

# NATIONAL CITY BROWNFIELDS ASSESSMENT



Technical Assistance Panel Report

# THE CLIENT



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The material presented in this document was prepared by members of the Urban Land Institute's San Diego-Tijuana chapter in summer/fall of 2023. The report seeks to provide an informed outlook on local real estate and planning topics and as understood by ULI San Diego-Tijuana and our contributing members. The analysis, views and opinions expressed herein are those of the contributors and not necessarily their employers, the ULI, or the ULI San Diego-Tijuana chapter. The material that follows was developed from a number of sources: interviews, research by individual contributing authors, surveys, and forecasting. While the information contained in this report represents informed analysis of issues in the San Diego-Tijuana region, it should not be used to make business decisions in lieu of professional consultation.



# THE TAP PROCESS

- 1 Define the problem
- 2 Assemble the team
- 3 Build the briefing book
- 4 Site tour
- 5 Stakeholder interviews
- 6 Panel deliberations
- 7 Presentation and final report



## PANEL CHAIRS



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“

Study results will help indicate economically feasible reuse options that serve to further local planning priorities at community-identified sites.

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# INTRODUCTION

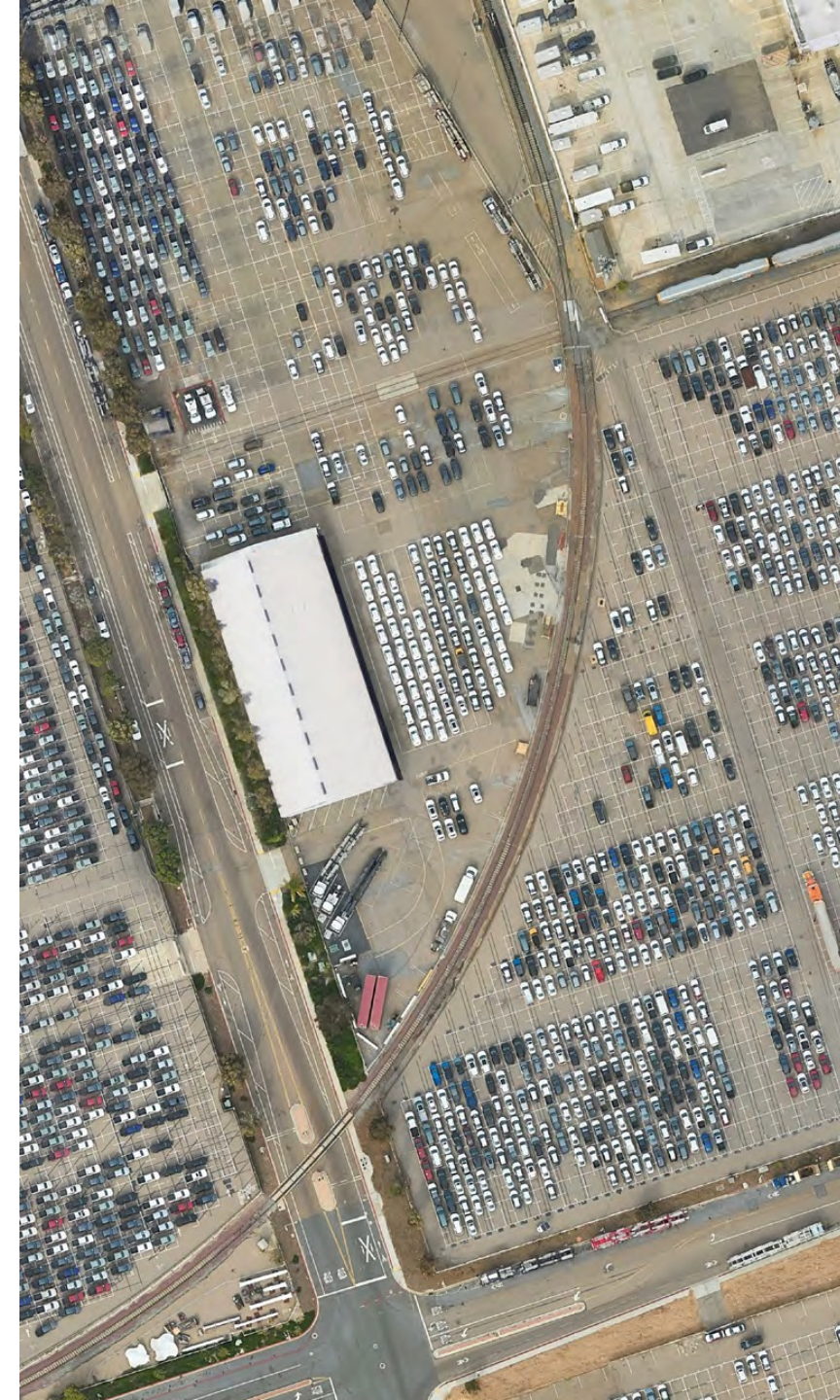
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Assignment

National City has a proud history of **industrial and military land use**, but it has long **struggled** to balance this with **livability and environmental equity for its residents**. In 2017, the city adopted a **Downtown Specific Plan (DSP)**. Its stated goals are providing housing; effective parking management; desirable land use and quality urban design; a user-friendly entitlement process; avoidance or mitigation of impacts; and improved mobility and access.

