisun Channel. The site was previously occupied by prefabricated metal warehouses and vacant lots, but now adjoins a promenade along the channel



The gazebo at the town plaza. S. Buntin.

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and includes landscaping, patterned walkways, a granite and bronze stage area, and a gazebo.

Adjacent to the town plaza, the city purchased and demolished a number of industrial warehouses and laid out small building pads for local businesses. Bab's Delta Diner was the first business to move to the redeveloped area along the plaza, and is a Victorian-style mixed-use building with the diner on the first level and the owner's residence on the second. Owner Babs Curless admits that to be the first feels "very honored and very scary. It was a big gamble for me, but people come in and thank me for coming down and giving them a place to eat down by the water. They *love* the

Suisun City Harbor Master. S. Buntin.

water."²⁹ The Harbor Plaza retail pads range from 4,700 to over

11,000 square feet, and fall within the city's enterprise zone and its subsequent incentive programs (discussed later).³⁰ Though pads

Landscaped open space blends to the natural vegetation of Suisun Marsh south of the marina. S. Buntin.

The marina's east channel location fronts the Civic Center, which also includes the police station.
S. Buntin.

Babs Delta Diner, with the Athenian Grill under construction behind it. S. Buntin.

are still available, the Athenian Grill restaurant and an art gallery are under construction, and it is expected that other restaurants and specialty and entertainment shops will follow shortly.

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The redeveloped Suisun City train depot, circa 1910. S. Buntin.

Waterfront Improvements

Waterfront improvements are a large portion of Suisun City's redevelopment, and include both built and natural environment improvements. In 1994 the city built a 150-berth marina after working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to find an environmentally benign and economical way to dredge the Suisun Channel. In the process, a new and effective dredge and fill process was developed which can be applied to similar waterfront communities, the polluted harbor was cleaned, and--coupled with the removal of dilapidated buildings and abandoned sewage treatment plant along the channel--citizens gained access to the water for the first time in decades.³¹ The marina has been expanded with the development of a new seawall in the north channel, providing additional facilities for boats. A new harbor master building was also constructed.

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Additionally, construction continues on the promenade which is already in place by the Civic Center, marina, and town plaza, eventually skirting the built portions of Suisun Channel. It includes a 25-foot-wide walkway, landscaping, and traditional streetlamps.

A number of additional redevelopment activities are planned along the waterfront area, including 125,000 square feet of specialty retail and office uses on the old Sheldon Oil Refinery site, at the north end of the channel.³² These new uses will be combined with a historic riverboat, such as the Sacramento-based *Delta King*, a permanently moored boat that includes entertainment, recreation, restaurant, and conference uses as well as a hotel and card club. In the process of redevelopment, Sheldon Oil has removed 27 storage tanks and 160,000 cubic feet of contaminated soil, and is liable for any additional cleanup.³³ This area will serve to link Main Street, town plaza, and redevelopment

"The Ketch" prototype for Delta Landing. Suisun City Redevelopment Agency.

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along the west side of the channel with Waterfront Park, Victorian Harbor, Civic Center, and other redevelopment along the east side of the channel.

A unique live/work development called Delta Landing is a 28-unit, high-end Victorian-style project which recently began construction just south of Babs Delta Diner.³⁴ Lots are purchased individually for custom or semi-custom homes, and may include up to 400 square feet of commercial space on the first floor. The Redevelopment Agency has developed design guidelines and prototype building designs to ensure the structures conform with the adjacent Old Town.

Another residential development--Todd Park--is slated for a 10-acre site across from city hall, which will house 32 single-family homes adjacent to a public waterfront park.³⁵ Like Victorian Harbor and Delta Landing, it will be pedestrian-oriented and adjacent to parks (Todd Park across from the Civic Center, and the naturally-vegetated Waterfront Park adjacent to the marina). It will be built on the site of an old sewage facility which has already been removed and cleaned up, and ball fields which will be moved to another location.

