

**JOINT PLANNING COMMISSION AND
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
AGENDA REPORT**

Meeting Date: February 6, 2025

Subject: Library Courtyard Project at 13 South San Antonio Road

Prepared by: Sean Gallegos, Senior Planner

Initiated by: Natalie Tan for SSA Landscape Architects, Applicant

Attachments:

1. Draft Resolution Approving a Historical Alteration Permit
2. Draft Resolution Approving a Design Review Permit
3. Project Plans
4. Department of Park and Recreation Form 523A and 523B
5. Secretary of the Interior Standards Compliance Review
6. Categorical Exemption Memorandum

Recommendation

1. It is recommended the Historical Commission take the following action:

Adopt a Resolution approving a Historical Alteration Permit (H24-0003) for a new library courtyard at 13 South San Antonio Road per the recommended findings and conditions of approval; and find the project is categorically exempt pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 (Existing Facilities) and Section 15303 (New Construction and Conversion of Small Structures) – Attachment 1.

2. It is recommended the Planning Commission take the following action:

Adopt a Resolution approving a Design Review Permit (D24-0002) for a new library courtyard at 13 South San Antonio Road per the recommended findings and conditions of approval; and find the project is categorically exempt pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 (Existing Facilities) and Section 15303 (New Construction and Conversion of Small Structures) – Attachment 2.

Background

Property Description

The project site is located at the Civic Center complex (Figure 1), which is located on a block bound by Angela Drive to the north, Cielito Drive and Eleanor Avenue to the east, Hillview Avenue to the south, and San Antonio Road to the west. The civic center complex consists of City Hall, Los Altos Police Department, Los Altos Community Center, Los Altos Library, J. Gilbert Smith House, Los Altos History Museum, Hillview Baseball Field, Hillview Park, Bus Barn Theater, Civic Center Orchard, a playground, parking, and landscaping areas. The surrounding area is a mix of residential and commercial buildings.



Figure 1: Location Map

Project Overview

The existing Los Altos Library is part of the Santa Clara County Library District. The Los Altos Library is a 28,050 square foot building that includes one community meeting room (with a maximum capacity of 100 people) and a collection of over two million books, movies, and other media. The library currently hosts a variety of events including book clubs, story time, meditation, music performances, life skills classes (e.g., cooking), social events, art classes, and educational programs (e.g., language classes, history lessons, gardening talks, and apricot orchard education). These events take place indoors during the library's normal operating hours. The Los Altos Library operates Monday to Thursday from 10:00 AM to 9:00 PM and Thursday to Sunday from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM. Parking for the civic center is open and shared by all uses on site. Operators of the library are looking to continue hosting existing library events with the flexibility to host them outdoors.

The proposed project would remove the existing trellis, patio, and reorient the pedestrian pathway located directly north of the existing Los Altos Library and construct an outdoor courtyard. The courtyard would consist of new hardscape and pedestrian pathways, an outdoor multi-purpose seating area including an audio-visual system, and landscaping. The proposed pedestrian pathway would provide connections to City Hall and the existing parking lot to the east. The purpose of the courtyard is to host and support existing events at the Los Altos Library in conjunction with allowing for expanded programming opportunities. The courtyard would provide a flexible area to accommodate a variety of events year-round. The courtyard would include concrete pedestrian pathways along the length of the courtyard to City Hall to the north and the parking lot east of the library. Most of the courtyard would consist of permeable pavement. The entire courtyard would

be fenced in with a mix of corten steel, wood, and glass fencing ranging from approximately five to seven feet tall.

An outdoor multi-purpose seating area would be the courtyard's primary feature. The area would provide bench seating, and five outdoor display screens with audio to support existing and future community events with a pergola above. All outdoor equipment associated with the outdoor display and audio system(s) would be placed within a climate-controlled equipment enclosure located within the area when not in use. Not all events would require the use of the audio and/or display systems. No mechanical pieces of equipment, such as heating, ventilation, air conditioning unit, or emergency equipment like a backup generator are proposed (Attachment 3 – Project Plans).

Civic Center Orchard Historic Landmark

In December 2024, the historic firm Treanor an independent consultant and subject matter expert on historic resources updated the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) Primary Record forms 523A and 523B for the Civic Center Orchard (Attachment 4). The attached DPR form updates the previous DPRs completed for the site in 2000 and 2011. The historian confirmed and determined the following related to the Civic Center Orchard as apart of their independent analysis.

