

Chapter 1.0

Historic San Juan Bautista: Where We've Been, Where We are

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This plan is important to the future of Historic San Juan Bautista. It serves as opportunity in the city's history for reconnecting with community heritage, articulating community values, and defining those steps desired for both accommodating change and preserving sense of place. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a context for the plan: what are the factors that have shaped or are shaping Historic San Juan Bautista.

1.2 MAJOR HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY FACTORS SHAPING HISTORIC SAN JUAN BAUTISTA

The economic and physical environment of San Juan Bautista is greatly influenced by four great events, one natural asset and one natural liability. Few places in this country can demonstrate so tangibly how past decisions have sculpted both present conditions and future options.



1894 photo of Third Street - from "Historic San Juan Bautista", San Juan Bautista Historical Society; page 6:

Mission San Juan Bautista: The first great event was the development of Mission San Juan Bautista in 1797. Located along the edge of a fertile valley, the Mission's activities have strongly influenced community development for the past two hundred years. Even today, as a major tourism draw and as an icon for local values, it remains a dominant component of the local economy.

Rejection of Southern Pacific Railroad: The second great event was the community's decision in the 1870's to reject an offer to bring the Southern Pacific Railroad into town. Instead, this powerful economic engine was redirected to Hollister, which as a

result became the region's major commercial center and county seat. San Juan Bautista remained a small village beyond the reach of California's lust for growth. Not until 1907 did a railroad actually come to San Juan Bautista. For a variety of reasons, its impact – though positive – was not lasting, too late to reverse Hollister's prospects as a regional center.

Location of State Highway 101: The third great event was the state's decision to locate the State Highway 101 corridor and interchange significantly west of town. The economic energy of this freeway was contained and directed elsewhere. Once again, San Juan Bautista side-stepped substantial growth, thereby sustaining its traditional rural character.

Agriculture, the San Andreas Fault, and the Silicon Valley: The fourth event must await an explanation of the community's key natural asset and liability. Its strategic asset is its setting. The fertile valley that drew Father Lasuen to locate the largest of the Spanish era missions here offered several significant advantages, including its position midway between two other major missions, commanding position on a bluff over the valley, access to prime agricultural land, timber, tules (for roofing), water, and nearby limestone. Most of these advantages continued to serve San Juan Bautista for many generations. The limestone quarry eventually drew large investments in cement manufacturing during the early-mid 1900's. Unfortunately, this industry had sporadic success and is now completely gone.

The most important of these natural advantages is the agricultural land surrounding the town. This resource, more than anything else, has continued to dominate both the local economy and way of life for the people of this community. Countering this natural asset to some degree is the community's location on the notorious San Andreas Fault. Earthquakes are a part of the town's heritage and future. No known study defines the economic impacts of this condition.

However, it is safe to presume that many developers over the years have opted to avoid potential losses from being adjacent to the fault by locating elsewhere. Even so, the town and Mission have proved to be tenacious in the face of this danger. After two hundred years of settlement, the community remains clearly one of the most attractive in the state.



1894 photo of Rancho San Justo - from "Historic San Juan Bautista", San Juan Bautista Historical Society; page 13: copyright 1967.



San Juan Bautista's regional location

Returning now to the fourth event, it is something with world-wide impact and not actually originating in San Juan Bautista. It is the advent of the computer. Since the 1980's, an extraordinary industry has grown up in the San Jose area north of town. Known as Silicon Valley, this industrial behemoth has quietly moved its sphere of influence ever closer to the ancient rural village. Today, this influence is being felt through high demand for housing. Housing costs have become very high (though lower than in San Jose), without – apparently – many citizens realizing it. In fact, the event is still ongoing as illustrated by the pending Coyote Valley – Cisco Systems development. Its ultimate impact is yet undefined. However, there is strong momentum and San Juan Bautista is in the way of it. Without appropriate guidelines

and truly strategic action, Silicon Valley and the region's growth will do what the railroad and interstate highways have been unable to: end the town's self-imposed rural self-containment. San Juan Bautista today very definitely faces its greatest challenge. Clear policy guidelines to retain the

historic character of the City and its surrounding open lands are imperative to meet these challenges head-on.

1.3 OTHER KEY CONTEMPORARY FACTORS SHAPING HISTORIC SAN JUAN BAUTISTA

While the four great events, one natural asset and one natural liability influencing the evolution of Historic San Juan Bautista are important to understand, there are also other factors (i.e., assets and liabilities) that play a significant role in Historic San Juan Bautista's economic development, sense of place, and quality of life. These key contemporary factors are described below.

Assets

Downtown Buildings and Character: The Historic Downtown area is flush with a wide range of historic buildings whose collective character maintains a sense of place long ago lost by most California communities. This district is a substantial tourism draw just because of its character.

Rural Setting: The town's rural setting adds greatly to Downtown's historic character and fabric. Surrounding hills and valley make this scene highly attractive. In fact, this setting is fundamental to the definition of the town. Regional development pressure, especially for housing to support the demands of Silicon Valley, is poised to change this character. The community has a major stake in the County's future management of growth demands. So, while the rural setting is an asset, the town's lack of control over this asset is a major liability. The City must involve itself in the County's management of future growth.



Plaza Hall

San Juan Bautista Historic Park: “When entering the Plaza of San Juan, ‘at one stroke you are transported into another time and another world. Here in the range of a single glance is epitomized the course of a century and a half of California history.”¹ This quote from 1919 is as accurate today as it was then. The Plaza area is extraordinary. It and surrounding buildings are preserved through the good efforts of the State Park Department and the Mission San Juan Bautista.