Train Depot

In 1991, the Redevelopment Agency purchased from Southern Pacific a poorly maintained railroad station just south of

Highway 12 off Main Street.³⁶ The agency removed dilapidated industrial buildings and then closed and renovated the circa 1910 structure, reopening it in 1992 as the focal point of the new Rail Station Plaza, including office and retail space. The train depot has become a multi-modal transportation center, serving as Amtrak's only Solano County station, a hub for the CityLink bus

Suisun City's CityLink bus stop rests between the park-and-ride and the train depot, just south of Highway 12. S. Buntin.

service

that connects Suisun City with Sacramento, and as a Greyhound bus station. The station is adjacent to a park-and-ride lot, and would likely serve as a stop for the proposed Sacramento-Oakland Intercity Rail service.³⁷

Environmental and Cultural Redevelopment Efforts

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Suisun City's redevelopment has been more than physical redesign. As mentioned previously, the city has worked diligently to ensure that the 84,000-acre Suisun Marsh--the largest estuarine marsh in the U.S.--is preserved. A priority for the Redevelopment Agency has been to restore wetlands which were damaged by oil and other industrial facilities along the channel, so it cleaned these areas up and reverted many sites back to natural wetlands. The city's Waterfront Park along the channel and Suisun Slough is predominantly natural wetlands, crossed only here and there by pedestrian paths. Outside of the city itself, the wetlands are preserved indefinitely through state enforcement, acting as a geographical growth buffer to Suisun City while providing natural plant, fish, and wildlife habitat for native species and recreational

Old Town Suisun City Festivals in 1997³⁸

Boating Season Opening Day Parade and Festival

Old Town Rhythm & Brews Festival

Suisun Waterfront Festival Market

Old Town Fourth of July Celebration

Power Boat Races

Dixieland Jazz Festival

Harbor Days Festival

Halloween Parade

Christmas in Old Town

opportunities for residents and tourists alike.

To ensure the new public spaces surrounding the channel and marina are utilized, as well as to increase civic pride and provide

protected and contiguous wetlands in the

plenty of opportunities for resident interaction, the city hosts a variety of festivals, as well as a weekly farmer's market and concert series during summer months.

The city has also initiated a bicycle and pedestrian pathway and facilities system in concurrence with the *Specific Plan*.³⁹

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Pedestrian and bicycle circulation is facilitated through a combination of the waterfront public access path system, narrow neighborhood streets and wide sidewalks, and striped bicycle lanes on major streets.

Public and recreational open spaces beyond the marsh have been created in the form of neighborhood parks, such as small “pocket” parks, and larger public areas, including town plaza and the proposed Todd Park.

Redevelopment Process

According to City Manager Camran Nojoomi, Suisun City began redevelopment first by looking at what the citizens want, and then working back to the land use plan and approval process from there.⁴⁰ Such an approach satisfies two criteria: (1) The city can define what it wants to accomplish up front, and therefore design incentives and disincentives for what it doesn’t want; and, (2) The city lets developers and business owners know what the city’s plans are, so they can prepare appropriately.

A primary step for the city was reforming the

The redevelopment process: 1. planning, 2. infrastructure and amenities, 3. infill and renovation. Suisun City Redevelopment Agency.

Redevelopment Agency by merging Planning and Housing within it, as discussed earlier. In forming the agency, it was necessary for Suisun to set redevelopment boundaries. While at the time one of the city’s main priorities was to bring back Old Town, the Mayor and citizens knew that the overall well-being of the city was so dependent upon creation of tax base that the redevelopment area had to be as large as possible. It therefore set redevelopment

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boundaries over the entire city to “capture tax increment financing from projects happening all over town,” said Mayor Spering.⁴¹

The city developed a *Redevelopment Plan*--now synonymous with the *Specific Plan* adopted in November 1990--in a process involving the Citizens Advisory Committee. The *Plan* and its subsequent amendments acknowledge Suisun City’s unique waterfront, cultural, and historic heritages while endeavoring to create economic development.