Within or just beyond the DSP's boundaries are **many suspected brownfield sites** that impede the progress envisioned by the DSP and city leaders. To help overcome this impediment, a team from **San Diego State University (SDSU)**, working alongside the city, secured **two federal grants to identify, prioritize, and assess brownfield sites in National City**.

Working in close collaboration with project partners and advisors, the SDSU team is cataloguing the brownfield sites, identifying likely contaminants at the sites, and suggesting strategies to remediate the sites. As part of its project, **SDSU also engaged Urban Land Institute San Diego-Tijuana (ULI) to assemble a panel of land use and design experts to recommend future uses for four of the identified brownfield sites**.





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

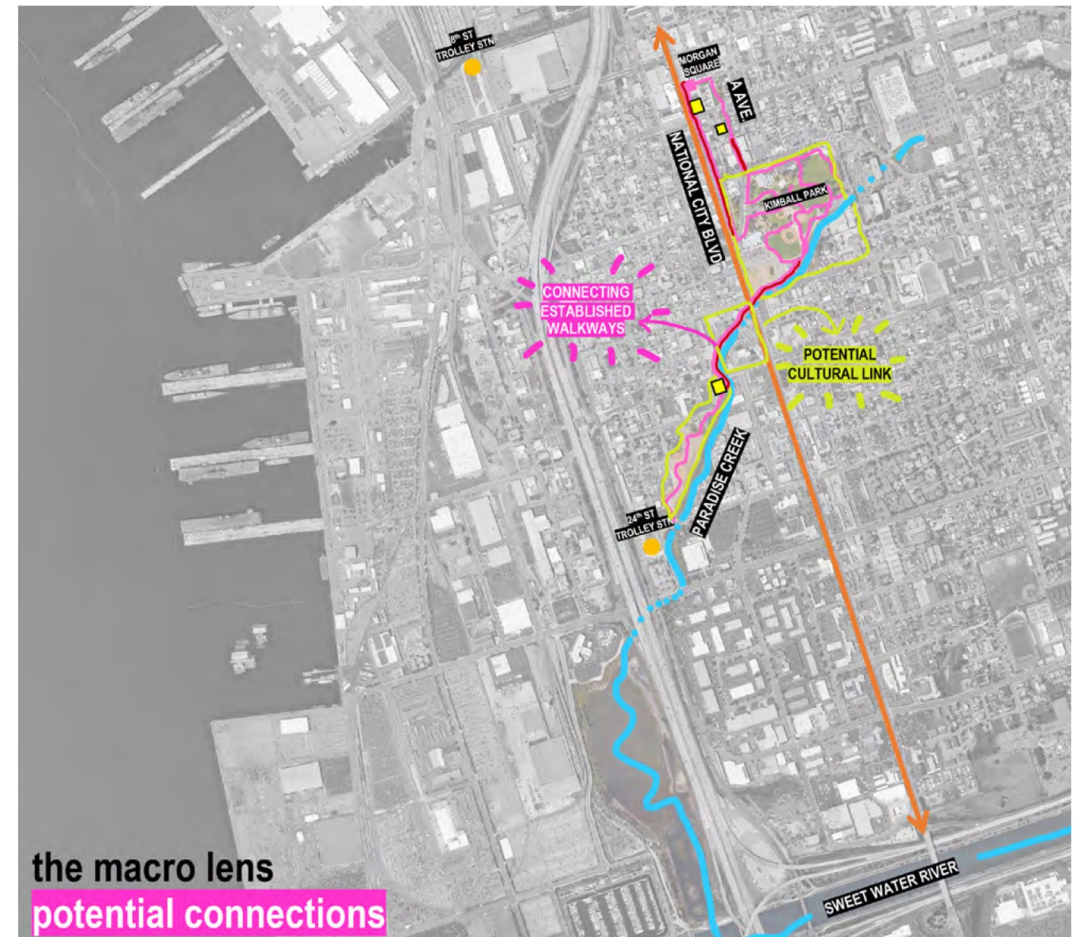
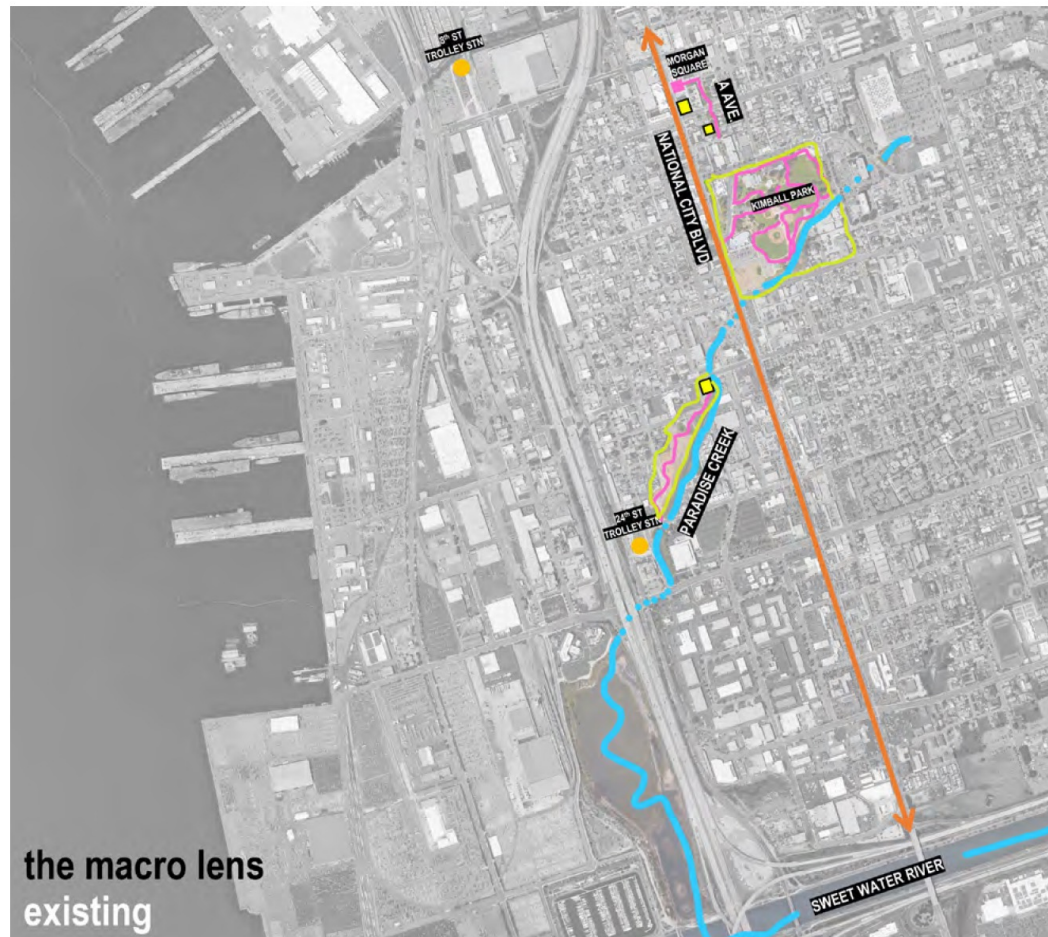
## Key Criteria

