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## Walnut Creek's Broadway Plaza primed to grow up

John King

Tuesday, April 17, 2012



From the day it opened in 1951, Walnut Creek's Broadway Plaza has embodied the evolving landscape of Bay Area suburbs.

It debuted as middle-class shops along new streets, parking lots on all sides. By middle age there were garages and a stylish Nordstrom. Now there's a glistening white Neiman Marcus and a proposed makeover that would make room for not only new shops, but also 200 apartments or condominiums.

The specifics vary across the region, but the punch line is the same. Even as advocates and naysayers quibble about whether suburbs should grow up as well as out, cultural pressures are priming the pump. More people seek urban life but not necessarily the rough edges of a San Francisco or Oakland. Well-located suburbs open to change are poised to see the result.

In Walnut Creek, part of the appeal of this city at the historic crossroads of Contra Costa County is that it took shape before suburbanization became a predictable march of self-contained subdivisions and malls. Downtown is a lazy grid alongside ridges that step up to Mount Diablo; on the perimeter, multifamily housing dating back to the 1970s is shrouded in trees.

### Residential options

The housing included as an option for Broadway Plaza is among the 1,500 residential units either approved or proposed in that core. Projects range from the 596-unit "transit village" envisioned at the Walnut Creek BART Station to several lots where single-family homes would be replaced by a handful of condominiums.

The fresh twist is that residential builders are prowling *within* the grid, where small blocks and modestly scaled commercial buildings of varying quality still set the tone.

One example is on Bonanza Street between Locust Street and North California Boulevard.

There, on the same block as the city's performing arts center, Laconia Development has filed plans with the city to replace a bank building and two cafes with 143 apartments above a tall retail base.

"We think people would want to live in the center of town for the same reason they live in center cities around the world," says Laconia's Paul Menzies, who has built towers in Seattle and San Diego. If the project is approved, the goal is to start construction by next summer. "There's a tremendous scene right outside the door, and BART is a few blocks away. ... San Francisco's a great place, but not everyone wants to live there."

### Coming back

To be sure, similar claims were made before the real estate implosion of 2008. Menzies' site was slated for housing then as well. Two condominium complexes that did get built contain units that today are rented out instead.

But in the same way that long-stalled San Francisco towers are breaking ground, several Walnut Creek projects approved before the recession are coming back to life. They've been joined by such newcomers as a 300-unit complex on the former headquarters site of Longs Drugs, now going through an environmental review.

"It's a city, and it's changing," says Ron Gerber, Walnut Creek's economic development manager. "Exactly how it grows and who will be there, we don't know."

Another question for Walnut Creek and other maturing suburbs is this: How will a more densely developed center *feel*?

That's the subtext to the debate over Broadway Plaza, which in the past month has been the subject of public hearings and a draft environmental impact report.

At present there are 800,000 square feet of retail space and two parking garages on 25 acres east of South Main Street and south of Mount Diablo Boulevard, an area split by a public street named, yes, Broadway Plaza.

Developer MaceRich wants to redo things by going up and in - closing the street and replacing one-story retail buildings with taller structures amid pedestrian lanes and plazas. One option would add 300,000 square feet of retail space. The other would add 200,000 square feet for shops and a similar amount of space for housing. No building would exceed today's 50-foot height limit.

The plans so far involve broad brushstrokes rather than fine-grain design, and there's wariness at City Hall about the notion of removing the roadway. It's a legitimate concern: When you

remove a public street, you erode true public access. At the same time, Broadway now is flanked on the north and west by retail buildings that include outposts of everyone from Tiffany's to H&M, Pottery Barn to Giants Dugout. An imaginative network of paths through Broadway Plaza could showcase what's outside, not just pull shoppers in.

### **The future of housing**

There's also skepticism about the idea of housing. There shouldn't be.

MaceRich seeks a 10- to 15-year development agreement, and including upper-floor residences as an option makes sense. Housing already blends with Bay Area retail scenes in Emeryville and Petaluma, as well as San Jose's Santana Row. Today, such housing at Broadway Plaza would be incongruous. A decade from now it might seem like the natural way to top things off.

Our suburbs will never take on the dense flavor of San Francisco's North Beach, or sprout 600-foot towers. Backyards and cul-de-sacs aren't going away. But the cultural notion of one-size-fits-all was outmoded a generation ago. We've got the chance now to explore new definitions of all that the suburbs can be.

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This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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**OPEN FORUM*****On Electric Vehicles*****Recharging state's economy****By Martin Lagod**

California leads the nation when it comes to hybrid and electric vehicles and, with record electric and hybrid vehicle sales across the country last month, advanced vehicles are set to break into the mainstream.

That breakthrough so far has been held back by the relatively limited number of electric vehicle charging stations available to California drivers.

That's about to change.

The electric vehicle industry got a huge shot in the arm last month when Gov. Jerry Brown announced the largest-ever investment in electric vehicle charging infrastructure. The California Public Utilities Commission reached an agreement with an energy company, NRG, under which the state will get much-needed infrastructure to support more than 10,000 electric vehicle charging hookups and at least 200 fast-charging stations in the San Francisco Bay Area, the San Joaquin Valley, the Los Angeles basin and San Diego County. All told, the project will put \$100 million of infrastructure and charging stations on the road, and will provide another \$20 million directly to California electric ratepayers.

The PUC's deal closes the book on one of the last lawsuits from the electric crisis of 2001. Of all the settlements to come out of that dismal episode, none has presented a greater opportunity for the state to change its energy future and reach its ambitious greenhouse gas, clean air and clean vehicle goals than this one.