The Roma Design Group prepared a *Conceptual Plan* for the downtown that designated proposed land uses, densities, open space, and circulation improvements, as well as development guidelines for specific residential project areas. These are based on a market analysis prepared by Halycon Limited, another consultant. The analysis was used to determine the types and scales of residential and commercial development that would be most appropriate for the redeveloped downtown.⁴² Halycon also prepared financial feasibility analyses for specific project sites. Additionally, the city prepared an environmental impact report as required under California law which evaluated the impacts of proposed revisions to the 1982 *Specific Plan*.⁴³

Design standards and guidelines were developed under the 1990 *Specific Plan*, and provide the basis for developers and the Architectural Review Board, Planning Commission,

Redevelopment Agency Board, and/or City Council to ensure that any new development or facade renovations support existing and desirable historic characteristics of Old Town. The residential guidelines attempt “to create a traditional townscape throughout the downtown/waterfront area which fosters community activities, social interaction, and a strong cohesive image,” while the commercial guidelines “are intended to preserve and enhance the historic character of the downtown commercial area and to ensure that new developments are compatible.”⁴⁴

Initially the city hoped to find one developer to redevelop the entire area, but there were no takers. The city then decided to take on the large-scale effort itself. “We needed to go ahead and do the planning, then break it down into smaller projects that we could do through developers who specialize in those areas,” said Nojoomi.⁴⁵

The primary financial means for redevelopment was tax increment financing. In 1991 the city issued \$58 million in tax increment bonds to provide for overall downtown redevelopment; purchase of dilapidated properties; infrastructure such as new water and sewer

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pipes, new and renovated streets, and streetscaping; facade improvement programs; construction of the town plaza; dredging and restoration of Suisun Channel; and other activities.

Tax increment financing allows the city to keep tax revenues at fixed amounts while using the new tax revenues--the tax increment--to pay off the bonds. New revenue increases as businesses and homeowners move into the downtown area, adjacent to Old Town and other areas that have been revitalized. The increasing tax base provides funding to repay the bonds and fund

The Civic Center, a major center for Suisun City, is shown in the photograph above.
Suisun City Amended Downtown Specific Plan.

essential city services.

While the bonds were rated at A- and a 7.5 percent interest rate when issued in 1991, the city refinanced in 1993 to gain the lower 5.75 percent rate and obtain insurance for them.⁴⁶ This enabled the city to borrow \$10 million more than in 1991.

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But funding for redevelopment projects comes from other sources, as well. For example, state transportation funds were available to renovate the train depot. The city also utilized a feasibility study and a \$5.6 million loan from the California Department of Boating and Waterways to construct the 150-berth marina, completed in early 1994.⁴⁷ Loan payments are deferred until 1998, when the marina is expected to be fully leased. Additionally, the city expects to build a \$2 million reserve fund to provide a financial buffer for marina operations by the time payments begin.

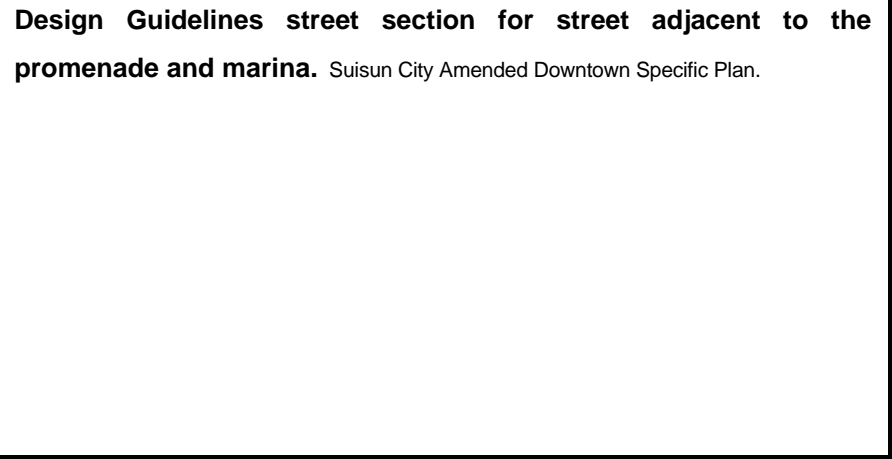
The Redevelopment Agency purchased areas, such as the Crescent neighborhood and Sheldon Oil Refinery site, one lot at a time. It took what Nojoomi calls a “public developer” role: to create a flexible plan that reacts to market changes and then to implement as much of the desired changes--through physical redevelopment and financial incentives--as legally and financially feasible.

The city also acts as a link between the City Council, citizens, and architects. The City Council has final approval on any city actions, the citizens have to live in whatever comes from the redevelopment and so are the ultimate “customer,” and the architects can ensure that the buildings physically enhance Old Town and other favorable Suisun City places and characteristics.

