

## REPORT TO THE PLANNING COMMISSION



**DATE:** February 27, 2014

**TITLE:** Vortex Specific Plan Review & Discussion

**CASE NO:** SP 02-07

**PREPARED BY:** Martin Magaña, Community Development Director

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### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Review and discuss the Vortex Specific Plan and provide direction to Staff.

### **BACKGROUND:**

The Planning Commission and City Council approved the Vortex Specific Plan back on February 16, 2010 (Exhibit 1). Along with the Specific Plan was a General Plan Amendment, Zone Map Amendment and certification of an Environmental Impact Report. The Vortex Land Use Plan covers approximately 151.6 acres and provides for a potential mix of approximately 847,300 square feet of commercial, retail, office, restaurant, destination health-and-wellness resort, civic center, and entertainment uses, as well as up to 504 residential and live-work units and 100 timeshare/hotel rooms.

The overall purpose of this Vortex Specific Plan was to generate momentum and provide comprehensive direction for the development of the Vortex project site, while implementing the goals and policies of the City's General Plan. Thus, the project is to be guided by several major objectives:

1. Establish a unified vision for the project site in order to guide a cohesive, complementary mix of uses structured around a comprehensive set of circulation and infrastructure systems.
2. Create a new mixed-use regional lifestyle destination development that stimulates a major new source of tax base for the City of Desert Hot Springs, incorporating the health and wellness industry as a theme.
3. Plan for an appropriate mix of commercial, office, entertainment, resort, and residential uses the context of a master-planned town center, in order to meet the trade area's growing demand, and build in the flexibility to respond to changes in the market.
4. Apply innovative planning and design solutions to create a sense of place at multiple scales.
5. Provide new housing concepts for the community, encouraging high quality, high density residential units that appeal to residents seeking shorter commutes to jobs, restaurants, and entertainment.
6. Take advantage of the area's location and exposure by establishing a welcoming town center within the City, characterized by distinct and attractive signage, architecture, and landscaping, both on-site and in the public right-of-way.

7. Implement an integrated circulation concept that optimizes connectivity for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic, internalizes pedestrian activity to buffer it from the vehicular traffic along perimeter roadways, and establishes close relationships between land uses that are infused with pedestrian-friendly and walkable spaces linkages.

The goal behind the Plan was that the Redevelopment Agency was to purchase properties within the area, consolidate them, and sell them to developers that would then build out the vision of the Specific Plan. However, with Redevelopment being dissolved by the State of California, it has become very difficult to implement the Plan. With the economy not turning around as expected and the fact that Redevelopment funds are no longer available to offer incentives or to pay for some of the public improvements, the Plan appears to be at a standstill. While there has been some discussion from the State about bringing some form of redevelopment back, no decision has been made to date.

Staff has been presented with some problems in that property owners have come into City Hall requesting approval to locate businesses within the Specific Plan area but their proposed uses are inconsistent with the Land Use Plan. In some cases, Staff has turned people away. Staff has allowed some small businesses to establish themselves within the Plan area to help generate much needed retail sales tax and local jobs.

An issue that arises is whether or not the Plan should be partially suspended until such time that some form of redevelopment comes back. In the meantime, allow businesses to locate in the area to generate sales taxes and jobs as long as they are consistent with the land uses listed in the Plan (i.e., retail, restaurant, personal service, entertainment venues and professional office). In this manner, the Plan is not completely suspended or voided but allows some business to locate in the area within existing buildings. A lot of money was invested in the Plan and it has a long term vision with many sustainable aspects that should not be ignored. The Plan was developed with “sustainability” in mind which is what the General Plan Update attempts to accomplish in other areas of the City. Continued progress on allowing businesses to locate in the area is crucial and should be considered a viable option to continued economic development efforts.

In addition, the Vortex Specific Plan is part of the General Plan Update. The traffic analysis for the General Plan Update has already been prepared. Taking the Vortex Specific Plan out of the General Plan Update would mean preparing another traffic analysis for which there is no money in the budget. The traffic analysis that was done for the General Plan Update costs approximately \$40,000.00.

Staff requests that the Planning Commission review the Vortex Specific Plan, discuss it with Staff and provide a recommendation to the City Council on how to proceed. In this manner, clear direction will be provided to Staff and help in processing business license and entitlement applications within the Project Area.

## **EXHIBIT(S)**

1. Vortex Specific Plan