Community Spirit: This is a town where citizens are involved and speak out to protect their values. Historic buildings and places are preserved because there is a common will to do so. This spirit, however, can be both an asset and liability. Community involvement helps to ensure that change is directed. However, *informed* community involvement is necessary for change to be directed in the best interests of the community as a whole. Often, this well-intentioned and valued community spirit results in significant accomplishments; sometimes, however, this spirit makes it difficult to undertake even basic and needed improvements.

¹ From *San Juan Bautista: The Town, The Mission & The Park*, Charles W. Clough, Word Dancer Press, Fresno, CA, page 129.

Consistency, rationality and clarity in development regulations founded in community support are of paramount importance to the town's economic stability and creating a predictable framework for change.

Liabilities

Cost of Living: Housing costs have risen dramatically in recent years. These costs are so high now that for many local people, including children who grew up in town, local housing ownership is unattainable. San Juan Bautista and surrounding area are so attractive to outsiders that a gentrification process has begun in earnest. For example, a 700-square foot home in poor condition, with no foundation, on a 6,400-square foot lot in an average neighborhood sold for \$201,000 in 2000. Two other similar ones backed the accepted offer. The only people who can afford to live in town will soon be the very wealthy and those whose property taxes are grandfathered by Proposition 13.

PROPOSITION 13

On June 6, 1978, nearly two-thirds of California's voters passed Proposition 13, reducing property tax rates on homes, businesses, and farms by approximately 57%. This passage amended the state constitution so that property tax rates could not exceed 1 percent of the property's market value and valuations couldn't grow by more than 2 percent per annum unless the property was sold. Prior Proposition 13, the tax rate throughout California averaged a little less than 3 percent of market value and there were no limits on increases either for tax rate or property value assessments. Proposition 13 also required that all state tax rate increases be approved by a two-thirds vote of the legislature and that local tax rates also require approval by the vote of the people. Proposition 13 has had a negative impact on the revenues of local governments, leaving most to rely upon sales tax as a primary source of revenue..

Partnerships: San Juan Bautista's greatest strength is the implicit partnership between ten key entities:

- ❖ City of San Juan Bautista
- ❖ Mission San Juan Bautista
- ❖ San Juan Bautista State Historic Park
- ❖ Business Community
- ❖ Aromas – San Juan Bautista Unified School District
- ❖ Caltrans
- ❖ County Government
- ❖ State Government
- ❖ Federal Government
- ❖ Citizens

This strength can be a liability when the five entities are not working together consciously and strategically. Recently, varying priorities and misunderstanding



The Chamber is an important economic development partner

have reduced the quality of the partnership. Given the immense outside pressures on the community, these conditions must be improved for the partners to achieve their individual and collective goals. Fortunately, local leaders are working to enhance their cooperation, collaboration and communication.

Specific opportunities exist to address many significant community issues through improved partnership. However, if collaboration doesn't improve or erodes, San Juan Bautista will suffer greatly in the near future.

Issues needing the attention of a refined partnership include:

- ❖ Input into management of The Plaza for the use of community functions by citizens, Mission congregation and visitors
- ❖ Physical and directional connections between The Plaza area and the rest of Historic Downtown
- ❖ Provision of centralized parking for Historic Downtown, Mission and Park guests and employees
- ❖ Public safety on Historic Downtown streets, sidewalks and open space
- ❖ Access to public restrooms
- ❖ Preservation of historic properties
- ❖ Promotion and management of Downtown events
- ❖ Promotion of San Juan Bautista
- ❖ Interpretation of local heritage and the natural environment
- ❖ Business retention
- ❖ Business recruitment
- ❖ Public awareness of Historic Downtown issues
- ❖ Volunteer recruitment and management
- ❖ Economic information collection, management, analysis and distribution

Planning and Permit Process: The planning and permit process for construction, whether for rehabilitation, restoration, renovation or new, is awkward. Developers and some local property owners complain that the rules of this arena are not clear enough nor consistently applied. Whether or not this is true, the perception is a danger. The reality is that the local economy is weak and getting weaker. Some change is required to ensure economic and social stability. City government needs to make sure that construction and development processes are clear, fair and consistently upheld. Ambiguity and inconsistency are very dangerous conditions. Even the false impression of these conditions can throttle desirable change because nearly all developers shun the unpredictable. Additionally, local property owners tend to defer building maintenance and preservation to avoid the perceived complex and expensive permitting process.



The current City planning and permitting process should be improved

Tax Base: Very little industrial property exists in town to bolster City budgets with tax revenues. Most of the limited development in San Juan Bautista in recent years has been residential, which offers substantially lower tax revenue than commercial or industrial. Growth in taxes on private property is limited by Proposition 13. As a result, the weak tax base highly constrains the City in its provision of services.

Local Jobs: There are few local jobs, especially those that pay well. Many people are forced to seek employment elsewhere. This makes the community progressively more a commuter town, even for people born there.

Economic Information: It is fairly astonishing how little economic information is available on San Juan Bautista. Demographics, employment data, development trends, retail sales figures, tourism statistics and other basic information available in most places are simply absent. This is true for both past and present conditions. As a result, it is extremely difficult to define the town's economic strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This absence of information must be eliminated if strategic economic management is to ever occur.



Basic economic information for all businesses should be regularly collected and maintained.

1.4 CONCLUSION

The dozen or so factors described above have had or are having a significant impact on Historic San Juan Bautista's past and present citizenry. Only through an understanding of these factors (i.e., "Where We've Been, Where We Are"), can the community begin to venture on a path toward the future. The sensitivity and respect for the past and present of Historic San Juan Bautista provided by this chapter serves as a clear guide for defining "Where We're Going" in Chapter 2.