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Revision of the *Specific Plan* in 1990 was a thirteen month process, beginning in 1989. Implementing physical redevelopments has been a longer process, and one from which the city and its citizens have learned much. Redevelopment of the Crescent neighborhood into Victorian Harbor provides a good example.

Suisun City began purchasing the run-down fourplexes, which were in large private ownerships, in 1989, and by 1992 had cleared most of the neighborhood at a cost of \$11 million. The city paid



between \$100,000 and \$145,000 per building--more than the owners were likely to get on the open market--and provided relocation assistance to any residents who wanted it. Assistance

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included four years of subsidized rents anywhere in Northern California. Many eagerly accepted, and the landowners readily sold.⁴⁸ Over 50 developers were pursued before finding one--the O'Brien Group of San Mateo, California--that was willing to comply with ninety percent of the city's goals, including pedestrian orientation, rear garages and alleys, Victorian-style architecture, and streetscaping, all at entry-level housing prices (\$130,000 to \$180,000). Construction began in 1992, and in 1994 the residential redevelopment was featured by *Builder Magazine* as one of the year's fastest-selling projects.⁴⁹ That project perhaps more than any other in Suisun City has changed citizens' and developers' expectations about the chances for successful redevelopment in the downtown.

Redevelopment of other parts of the city have incorporated a number of processes and incentives. Commercial sites for restaurant and specialty retail, such as Babs Delta Diner and the Athenian Grill, are facilitated along the town plaza and waterfront

through the use of building pads ready for construction. Pads have two advantages. First, it is easy for a prospective business owner to go to the pad and see exactly what he or she is getting. Much of the parking and landscaping, for example, is already in place around the site. Second, since parking and landscaping benefit the entire city, they are maintained by the city as public amenities. Site owners, then, are not responsible for their upkeep, yet benefit directly from them.

Lush landscaping, wide sidewalks, usable porches, decorated streetlamps, and narrow streets make Victorian Harbor a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood. S. Buntin.

The pad sites within Harbor Plaza and other waterfront

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locations are also facilitated through a number of focused programs through the city's enterprise zone incentives.⁵⁰ For instance, on those sites that are owned by the Redevelopment Agency, it can negotiate land acquisition terms based on market conditions and business "viability." The agency may also finance purchase of the land, allowing the project to obtain easier financing than might otherwise occur. Such an approach reduces up-front costs for projects.

The agency can also negotiate--on behalf of the prospective business owner--the waiver of some or all of the development and building permit fees, as well as initial business license fees. Fee waivers can result in savings of between \$10,000 to \$30,000 per project.

Architectural design assistance is also provided at the

Festival artwork. City of Suisun City.

Victorian Harbor's alleys provide access to attached and detached garages and garbage disposal, yet are still walkable, landscaped, and safe. S. Buntin.

agency's expense. Such consultation not only reduces costs for the project, but also ensures that any new buildings fit into the city's overall design guidelines and its cultural and historic context.

And agency staff will assist developers and business owners in preparing permit applications required at the city, state, and even federal levels. This assistance ensures a streamlined process for projects that meet overall guidelines.

The process for redevelopment of Suisun Channel as a viable harbor and boating route between Suisun City and, ultimately, the San Francisco Bay required an agreement between the city and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It resulted in a pilot project dredge fill site on an island just south of the channel, as well as the creation of wetlands adjacent to Suisun Marsh.

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Specifically, material dredged from the channel and harbor was traditionally piled on the edges of the channel, forming levees. However, the fill rolled off the edges of the artificial embankments, damaging adjacent wetlands. In the pilot program, the fill was instead used to raise sections of an island south of the city, creating a seasonal pond. New techniques allow the fill to remain in place while the pond creates additional plant and wildlife habitat. As fill is added, the pond can be expanded, mitigating any additional damage.

As public developer, the city also finds itself in the role of marketer. While local residents and professional planners and designers may know of Suisun City's revitalization, prospective business owners--especially those not now within the region--may not. It is essential, therefore, for the Redevelopment Agency to promote overall redevelopment as well as the availability of specific sites.

