

A new neighborhood eyesore offers a timely lesson

Finally something everyone can agree on – that data center on 11th Street is about as fugly and foreboding as a new installation can get, adding a fortress- or even stalag-like note to residential 11th Street.

Gateway Area Plan (GAP) critics are pointing to this compound that clearly wants nothing to do with its surroundings as an example of streamlined planning, since the project was approved without design review and Planning Commission hearings. The data center, goes the argument, is the kind of development you'll get with GAP approval.

❖ UNION EDITORIAL

However, the lethal-looking fence is disallowed by current standards. It only slipped through due to a staff oversight, openly admitted and owned by the Community Development Dept., and is soon to be corrected.

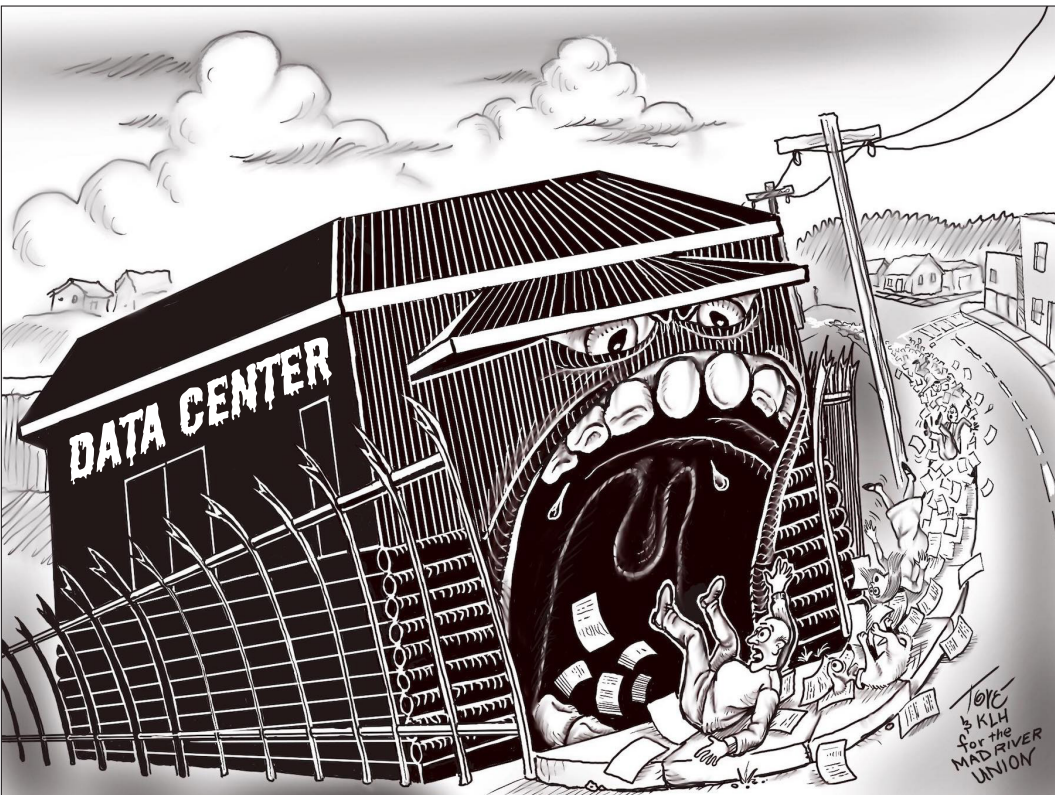
The data center itself, offering no neighborhood benefit, is freely allowed by current regs – which would remain in place unless a smarter plan with better standards, incorporating lessons learned, is implemented. So, if you happen to *like* that inscrutable building, by all means, oppose the GAP.

Shaky reasoning

A letter published in local periodicals last week (including the *Union*) about the “Gateway Project” (there is no such thing) warned that, “I would advise that the height of future buildings be limited on ground that behaves as ‘Jell-O’ during earthquakes to avoid potential structural failures (even if engineered) that may cause loss of life.”

A compelling analogy, for sure. Pass the Gateway Area Plan – or “Project” as the writer called it – and you’ll get tall buildings toppling, killing people and possibly embedding them in slime Jell-O like so many entombed peach slices and cocktail franks in a 1950s gel cookery centerpiece. And no one wants that.

The writer, a retired seismologist, didn’t quite explain how these doomed buildings



News item: The current General Plan allows residents' quality of life slip-slide away on a carpet of inadequate standards.

could be funded and constructed in the first place, in defiance of the seismic safety and building codes in the General Plan, of which the Gateway Area Plan will be a part (*see Letters, page 9*).