In 1901, J. Gilbert Smith purchased land near San Antonio Road (then Giffin Road), where he constructed a house and planted a small orchard of apricot trees. After marrying Margaret Hill Smith, the couple expanded the orchard, ultimately developing a thriving apricot operation that became a significant part of the area's agricultural heritage. Over the years, the Smiths acquired additional land, growing the orchard to a total of 15 acres, with approximately 1 acre surrounding the house reserved for yard space.

When J. Gilbert Smith arrived in Los Altos on August 1, 1901, he purchased five acres of land near the area by San Antonio Road (formerly Giffin Road), Edith Avenue, and railroad tracks that are no longer extant. The land was undeveloped, with poppies, lupine, and trees. By 1902, Smith had planted apricots trees on the five acres and began construction on his home, the Smith House.

Smith's orchard was developed within a period establish by the National Park Service as the United States' modern orchard fruit growing era (1881-1945). Orchards established between the years of 1881 and 1945 were characterized by a limited variety of fruit types grown within a farm because not every variety of fruit was commercially viable. Prior to this period, hundreds of fruit varieties were found on farms and orchards throughout the United States. Research did not confirm what types of apricot J. Gilbert Smith grew throughout his career as an orchardist, however the orchard that has been maintained by the City consists of only Blenheim apricot trees and saplings.

In 1954, the Smiths sold a portion of their land to the City of Los Altos, though their home and the nearly 1-acre surrounding property were not included in the sale. A provision in their wills stipulated that the house and land be donated to the City upon their deaths. The Civic Center Orchard was designated as a historical landmark in 1981 through Resolution No. 81-23, which included a legal description of the property boundaries of three (3) parcels. The resolution specified that "all other structures on the land, as well as a presently undefined portion of the orchard necessary to accommodate the future Council Chambers, are specifically excluded."

However, the resolution did not define the exact boundaries of the "undefined portion of the orchard," leaving certain areas outside the historic designation unclear.

On September 8, 1991, the City Council adopted Resolution No. 91-31 defined the orchard's designated boundaries. Resolution No. 91-31 is accompanied by a hand drawn sketch labeled "Exhibit A," showing the defined landmark designation boundaries of the Civic Center Orchard (Figure 2). The Civic Center Orchard surrounds City Hall and is largely broken up into two main areas with a strip of land east of San Antonio Road and City Hall and continues east of City Hall, occupying land south of the surface parking lot and north of the Los Altos Library. The orchard

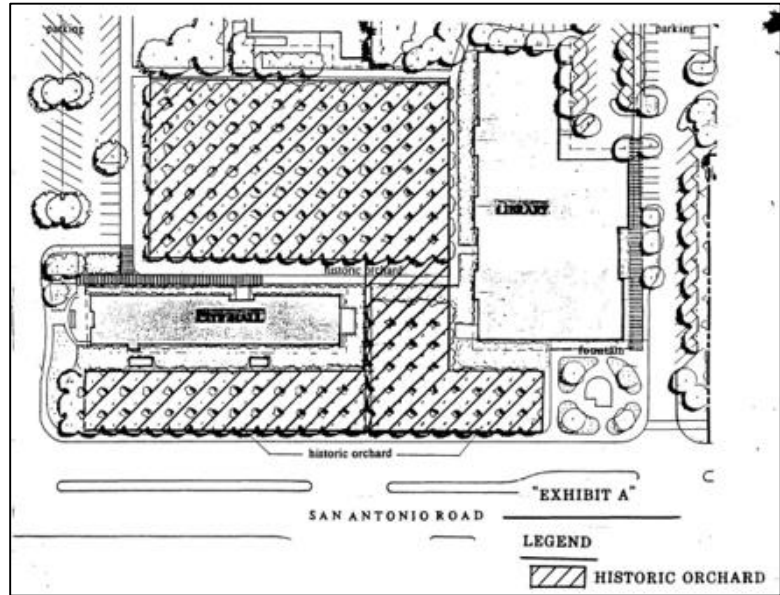


Figure 2: Historic Orchard Boundaries

connects north of the Los Altos Library and south of City Hall. The boundaries of the orchard have remained the same since 1991, and many trees within the orchard have been replaced over time since some have died or were removed due to disease. The number of trees planted within the boundaries of the resource have varied over time and there is not a defined number of trees or planting sites established with the original designation in 1981 or in 1991 when the boundaries were clearly defined. The orchard is organized into rectangular sections with orthogonal rows of trees. In early 2024, the orchard was planted with many new apricot saplings and drip irrigation was added.



Figure 3: Aerial Photograph of Civic Center Orchard Boundaries

City Council Discussion

On June 27, 2023, the City Council discussed location and general design characteristics in consideration of a new outdoor patio for the Los Altos Library at the Civic Center.

