

Findings of the ad hoc Gualala Community Action Plan Committee

Presented to Gualala Municipal Advisory Council (GMAC)

August 6, 2020



Introduction

Planning for the upgrade of Highway 1 in Gualala—our town’s Main Street—began a quarter-century ago. By 2002, with the hard work of hundreds of residents and officials, the Board of Supervisors and Coastal Commission adopted the Gualala Town Plan, with the primary goal of ensuring that future development better integrates the town’s natural surroundings.

Since then, there have been scores of meetings, Town Halls, reports, studies, surveys, negotiations, compromises, and many, many intense debates. The project parameters have been adjusted, but the clear intent of the Town Plan has always remained sacrosanct through all those years: “to make Highway 1 a scenic element of the Gualala Townscape.”

It is in that spirit that we humbly offer our findings on the latest proposed design: Caltrans Alt 3.

Respectfully,

Robert Juengling and Tom Murphy,
GMAC Ad Hoc Committee on the
Gualala Community Action Plan (Streetscape)

Robert Juengling, Chair of GMAC, also leads the Redwood Coast Chamber of Commerce and is Broker/Owner of Oceanic Land Real Estate Co. in Gualala, where he has lived since 1985. Juengling has previously played leadership roles in other Gualala infrastructure projects, including the GCSO sewer project and undergrounding of Gualala’s electric lines.

Tom Murphy, Vice Chair of GMAC, also leads GMAC’s Housing & Economic Development Committee. He has four decades of experience as an award-winning journalist, marketer, and manager with specialties in small business, economics, technology, aging, and community development. He lived in a home he built in 1991 at The Sea Ranch and moved to downtown Gualala in 2014.

Finding 1: Alt 3 Would Violate the Gualala Town Plan

The Hwy 1 streetscape is a centerpiece of the Town Plan, and the goals for it are clearly spelled out:

“...to preserve and enhance the rural, coastal character of the town of Gualala, to better integrate future development with the natural surroundings...” (GTP Goal No. 1)

“...improvements to the Highway 1 corridor shall be required to help make Highway 1 a scenic element of the Gualala townscape...” (GTP 3.6-1)

The Town Plan (part of Mendocino Co. code) requires:

- no on-highway parking (for safety and aesthetics)
- center turn lane (enhance safety, reduce congestion)
- landscaping (reflect natural environment)
- sidewalks (encourage walking through town)
- separated bike lanes (improve safety, ease congestion)



Alt 3 Excludes Most Town Plan Elements *(based on Caltrans info as of 8/5/20)*

Low-maintenance Landscaping	GONE	Caltrans won't do landscaping
Center Turn Lane	GONE	“for the foreseeable future”
Off-highway Parking	GONE	2 lanes planned through entire town
Scenic Element / Natural Surroundings	GONE	64-feet of concrete and asphalt
Separated Bike Lanes	THREATENED	Or up to 5 ft retaining walls?
Owner Choice on Parking	GONE	Was part of GMAC approval

Finding 2: Alt 3 Does Not Qualify for an Exception under the Town Plan

Prior adjustments to the Streetscape plan were permitted under criteria for “exceptions” that are defined in the Town Plan.

Exception Clause in Gualala Town Plan, 3-6.1

“Exceptions to the strict application of these standards may be granted by the County, with the prior approval of the Caltrans District Director, where *existing development, site topography or physical constraints mandate a greater or lesser right-of-way width.*”

Alt 3 does not qualify for an exception under this rule. Caltrans previously demonstrated in Alt 1 and Alt 2 that there are no physical impediments requiring changes to the right of way or project elements (below).



Alt 2 included all Town Plan elements in a 60-foot ROW.

Further, the addition of parking lanes that are **not** in the Town Plan does not justify exclusion of elements that **are**.

Caltrans made changes, explaining that Chief Planner Julia Acker said there was “wiggle room” in the Town Plan. However, Acker said in June she has neither seen nor signed off on any plan. She said she’d ensure Caltrans isn’t “running carte blanche.”

Finding 3: MCOG, Caltrans and the Surf Ignored the Interim Constrained Plan in ‘19

The Surf Market and the Mendocino Council of Governments (MCOG) agreed in 2013 to allow the Surf to continue to use highway parking until the Surf Center parking lot is complete. It’s called the Interim Constrained Plan, or ICP.