And that’s another thing. There’s an ambient misbelief, as exemplified by the seismologist’s letter, that the Gateway Area Plan is a “project” to construct buildings.

It’s a draft version of a *plan*, being refined via a public planning process. The Village, for example, was a developer-generated project for new buildings. Its replacement at the Craftsman Mall site will also be a project, carried out under the auspices of polytechnic planning, which, like Gateway Area planning, is now underway.

It’s a key distinction. If we want to be reality-based – always a choice – we can

understand that the current community design process is *developing standards for buildings*, including their height. Any resulting projects would be filed by developers, in accordance with the plan. (Note that individual projects could still be appealed under the GAP, just like now.)

This design process was demanded by citizens active in The Village, back when Arcata had a say in what happens at the Craftsman Mall. Now that the demanded process is underway, with multiple opportunities for shaping the plan, we’ll find out whether the community really wants or uses it.

If someone has a better approach than planning, we’ve yet to hear it. Railing against a draft plan is like yelling at your wait person about menu selections you don’t want. Instead of doing that, order

something else. The wait staff (that is, city planners, Planning Commission and City Council) are standing by, pens in hand.

In the end, by way of compromise, you may get only part of what you want. But one way to ensure that you get nothing is to fling poo rather than contribute to the process.

For example, those who want a car-free, walkable community and they who demand more parking, more paving and more public subsidies for private transportation are presently competing for mind-share in the GAP. Neither will get all their asks, but whomever bestirs themselves to participate constructively will end up with more of what they want to see.

Unstoppable development

It can’t be emphasized enough is that development pressure is huge, growing, irresistible and inevitable. Housing is already a wrenching crisis which is tragically stifling families every day. With Cal Poly personnel and those fleeing climate change poised to flood in to Arcata and environs, west Arcata and other developable areas *are* going to see housing construction.

Those who are comfortably situated during the current hellish housing situation may prefer to fight creation of a coordinated *plan* with incentives for beneficial development, and then attempt to prevent new *projects* one by one as they arise.

But halting development of new homes would worsen unmet housing demand, and ensure that residing in Arcata is only possible for current residents and the well-to-do. And speaking of the status quo, the best way to bring about more odious eyesores like the anti-human data center is to retain present development standards.

So rather than slow-walk planning, as some have suggested, Arcata ought to expedite a smart, inclusive and systematic effort to define what it wants out of new development, and do it with all orderly dispatch so it is in place to meet what is coming.

Why, you could even call that a Gateway Area Plan.

Light, fit and quality of life can inform any development

Sandpiper Park fills its place and space with uncommon grace

Long ago, in 2012, a Sacramento company named Resident Owned Parks, inc

trucked up to Arcata 16 pre-fab tiny houses special ordered from Champion Homes in Lindsay, Calif. and situated them one by one on permanent foundations in perfect alignment side by side like a Roman camp on the Rhine right at the point where H Street bends south of Samoa Blvd. and joins G Street, just across the street from the Marsh.



❖ THE FUTURE OF ARCATA
Daniel Duncan

When I lived on Third Street in the 1970s and 80s, my route to the then-developing Arcata Marsh took me alongside that H and G corner which was then a trailer park, full of shabby and rusting mobile homes. Across the street and down a ways, where the Marsh Interpretive Center is now located, the open space didn’t look much better, as it was thick with abandoned mill site debris, including chunks of concrete lying about, rotting pilings sticking up randomly (they’re still there) and sightings of frightful snakes wriggling away in and out of the brush behind the wire fence enclosing the property, no doubt feasting on the rats (now gone, I hope, both of those nature low-lives – just kidding, snakes and rats are both just part of nature, aren’t they?

Just not under my feet, please).

Reaching Franklin Klopp Lake, I liked walking along the beautiful bay on a spit enjoying whatever tide was in or out, and the muddy shoreline appearing beneath the retreating water, where trotting sandpipers pecked about for grubs. I didn’t much like, however, trekking my way back South G alongside that disheveled mobile home park. But the trailer park was a part of my world below Samoa Boulevard, the one business at the end of a very long block of

mostly modest single family houses in the middle of which was situated right up to the sidewalk Skidmore’s one-chair barber shop complete with barber pole, There were no Joyce Plath-designed condos down on the next block in those days (they came later), built on the Marsh side of South G across from Arcata Garbage (now called Recology, and since relocated to Samoa).