The panel's recommendations articulated in this report were based on the criteria they designed after stakeholder interviews, tours, and research:

- Consistent with community vision and needs
- Consistent with neighborhood context and scale
- Consistent with zoning, neighborhood plans, and by-right development
- Promote economic feasibility
- Consider environmental baseline conditions and criteria
- Create “activation” by project and nearby
- Prioritize pedestrian friendliness and walkability
- Incorporate cultural sensitivity and homage

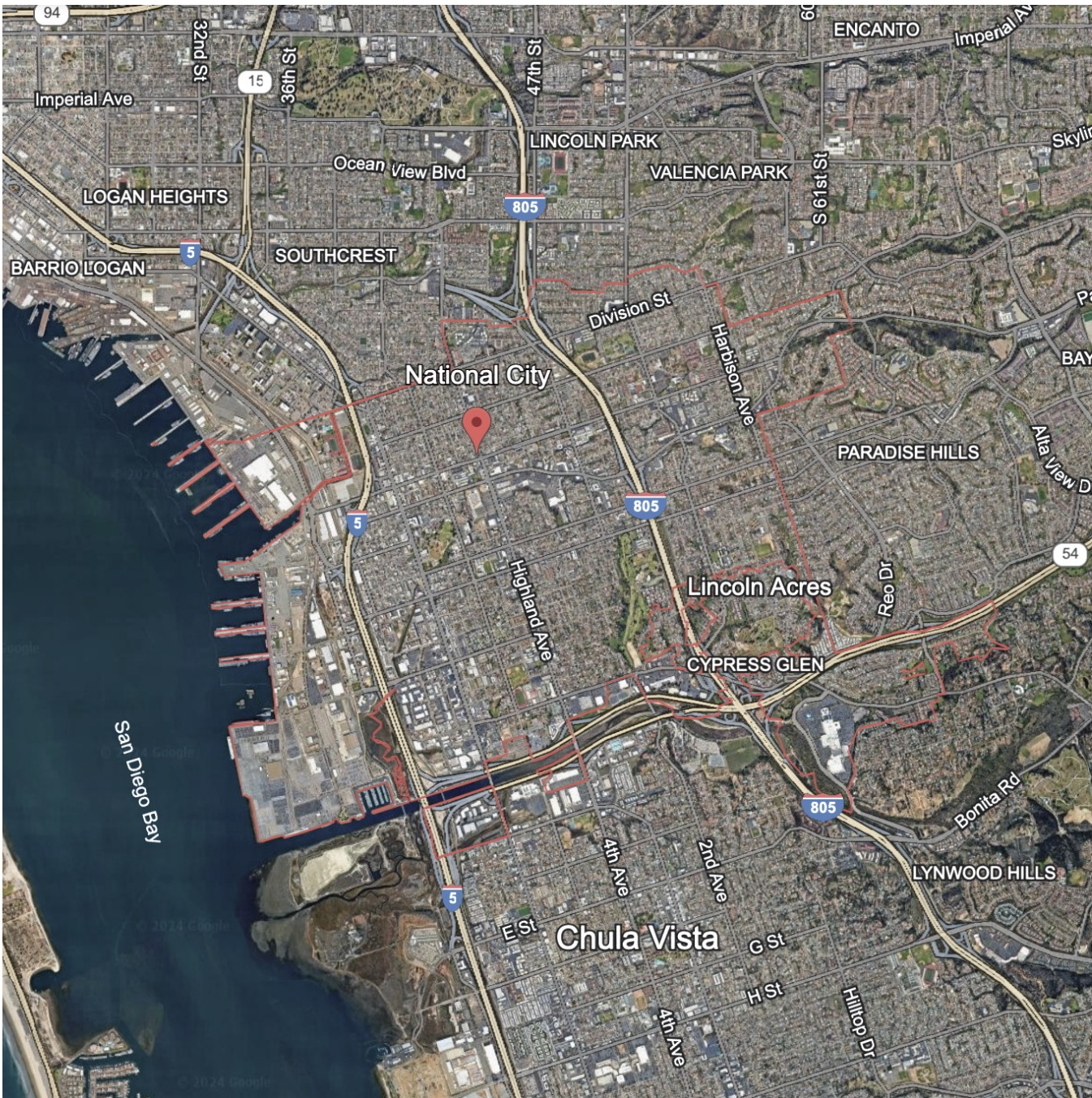
# MAJOR CONCLUSIONS

While the ULI TAP's assignment was to assess sites individually for their highest and best uses, while incorporating the criteria above, the panel also considered the sites together and in context of their surroundings to illuminate connections.



CONTEXT





# ABOUT NATIONAL CITY

National City is located along the bayfront in San Diego's South Bay, approximately 14 miles north of the U.S. - Mexico border.

In 2020, the **population was 56,173**. It is **San Diego's second-oldest city** and was incorporated in 1887. To the west of the city is San Diego Bay. To the north and northeast is San Diego. National City shares its southeast border with Bonita, and the City of Chula Vista lies to the south, across the Sweetwater River. The city is served by the San Diego trolley's blue line, with stations at 8<sup>th</sup> Street and 24<sup>th</sup> Street. **The diverse city includes those of Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native American, White, African American, and other heritage.**



# THE CHALLENGE

National City's long history of industrial activity, proximity to freeways, and mixed and often incompatible land uses have created multiple paths for environmental contamination and many potential brownfields.

Freeway construction that divided parts of the community and the practice of redlining also negatively impacted the livability and prosperity of the area for generations.

SDSU is working with National City to **identify and catalogue the city's brownfields with the ultimate goal of facilitating remediation and eventual redevelopment of those sites.**

**SDSU engaged the ULI San Diego-Tijuana District Council to assemble a panel of experts to evaluate four city owned brownfield sites to recommend economically feasible reuse options.** In doing so, ULI's panel considered economic, social, cultural, health, and other factors, partly based on stakeholder interviews, to determine highest and best uses. **As part of its analysis, the panel also focused on how the City of National City and its residents can prosper in a sustained fashion.**





# PRIORITY SITES

1

## Former Education Center

921 National City Blvd.

**Description of Location and Census Tract (CT):** Central to the DSPA and located in CT 060730117004, in Opportunity Zone (OZ) 06073011801

**Past Use:** Adjacent to historic dry cleaner, now vacant land

**Proposed Use:** 122 Residential units, retail, commercial, and educational uses

**Environmental Concerns:** Chlorinated solvents, petroleum hydrocarbons, heavy metals, VOCs, SVOCs

2

## Steamed Bean

929 National City Blvd.

**Description of Location and Census Tract (CT):** Central to the DSPA and located in CT 060730117004, in Opportunity Zone (OZ) 06073011801