On November 28, 2023, the City Council authorized the use of Civic Center land for the construction of an outdoor library patio and directed the review to the Planning Commission for final design approval.

Analysis

General Plan Consistency

The General Plan contains goals and policies for the Civic Center Complex in the Land Use Element and Community Design & Historic Resources Element which emphasize balancing land uses, and ensuring compatibility with adjacent residential land uses and nearby single-family neighborhoods.

The Land Use Element ensures public facilities are available to accommodate planned land uses and that the unique qualities of Los Altos are safeguarded and enhanced. The project is consistent with the General Plan's goals and aligns due to the project being for governmental use under the Public and Institutional land use designation, and it complies with the permitted uses of the PCF zoning district, which allows uses for facilities owned, leased, or operated by a city, county and state.

The project complies with the Community Design & Historic Resources Element, particularly Community Design Policy 1.8, by promoting thoughtful design that respects the character of its surroundings without duplicating elements or styles. In alignment with Policy 1.8, the project blends harmoniously with the library building through the use of complementary materials, while also featuring contemporary design elements. This approach reflects integrity in design by respecting the physical qualities and character of the area, preserving the visual appeal of the civic center, and maintaining consistency with the architectural identity of the community.

The proposed outdoor library courtyard project for the City Civic Center is designed to enhance the site's functionality and aesthetic appeal while fully adhering to the historic preservation policies outlined in the Community Design & Historic Resources Element. The applicable policies from the Historical Resources Element are outlined below:

- Policy 1.1 states: "Preserve trees, especially heritage and landmark trees, and trees that protect privacy in residential neighborhoods."
- Policy 6.1 states: "Ensure that the integrity of historic structures and the parcels on which they are located are preserved through the implementation of applicable design, building, and fire codes."
- Policy 6.3 states: "Work with property owners to preserve historic resources within the community, including the orchard, or representative portion thereof, on the civic center site."

The project complies with Historic Resources Policy 1.1 by preserving all existing Civic Center Apricot Orchard apricot trees, designated as heritage trees, which will not be impacted. While the project results in the loss of approximately seven potential planting sites, this does not affect the orchard's historic significance or integrity. The historic landmark orchard remains understood as such, and the loss of these sites does not substantially alter the orchards' defining characteristics.

The project complies with Historic Resources policy 6.1 by following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, ensuring that the integrity of both the historic orchard and the parcels they occupy is preserved. In addition, the project is consistent with Section 12.44.140 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, which requires adherence to these standards.

The outdoor patio project also complies with Historic Resources Policy 6.3 by integrating harmoniously with the civic center's historic resources, including the preservation of the orchard or key portions of it. The design incorporates materials that complement the site's historic character, ensuring the preservation of the civic center's cultural and historical value while enhancing its functionality for future use.

Zoning Consistency

The project complies with the Zoning Standards of the PCF Zoning District. An analysis of the project's compliance with PCF Standards is provided on the table below:

PCF Zoning District Standards		
	Requirement	Proposal
Coverage	30% (172,031 square feet)	6.3% 36,651 square feet
Front Setback	40'	104'
Interior (Left) Side Setback	25'	66'8"
Interior Side Setback	25'	70'
Rear Setback	50'	653'
Height	30'	11'2"

Historical Alteration Permit

The Civic Center Orchard is one of the last remaining orchards in Los Altos and holds additional significance as it was planted by early resident J. Gilbert Smith. The proposed project involves constructing a new courtyard north of the Los Altos Public Library, a portion of which overlaps the defined orchard boundaries however does not modify such boundaries. The City hired Treanor,

an independent historic consultant firm, to evaluate the proposed project and prepare a Secretary of the Interior Standards Compliance Review report with their findings (Attachment 5).

The report finds the project does not involve the removal of any character-defining features, which are essential for historic designation as they embody the visual and physical aspects that give a property its historic significance. The Civic Center Orchard's character defining features include its trees arranged in rectangular plots with orthogonal rows spaced approximately 12 by 12 feet apart. While the project will overlap a small portion of the orchard boundary, it will not impact the orchard's historic character. The loss of seven (7) potential planting sites will not affect the orchard's historic significance or integrity, as these sites do not individually convey the orchard's function or historical value. The remaining orchard trees continue to represent the orchard's historic character.

The Civic Center Orchard retains its integrity of location, as it has not been moved, as well as its integrity of association and feeling, remaining an orchard since its establishment in the early 20th century. It also retains integrity of design, materials, and workmanship, as the trees' size, spacing, and arrangement are preserved. Although the civic center has been improved over the last several decades with anticipated new and expanded buildings, the orchard maintains sufficient integrity to convey its historical significance and original function since its initial designation in 1981.