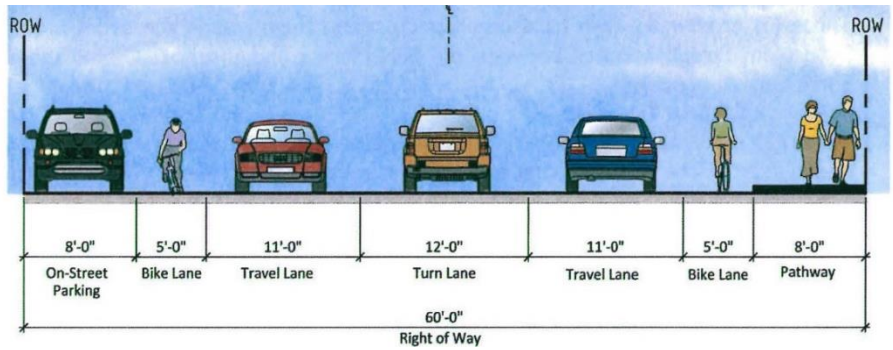
“While not the preferred option,” MCOG said at the time, the Interim plan “will be implemented” if the Surf Center lot wasn’t finished when the Streetscape project was ready to move ahead. Basically, it would allow on-highway parking continue near the Surf while the rest of the project was built. Sidewalks and bike lanes would be added at the Surf after the parking lot was ready.

In September 2019, GMAC proposed a variation of the ICP as a compromise, assuring uninterrupted parking along the Surf Center properties.

A phased project might cost more, but it would cost considerably less than Alt 3, which involves acquiring an additional parking lane. The interim project would honor the Town Plan and the Surf-County agreement.

We find the County and Caltrans should respect some form of an ICP to ensure parking for Surf for a limited “interim.”

The proposed GMAC ICP (at right) allowed for parking beside the Surf Center.



Finding 4: A Professional Marketing Campaign Divided Our Community

In 2019, the Surf Market launched a professional marketing campaign with what we view as misleading information. The slick media blitz stated the market might close without on-highway parking.

The campaign included mass emails, social media ads, political lobbying, and letters to officials and media, triggering what Surf Market owner Steve May himself called “a nasty community fight.”

But the market failed to disclose the 2013 Interim Constrained Plan that guaranteed on-highway parking, or the Surf Center’s 12-year-old plan for a 90-plus space parking lot at the market. A concurrent smear campaign attacked Streetscape committee members and GMAC as a whole, undermining the council’s diligent efforts to resolve the issues and unite the community.

These scare tactics prompted many customers to write letters that unknowingly echoed the hollow claims. A national petition was signed by over 1,000 people—including hundreds from out of state.

Caltrans said the resulting division in the community meant that it could not build Alt 1 or Alt 2, which followed the Town Plan. To this day, Caltrans relies on an email distribution list that is dominated by those who wrote letters based on the market’s dubious claims.

We recommend Caltrans re-start its outreach effort and expand it to include more of our community.



Finding 5: Alt 3 Ignores 17 Years of Planning Due to One Fatally Flawed Town Hall

Town Plan Vision Had Many Solid Steps:

2002: Approval by BOS & Coastal Commission
2005: MCOG applies exception to ROW to 64'
2012: GTC reduced ROW to 60' (constraints)
2013: MCOG/Surf Agreed to ICP Compromise that guarantees Surf parking
2018: Town Hall Confirms Town Plan Concept (With crowd reflecting town makeup)

Alt 3 – One Faulty Step:

Dysfunctional 2019 Town Hall:
-No Sound System
-No Projector
-Poor Handouts, and Not Enough
-Loss of control by Caltrans
-“Bullying” prevents civil discussion
-Jeering mob blocks GMAC compromise offer

The GMAC Compromise proposal guaranteed parking for the Surf Market, the key topic that brought over 200 Surf supporters to the meeting. But the crowd blocked its presentation.

A GMAC survey before the Town Hall found 89% of local residents supported the compromise as long as the Surf’s parking was assured.

Finding 6: Off-highway Parking Would Help Our Businesses, Not Hurt Them

Opponents to the Town Plan claimed the loss of on-highway parking would hurt local businesses. We find the opposite is true.

Many opponents cited this concern in their letters to Caltrans, and it was repeated often in news accounts and hearings.

Caltrans noted verbally there were other studies showing positive benefits for business, but never presented them.

We found no basis for the claim that off-highway parking would hurt businesses.

To the contrary, most business experts we spoke with believed the Alt 3 design would irreparably damage Gualala’s fragile eco-tourism-based economy.

Business leaders at roundtables of the GMAC Housing & Economic Development Committee also reached a consensus that the highway project should “follow the Town Plan.”

“Gualala’s appearance is critical to the future of eco-tourism in Mendocino County.”

“We can’t let it look like a truck stop. We need a sense of nature and beauty from Gualala to Westport.”