**Past Use:** Adjacent to historic dry cleaner, now vacant land

**Proposed Use:** 122 Residential units, retail, commercial, and educational uses

**Environmental Concerns:** Chlorinated solvents, petroleum hydrocarbons, heavy metals, VOCs, SVOCs

3

## A Avenue Parcel

128 A Ave.

**Description of Location and Census Tract (CT):** Central to the DSPA and located in CT 060730117004, in Opportunity Zone (OZ) 06073011801

**Past Use:** Mixed industrial use including adjacent auto shops, now vacant land

**Proposed Use:** 38 Housing units and mixed use

**Environmental Concerns:** Chlorinated solvents, petroleum hydrocarbons, heavy metals, VOCs, SVOCs

4

## Welding Shop

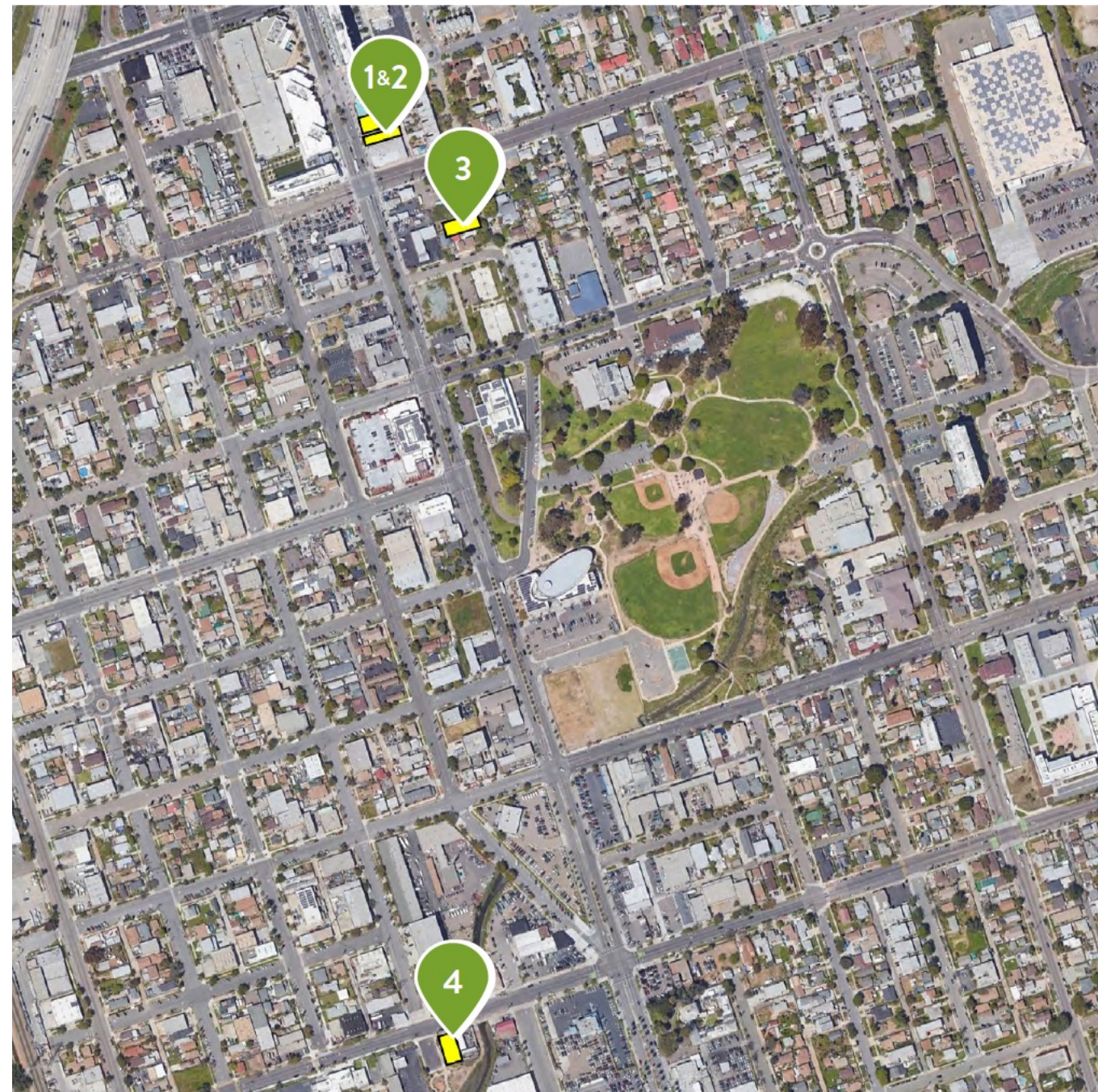
140 W 18<sup>th</sup> St.