The agency has developed a series of brochures and other marketing pieces which are available through a number of means: City Hall, the Redevelopment Agency, local publications such as the city's *Suisun City Discovery* monthly newsletter, a World Wide Web site, developer packets, and more.

Marketing is the lifeline to new economic development within the redeveloped area. The agency's marketing pieces

attempt to ensure that developers, business owners, and tourists know about real opportunities in the revitalized downtown, that useful information is constantly available, and that feedback is provided both by local residents and those with the potential of enhancing the city's economic development.

But even with a comprehensive city-led marketing approach, the challenge is still formidable. "We've got the product ready," said Mayor Sperring, "now we need someone to sell it."⁵¹

Barriers to Implementation

Suisun City faced a number of barriers to its redevelopment efforts. From the outset, there was a high level of skepticism in the community as to whether redevelopment would--or even could--actually occur. When the original *Specific Plan* was developed in 1982 by a group of citizens and architects, it "planned the city to a Disneyland," according to Camran Nojoomi.⁵² While intentions were good, there was little that was economically feasible in the original plan, and it was not implemented. With the revision completed in November 1990, and the 12-member Citizens Advisory Committee, however, the city hired the Roma Design Group and worked diligently to produce a redevelopment plan that was both economically feasible and flexible enough to acknowledge a marketplace that changes quickly. Most importantly, it was led by

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strong City Council and city staff members, and citizens who were aware of the consequences of sprawl-like design. Even with the new plan, however, residents were largely uncertain until the Civic Center was constructed and redevelopment began along the Waterfront and throughout downtown.

Similarly, time was a barrier. In an environment where the market can change quickly and the city's income is dependent primarily upon tax base, any efforts to redevelop had to be relatively fast-paced in order to maintain both momentum and City Council and citizen support. Suisun City's *Specific Plan* was developed in thirteen months. Though physical redevelopment has taken longer, and is ongoing, the adoption of the *Plan* in a measurable timespan, and the initiation of a number of viable redevelopment projects, demonstrates that it is feasible.

Facade renovation and streetscaping along Main Street integrate new and old buildings adjacent to Old Town. S. Buntin.

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Architecture and streetscaping of the new Train Station Plaza resemble that of the historic train depot. S. Buntin.

Another formidable challenge was getting developers to agree to the city's guidelines for various redevelopment projects. Most developers, especially those initially interested in redevelopment of the Crescent neighborhood, were only interested in residential development that is typical of sprawl: "snout" houses on curvilinear streets that are primarily auto-oriented. Developers were not giving credit to the uniqueness of what the city wanted in Victorian Harbor, and therefore assumed it would not sell. Its great success, however, has helped ensure neotraditional design for other residential redevelopment projects, as well.

Commercial developers have resisted because there were no examples of comparable land sales or values of land redeveloped along the waterfront. The oil tanks and other industrial facilities that were removed opened up both access to the

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channel and new commercial development opportunities. However, developers had no baseline to gauge the parcels against in ways such as land sale prices, lease rates, and the like. They had no evidence of reduced development risk. In order to lessen risks, the city implemented its enterprise zone incentive programs. These provide security to individual developers and business owners along Main Street, the waterfront, and other redeveloping areas in downtown.

Assembling the land itself along the waterfront, Main Street, and other areas was also a challenge. While Crescent neighborhood landowners readily agreed to the prices paid by the city for the fourplexes, in other areas owners did not want to sell, or wanted more money than the city could provide. Additionally, the city had to work with landowners such as Sheldon Oil to clean up contaminated land in order to provide a safe and healthy environment.

Assembling the land was politically difficult, as well. Some citizens questioned the nearly private-developer role of the Redevelopment Agency, yet the fact that no developer was single-handedly willing to take on the entire downtown redevelopment project proved that the agency had to act. Working with the City Council was perhaps the greatest challenge, according to the Mayor. And though City Council support has at times waned,

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Mayor Spring was re-elected with two-thirds of the vote in the

Open space, such as this area between the marina and the Civic Center, is essential to any sustainable redevelopment project.