- Una Wirkebau, Move2030

**Mendocino County
Economic Resiliency
Program**

Finding 7 : Off-Highway Parking Is Plentiful and Preferred in Gualala

Opponents claim on-highway parking is needed. Not so. There are 600+ off-highway spaces that most customers and employees use now. Another 200 are planned. Another 200 after that are possible.

In the photos below, which include Caltrans Alt-2, the **red lines** mark existing off-highway lots, while **orange lines** mark planned/potential parking areas.

Note that many cars are parked in lots, but hardly any on the highway. Only a few dozen spaces would fit onto the highway, likely putting the per-space cost into five figures.



South End of Gualala project zone.

North end of Gualala project zone



Finding 8: ‘Sharrows’ Can’t Safely Replace Separated Bike Lanes in Gualala

Separated Bike Lanes: Allow Kids, Seniors, and Visitors to ride safely on highway

- Kids:** Can ride safely to the school bus or to their friends’ homes
- Seniors:** Health benefits from riding to Post Office or stores
- Visitors:** Lanes encourage visitors to safely tour around town
- Environment:** Cleaner air, and less congestion on highway
- Business:** Stores get more visitors when visitors can ride to them.
- Safe Speeds:** Cyclists and Cars/Trucks move at their own chosen speeds.



Sharrows: Force Cyclists to share 11-foot lanes with Cement Mixers

- Dangerous:** Force riders to share a lane with cement trucks and semis
- Age-limited:** Prevent kids and seniors from risking a ride in traffic lanes
- Impractical:** Cyclists would head north at 8-12 mph vs 25 mph for cars/trucks; Southbound cyclists would go 8-15mph
- Legal Issue:** Cycling group says Sharrows in Gualala might violate ‘Safe Streets’ policies, setting up liability issues.

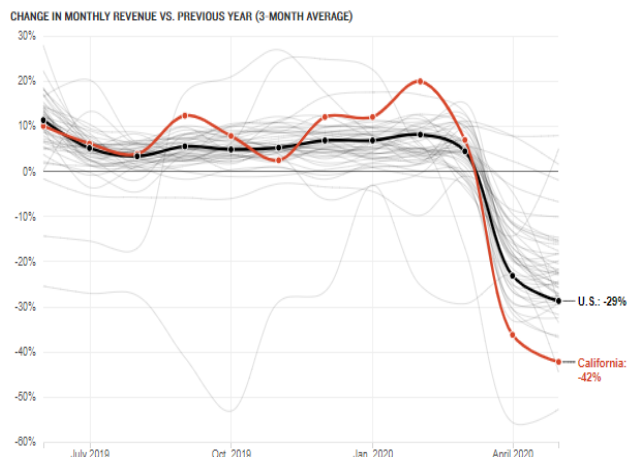


Finding 9: Expense of 4th Lane Is Something We Can’t Afford After Covid

Mendocino County and the State are facing soaring budget shortfalls due to Covid. There’s been no discussion of the financial impact of adding a parking lane that we truly don’t need.

Adding a lane costs big dollars:

- Acquiring additional land along the highway for parking.
- Buying land elsewhere to “offset” the environmental impact of land paved for highway parking;
- Providing taxpayer-paid parking to private businesses, which is NOT county policy. (Gift of Public Funds)
- *Cost-per-space on the highway will likely be well into the five figures.*



Finding 10: Alt 3's Lack of Landscaping Shatters Gualala's Eco-friendly Image

Alt 3 has been described as a “sterile San Jose strip mall” (Bill Merget, President, Cypress Village HOA). It would create a barren 64-foot slab of concrete and pavement from stores on one side to the other. It would run the length of town from Old State Highway to Ocean Dr. It would be nearly three times the width of the current 22-foot blacktop traffic lanes.



By comparison, Alt 2 was 54 feet of pavement/concrete plus 6 feet of landscaping.

END OF REPORT

POSTSCRIPT: Immediately after this committee presentation, the council heard from members of the public and discussed its options at length. It then voted 4-3 to adopt the following motion made by Murphy, and seconded by Council Member Donald Hess:

“Based on the Findings of the GMAC Gualala Community Action Plan Committee and the latest report from Caltrans of engineering issues encountered with the Alt 3 concept, the Gualala Municipal Advisory Council recommends that Caltrans and MCOG develop a three-lane highway concept that fits within the previously allotted 60-foot ROW and incorporates elements of the Gualala Town Plan, including separated bike lanes and landscaped ADA-compliant sidewalks as described in Alt 2.”

“We further recommend that MCOG and Caltrans incorporate an interim constrained option that will guarantee parking for the Surf Center stores for a fixed interim of time so that the center may complete its long-planned parking and redevelopment project, hopefully before any part of the highway project is begun.”