**Description of Location and Census Tract (CT):** In the DSPA in CT 060730219001; in flood plain; adjacent to OZ 06073011801

**Past Use:** Welding shop, now vacant building

**Proposed Use:** 0.25 Acres of expanded green space

**Environmental Concerns:** Chlorinated solvents, petroleum hydrocarbons, heavy metals, VOCs, SVOCs





# STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS



**Pedro Garcia**

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City of National City  
Councilmember, Urban Planner,  
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**Jim O'Callaghan**

President & CEO  
SOUTH COUNTY EDC

# FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## 📍 SITES 1 & 2

# Former Education Center & Steamed Bean, National City Boulevard



## Observations

- Surface lot + vacant building
- Across from Southwestern Community College – Higher Education Center
- Access to 932, 962, 963 bus routes
- South of 8th Avenue main corridor (Note: there's a market on 8th & A)
- Adjacent to Chamber of Commerce, vacant bar/restaurant building (with proposed multi-family mixed-income project in the works), Morgan Square Plaza



1

Former Education Center, 921 National City Blvd.



2

Steamed Bean Site, 929 National City Blvd.



## 📍 SITES 1 & 2

### Vision

The panel suggests a multi-story apartment building with a ground level program that may include:

#### Technical Assistance/Business Training

Explore collaboration opportunity with the adjacent Chamber of Commerce in support of business development and job growth

#### Incubator

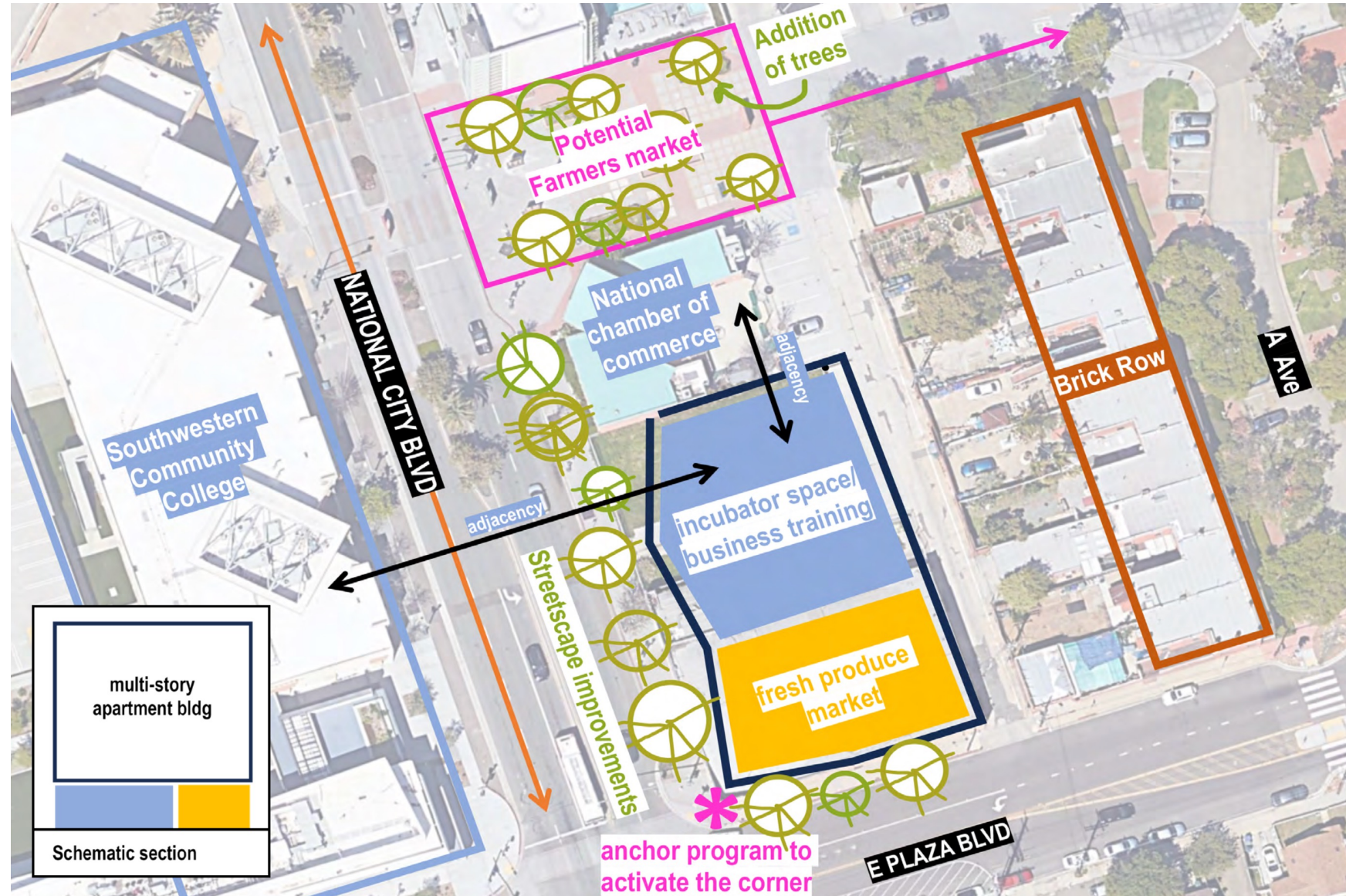
Explore collaboration opportunity with the adjacent Southwestern Community College in support of training and mentorship opportunities