S. Buntin.

November 1994

election, and has been mayor since 1989.⁵³

Though assembling the land “required true political courage,” the Mayor, Redevelopment Agency, and others involved directly with redevelopment “kept the faith in our plans, stayed the course, and made the tough decisions,” said Spring.⁵⁴

Measuring Success

It is important to note that Suisun City’s redevelopment is an ongoing process, one that is facilitated by the Redevelopment Agency yet driven largely by the market. As such, it has evolved

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more slowly than some residents would like, especially on Main Street. “So far,” says Thomas Bland, former city planning director who is now a planning consultant, “the policy more or less has been that since there was so much work to be done on the waterfront, and that was the focus of the acquisition program, it was a kind of a hands-off understanding on the other side of Main Street. The biggest problem right now, from a merchant’s point of view, is that we need bodies on the street, and we just don’t have much foot traffic.”⁵⁵

Quantifiable measures and data collection to gauge foot traffic and other successes or failures are not occurring. The Suisun City Redevelopment Agency does not utilize indicators of sustainability which would help it measure economic, environmental, and social success. Yet, redevelopment efforts to date appear to be successful to varying degrees on all three counts.

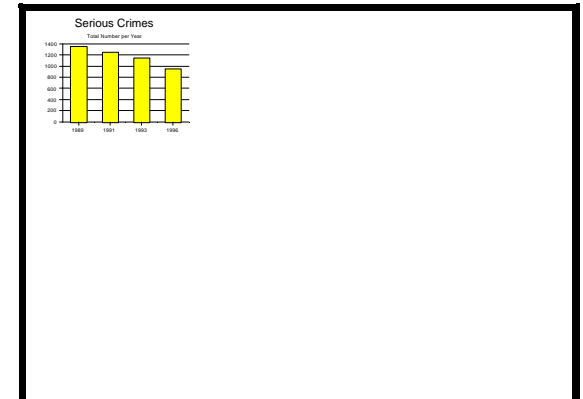
City Manager Nojoomi uses a number of qualitative factors to measure success.⁵⁶ He cites first the fact that costs have been eliminated. Resources previously spent for police and fire patrol of the Crescent neighborhood, for example, have gone down dramatically. Victorian Harbor is a much safer, more walkable neighborhood. Indeed, a review of crime levels in Suisun City reveals that serious crimes have dropped by 30 percent since 1989, when

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redevelopment efforts were initiated and the Redevelopment Agency began purchasing property in the Crescent neighborhood.⁵⁷

Crime has also been reduced due to increased citizen involvement and other police efforts, including the Citizen Police Academy, Youth Services Intern Program, and the Scanners (Suisun City Alert Neighbors and Emergency Reporters).⁵⁸

Nojoomi also measures success by the fact that non-revenue generating places--the abandoned industrial facilities, the Crescent neighborhood, boarded up stores along Main Street, and the polluted harbor--have been replaced by tax-generating businesses. Industrial facilities in front of the train depot were removed, the station was restored, and a new retail and office plaza adjacent to it was built. The spaces are 100 percent leased, and generate sales tax revenues for the city while providing services for the residents. The well-planned densities of Victorian Harbor provide a largely middle-



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income property tax base for the downtown area. New businesses are moving onto Main Street, and current ones are using city funding to renovate facades in order to increase business. The marina provides increased revenues as more and more boats pay rent for slips.

Indeed, the most measurable successes may be of an economic nature, as the city's tax base increases and employment levels rise. Much data for accurately gauging economic success, however, is not being collected at this time.

There are environmental measures of success, as well. 27 oil storage tanks, 160,000 cubic feet of contaminated soil, and an abandoned sewage treatment plant have all been removed from the waterfront, for example. Through an effective pilot program with the Corps of Engineers, the city has also facilitated environmentally sound dredging of the channel, and created additional wetlands along the adjacent Suisun Marsh.

Other environmental and health benefits have not been measured, but appear to be occurring. Perceived benefits include reduced use of automobiles, and so reduced air pollution and traffic accidents, due primarily to pedestrian orientation in Victorian Harbor and along the waterfront. Additionally, the multi-modal train depot provides low-cost, environmentally beneficial mass transit in the form of rail and bus service.