By providing the backbone on which electric vehicle charging companies can build a statewide network of charging stations, the agreement will open the door to innovation, job creation and vehicle purchases.

That's because this infrastructure will finally help solve the "chicken and egg" problem — that is, a comprehensive charging network will not be built unless there are enough vehicles to support it (but there won't be enough vehicles until such a network is built). Now California will have the core network, and the vehicles will come.

This new infrastructure also will help address the fear that you'll run out of charge on the road. By ensuring that drivers will be able to find fast-charging stations on the go, the project should turn range anxiety into range confidence, increasing electric vehicle sales. Solving these challenges is essential to meeting the state's target of 1.5 million zero-emission vehicles on the road by 2025.

More electric vehicles also mean more jobs for California.

Not only will auto dealers have a greater demand for workers, from mechanics to sales staff, but also electricians, construction workers and technicians will be in demand to build and maintain the infrastructure and charging stations. Those jobs will come to the communities where the network will be built, including parts of our state not yet commonly associated with advanced energy.

Some have expressed concern that this deal would give unfair advantage to a single company, because NRG would have 18 months to install its own charging stations on the infrastructure backbone. In fact, this project should do the opposite by creating infrastructure that other charging station providers will be able to employ. That's a good thing for innovation and competition. Nothing in the electric vehicle industry is easy, and there is a long road ahead. But we're all in this together — investors, entrepreneurs, innovators and customers — and with the promise of a major new investment in our technology, the future looks bright.

Martin Lagod is co-founder and managing director of Firelake Capital Management.



Michael Macor / The Chronicle 2011

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## Bay Area no longer among 25 most-polluted regions

Peter Fimrite

Thursday, April 26, 2012



More...

The San Francisco metropolitan area has dropped off the list of the top 25 most polluted regions in the nation, the American Lung Association said in a report Wednesday.

The State of the Air report ranked regions across the United States on particle and ozone pollution, finding that three of the nine least smoggy counties in California are located in the Bay Area and that, with a few exceptions, the air in Northern California is safe to inhale.

That, however, is not a license to breathe easy. California still ranks among the most polluted places in the nation, according to the report.

"Air pollution remains a serious health threat to too many Californians," said Jane Warner, president and chief executive officer of the American Lung Association in California. "We're making real and steady progress in the fight for clean air, but unhealthy levels of air pollution still exist, putting the health of California residents at risk."

The comprehensive list of the cleanest and most polluted areas in the country used data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to calculate ozone levels, which primarily come from vehicle tailpipes, and particle pollution, most of which comes from burning wood and fossil fuels.

The report, which has been issued every year since 2000, has regularly shown California air to be among the most polluted in the United States, mainly because the warm, dry climate tends to trap smog, especially in Southern California and in the Central Valley.

### Huge reductions

Lung association analysts gave credit Wednesday to California for huge reductions in car exhaust and soot, particularly over the past decade. In January, the California Air Resources Board approved regulations that will cut in half current greenhouse gas emissions and mandate production of more than a million zero-emission vehicles by 2025. The Bay Area Air Quality Management District has implemented strict wood-burning regulations during designated Spare the Air days.

The result, according to the lung association report, is that San Francisco is now among the cleanest counties in the country in terms of smog. The city and county did not record a single day that exceeded the federally designated ozone pollution standard last year. Marin, Sonoma, Santa Cruz, Mendocino, Lake, Humboldt, Glenn and Siskiyou counties were also on the ozone honor list.

The report said annual levels of particle pollution in Bay Area communities have dropped an average of between 15 and 30 percent since 2004. There has been a 51 percent decline in the number of days with unhealthy ozone levels since 2000.

"The Bay Area has made really dramatic progress in reducing both ozone and particle pollution," said Jenny Bard, the advocacy manager for the Lung Association in California.

### **There's more to do**

There is nevertheless a lot more that can be done, Bard said.

The San Francisco metropolitan area, which includes San Jose and Oakland, only moved three spaces over the past year, from 24th to 27th worst, in the number of fine particles wafting in the air. It was the 33rd smoggiest region out of 232 metro areas in the country.

Much of the local smog can be blamed on car-happy Santa Clara County, which recorded seven days last year that exceeded federal ozone standards, the worst in the Bay Area. San Franciscans should not boast, though, because most of their pollution blows away and fouls other people's air, Bard said.

The state as a whole isn't looking particularly good either. The State of the Air report said more than 90 percent of Californians live in counties that received a failing grade for either ozone or particle pollution. No California municipality was among the top 25 cleanest cities, a list that ranked Santa Fe, N.M., No. 1.

California, in fact, had nine of the 10 most ozone-polluted metro areas. As usual, the Los Angeles metropolitan area, which includes Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange counties, had the worst ozone pollution in the country. San Bernardino County alone had 127 bad air days.

The other big smog areas were all in Southern California and the lower Central Valley, with the exception of San Luis Obispo, which is on the Central Coast.

"Ozone and particle pollution contribute to thousands of hospitalizations, emergency room visits, and deaths every year," said Kari Nadeau, an associate professor of immunology and allergy at Stanford Medical School. "Cleaner air can save lives and can lead to better lives for our children."

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## How's your air?

People interested in their local rankings for air pollution can go to [stateoftheair.org](http://stateoftheair.org) and click on their ZIP code.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2012/04/26/MNPC10906Q.DTL>

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