The proposed project will not destroy historic materials, features, or spatial relationships that define the property. The new construction will be clearly differentiated from historic elements while remaining compatible with the size, scale, proportion, and massing of the Civic Center Orchard and its surroundings.

Therefore, the project complies with the Historic Preservation Ordinance, does not adversely impact the resource's physical integrity or historical significance, and meets the findings of Section 12.44.140.A of the Los Altos Municipal Code (LAMC) and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.

Design Review Permit

The project proposes an outdoor courtyard with a new pergola, hardscape and pedestrian pathways, outdoor multi-purpose seating area including an audio-visual system, and landscaping. The entire courtyard would be fenced in with a mix of corten steel, wood, and glass fencing ranging from approximately five to seven feet tall.

The project is designed to preserve and complement the architectural integrity of the library, with the proposed new courtyard, pergola, and improvements to the existing library. The design emphasizes the integration of elements, materials, and scale that harmonize with the traditional architecture of the library building; however, the library building is not a historic resource. The proposed pergola is constructed of wood, concrete, and metal, along with wall-mounted monitors and concrete and wood seating. These features and materials are thoughtfully designed to complement the library's traditional board-and-batten and stucco siding, as well as its aluminum windows. The selected exterior materials and finishes reflect high quality, durability, and permanence, ensuring a cohesive and lasting design.

The design emphasizes a human-scale building mass by incorporating a low 11.2-foot-tall pergola, along with low seating and fencing features, which effectively soften the project's appearance and reduce its visual bulk. Additionally, the project includes generous setbacks, such as a left interior side setback of 66.6 feet (exceeding the required 25 feet), a front setback of 104 feet (where 40 feet is required), and a rear setback of 653 feet (where 50 feet is required), contributing to a more visually balanced and context-sensitive design within the civic center campus. The project design aligns with the low-density profile of the adjacent library building and complements other structures on the civic center campus.

The project proposes the removal of three (3) trees (one flowering cherry, one Japanese maple, and one purple plum) adjacent to the northern area of the Los Altos Library. The new landscaping plan incorporates the planting of numerous trees and shrubs, featuring a variety of native and drought-tolerant species that provide seasonal interest, shade, and visual appeal. Concrete pedestrian pathways will be installed along the length of the library, connecting to the east parking lot and extending north toward City Hall, while the courtyard paving will feature permeable pavement to enhance sustainability. The landscaping design includes inviting pathways, seating areas, and open spaces to encourage gathering and improve accessibility. Thoughtfully planned landscape and hardscape features complement the surrounding buildings and parking areas, creating a cohesive and welcoming environment for visitors.

The project fully screens all mechanical equipment from public view within an existing walled enclosure, and new sound and display systems will be housed in enclosures that complement the overall design of the building.

Therefore, the project complies with the development standards in the PCF zoning district because it is compatible with the character of the neighborhood as the design maintains an appropriate relationship with adjacent structures, minimizes bulk, and preserves existing trees to the extent possible, and meets the findings of Section 14.78.060 of the Los Altos Municipal Code (LAMC).

Environmental Review

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under Section 15301 (Existing Facilities) of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines because it includes a minor alteration of an existing public facility consisting of the replacement of an existing patio with a new courtyard. The proposed courtyard area would be approximately 8,265 square feet, which is below the 10,000 square foot criteria identified in the CEQA Guidelines and mentioned above. The proposed courtyard is also consistent with the General Plan land use designation for the site and is within an urban area of Los Altos that is currently served by existing public facilities and services.

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures) of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines because it is the construction of an accessory courtyard patio for the existing Los Altos Library. As mentioned above, the approximately proposed courtyard would replace the existing Los Altos Library patio.

The project is consistent with the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance, as outlined in this staff report. It does not result in significant impacts on sensitive environments, geological resources, biological resources, air quality, and is fully supported by necessary utilities and public services. The project site is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the California Register of Historical Resources. While a small portion of the northern boundary overlaps with the Civic Center Apricot Orchard, a City-designated historic landmark, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards Compliance Review concluded that the project would not significantly impact this historic resource as it complies with the Secretary of the Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties. Additionally, none of the exceptions outlined in CEQA Guidelines Section 15300.2 apply. A detailed analysis and supporting documentation for the CEQA exemptions are provided in Attachment 6.

Public Notification and Community Outreach

A public meeting notice was posted on the property along San Antonio Road, mailed to property owners within a 300' radius, and published in the newspaper. The applicant contacted the adjacent neighbors to the south and north in the immediate area for the community outreach. At the time of preparation of this report, the Planning Division has not received any comments on the proposed project.