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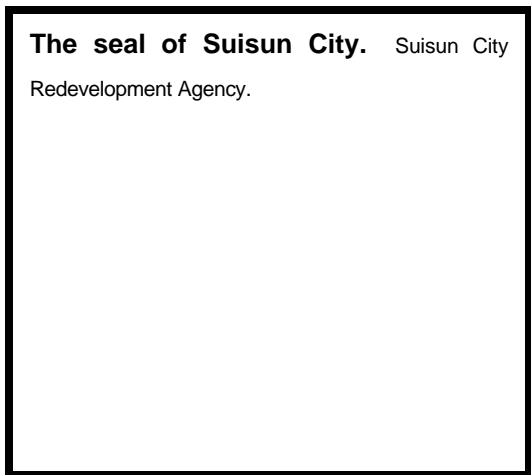
A traffic circle in the Victorian Harbor neighborhood. S. Buntin.

Social and cultural success is rarely measured, as well. Yet this may be the corner of the sustainability triangle in which Suisun City is most successful. Based on the revitalized downtown, the city offers year-round festivals which are well attended. Over 100,000 people attended festivals last year, and the farmer's market and concert series offered over the summer is so successful that it has even forced the city's neighbor to the north, Fairfield, to reschedule its farmer's market because it cannot compete.⁵⁹

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There is also a visible sense of pride and belonging--perhaps the greatest measure of sustainability--that has not been present for decades. Former residents Jose and Kim Vera returned to Suisun City after Victorian Harbor was built, and purchased a home there. “Kim and I fell in love with Victorian Harbor right away,” says Jose Vera, owner of an overhead door company. “We like the old style of architecture. We like the real sense of community. We see our neighbors all the time because the houses are separated by picket fences, not seven-foot walls. We have several block parties each year. Kim and I particularly like what’s

happening downtown these days--Main Street, the town plaza, the waterfront. Suisun has become one heck of a community, and it’s getting better all the time.”⁶⁰



Suisun City Downtown Sustainable Redevelopment Matrix

<i>Properties</i>	Yes	No	Notes
High-density, mixed-use core			1
Pedestrian orientation			2
Transit orientation			3
Regionalized architecture, site design, and landscaping			4
Public spaces			5
Protection, restoration, and enhancement of the natural environment			6
Energy efficiency and renewable energy use in buildings			7
“Green” construction			8
Integrated solid and toxic waste minimization			9
Water and wastewater reduction and reuse			10
Local production of goods, including food			11
Affordable housing			12
Building reuse and historic preservation			13
Integration with surrounding neighborhoods			14

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Notes to Matrix

1. Victorian Harbor and work/live units along the waterfront are high density, work/live units are mixed use.
2. Entire redevelopment area is pedestrian-oriented, facilitated by use of alleys, landscaping, walkways, bicycle paths, awnings, and others.
3. Redevelopment of the train depot provides transit orientation through Amtrak rail and CityLink and Greyhound bus services.
4. Regionalized architecture is evident in Victorian Harbor and other residential development; regionalized site design accommodates the Suisun Marsh and wetlands and drainage patterns; regionalized landscaping includes wetlands species and others.
5. Public spaces are ensured through the town plaza, wide sidewalks in all redevelopments, pocket parks, and others.
6. Environmental preservation includes restoration of the Suisun Marsh and marina area, removal of polluting industrial facilities and contaminated sites, and others.
7. Energy efficiency and renewable energy use does not go above the state requirements, which through Title 24 are quite strict. However, houses in Victorian Harbor utilize passive solar orientation. There is no renewable energy use onsite.
8. No “green” construction was utilized in the redevelopment.
9. Suisun City promotes an extensive solid waste recycling program and an education program to protect the marsh from toxic wastes.
10. Suisun City participates in the Suisun-Salano Water Authority’s Water Conservation Plan, which includes in-school water education, water audits, and other programs.
11. Other than crafts, there is no local production of goods, including food, in the redevelopment area.
12. Affordable housing is provided in the redevelopment area through existing low-income units, adjacent to Victorian Harbor. Victorian Harbor units were entry-level priced when first built.
13. Building adaptive reuse and historic preservation are required through the *Specific Plan* in Main Street and Old Town structures. Conversion of the grocery store to a performing arts theater is a good example. Facade renovation programs help ensure success.
14. Integration with surrounding neighborhoods, including natural wetlands, is ensured by community involvement and

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detailed design guidelines. Redevelopments to date are successfully integrated into surrounding areas.

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