#### Other civic/cultural uses

Establishing a cultural museum was proposed by one of the stakeholders

#### A market

A market or a grocery store as an anchor tenant to provide better access to healthy and fresh food





📍 SITES 1 & 2



*The 8th & Republican Mixed-Used Development, located in Seattle and design by Miller Hull Partnership, is set back from the street at mid-block proving a generous public courtyard, the backdrop for a well-loved neighborhood café and patio with a participatory water feature.*

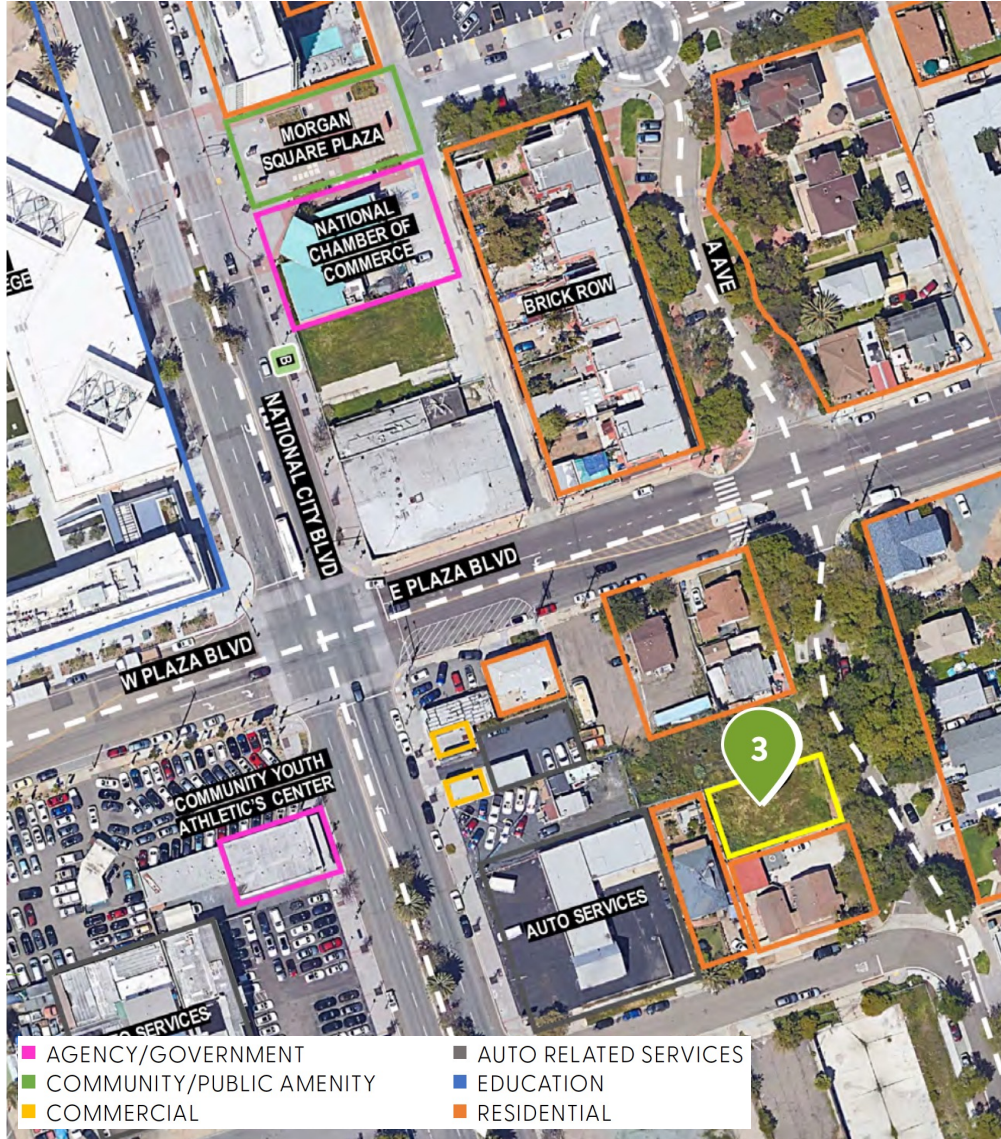


*The Continental is a mixed-use project located in San Diego's Little Italy, this is a building designed with limited parking and retail activating the ground floor of the building.*