When the cute little houses appeared in 2013, having replaced

the trailer park, you could get one for \$59,900, a deal even then. I have to admit I thought the diminutive things looked a bit absurd, each one of them identical, with no yard and too small to be a substantial dwelling for a full-size human. Over the years, I walked past them without giving them much thought on my trips to the



HOME SWEET HOME A Sandpiper dream house.
PHOTOS BY MATT FILAR | UNION

marsh and back. I just accepted them as one does the world that has come to be.

It wasn’t until I was walking there recently with my daughter and grandson and we were resting on the stoop of an empty unit that was for sale that I took the time to stand on the porch and peek inside a window and admire the layout. I smiled, turning back around, and said hello to a couple of pedestrians who happened to be going by on the sidewalk. My daughter and I continued our usu-



al chatter when the four-year-old apropos of nothing in particular asked, “what is that?” pointing to a downspout. I explained to him how it carried excess water away from a building, flowing through the gravel bed to the sidewalk then under it through a gutter, where it was eventually routed to the bay we had just come back from... and It was then that I finally saw what was right there in front of my eyes.

Had not this developer figured out all the essential design components to make a singular, very workable collection of small homes to fit right here in an old trailer park in Arcata? (This project was the first of its kind in the country, I was told...)

For Sandpiper Park is not only practical – by offering solid, attractive housing for a specific group of low income folks, it is also complete in concept and well executed. Look at it. There is a paved space in between each cottage with a small car parked neatly in the space. There is a roofed porch for lingering outdoors (some have closed this area with screens for privacy), a stoop for sitting on and chatting with the neighbors or passers-by. The gable roof is low-pitched but effective. The tan paint color – every unit the same – is pleasant and unobtrusive. Almost all of the 16 units front the street without wasting precious space (the entire complex sits on six-tenths of an acre and includes a maintenance building with three efficiency apartments.) For who needs a miniature, symbolic, pointless front lawn or garden space who

can walk up to the Farmers Market on the Plaza on Saturdays for great vegetables or step across the street to take a stroll in the Arcata Marsh for an experience of nature? There’s everything at hand a person, mostly a single person, occasionally a couple, needs in a house, including an on-site laundry facility.

How has Sandpiper Park achieved its goal to provide handsome, affordable housing in such a small space? Perhaps criteria gleaned from previous articles will help us understand.

- **Criterion No. 1: Light.** Sandpiper Park’s one-story building design with open space in the center allows the maximum of light to reach all areas of the development. Kudo No. 1
- **Criterion No. 2: Neighborhood Fit.** Sandpiper Park takes .6 of an acre in a neglected neighborhood of Arcata and situates 16 buildings (plus one) to maximize the use of space and create an orderly and attractive complex, a unique design concept somewhat between an upgraded trailer park and an iconic motor court. Genius.
- **Criterion No. 3: Quality of Life.** Sandpiper Park provides a much neglected group of low-income residents with an attractive and well-maintained place to live that enhances their particular life-stage, encourages a sense of self-worth and promotes the contribution of their group to the community by encouraging involvement in the everyday life of the neighborhood. Another outstanding accomplishment.

There is another factor of design that I would like to introduce, an intangible element to be sure, but an important one. It is this:

What is the effect of *replication* in a design? When is replication effective and when is it boring and annoying? For example, Sandpiper

er Park replicates the same house 16 times, and even paints each one of them the same color. A typical tract development replicates the same house design block after block, and when variations occur they are often insignificant.

Why does Sandpiper Park’s use of replication one as appealing while many other examples of this feature just bore a person to death?

I think the answer lies in the purpose. Sandpiper Park deliberately replicates a single design because it works for its intended occupants and it doesn’t try to hide this factor. In fact it doubles down on it by painting the cottages the same, so you feel you just don’t have to deal with that issue in this particular development.

A typical tract subdivision uses replication also for a purpose, to lower design costs, to maximize square feet of the interiors and to increase profits for the developer. It is no accident that Sandpiper Park was constructed by a non-profit, with major help from the City of Arcata which provided redevelopment funds and first time homebuyer loans.

No doubt many developments achieve the values we want to see flourish in our town. Others try but don’t succeed. Still others don’t even try. Let us recognize the difference between them and identify them as they are. For what we want to achieve is the right kind of development in Arcata, not just any development. Another Sandpiper Park somewhere in town (albeit with a different design concept appropriate to its particular neighborhood) would not be a bad idea.

Daniel Duncan ran Small World Construction in Arcata from 1986 through 2007. Contact him at dduncan362@gmail.com.