## SITE 3

# A Avenue Parcel



## Observations

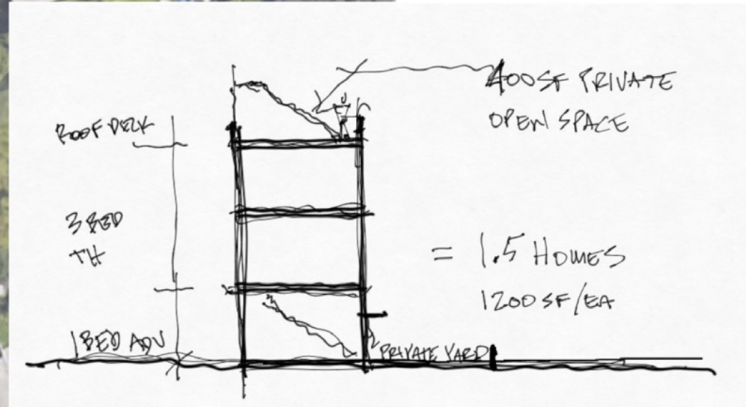
- Surface lot
- Elevation change
- Adjacent to single-family residential
- Located north of two recently constructed, mid-rise affordable housing projects
- Proximity to Kimball Park
- Clear connectivity to historic Brick Row
- Sidewalk lined with trees and historic streetlights Only allows for 8 units per acre



3

A Ave Parcel Site, 1028 A Ave.





**Fee-simple development with multiple for-sale homes**

**Option for Community Land Trust or Rent-to-Own**

**Vision**

The panel believes the city and its selected developer have an opportunity to help those historically shut out of the home ownership market to **build generational wealth** at this parcel. The site is well suited to accommodate **fee-simple, for-sale “urban cottages”** that can support multi-generational families.



📍 SITE 3



*CIDCO Housing located in Navi Mumbai, has an overall density of 55 low-cost housing units per acre and was designed in a way that creates livable public space, semi-public space and private space.*



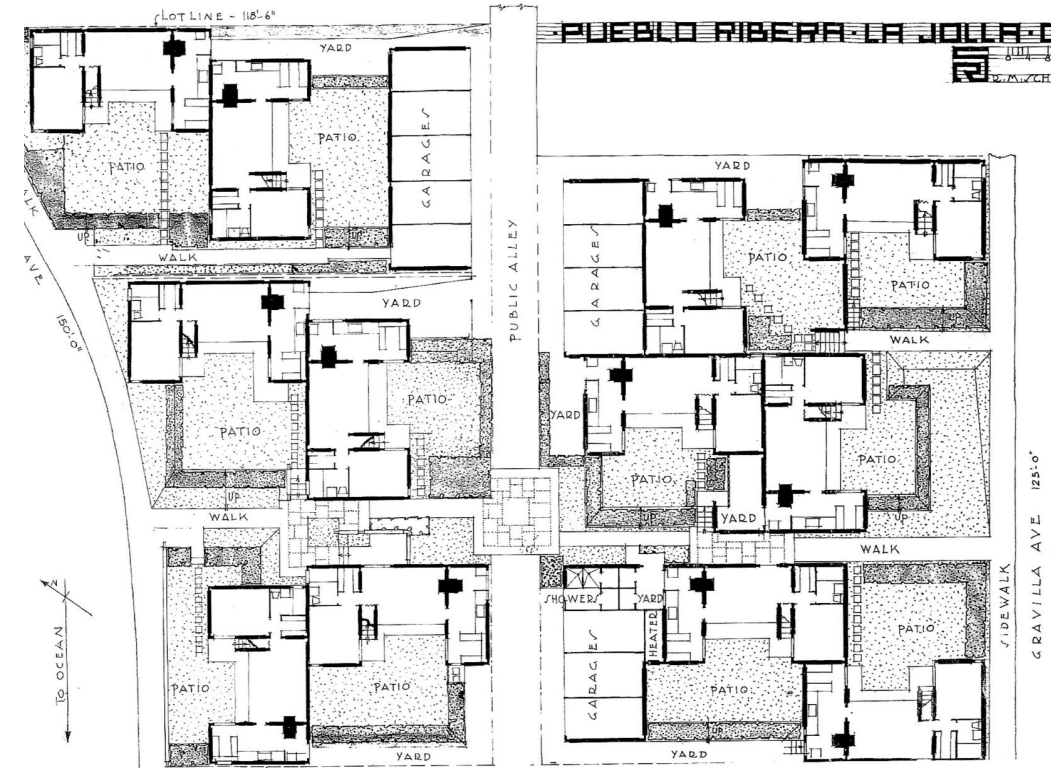
*Located in the heart of San Diego's Hillcrest Village, Eitol is a mixed-use, multifamily residential building. Its 13-tower design creates unique, standalone-like units with no shared walls, and also creates the opportunity to have private and shared exterior spaces.*



📍 SITE 3



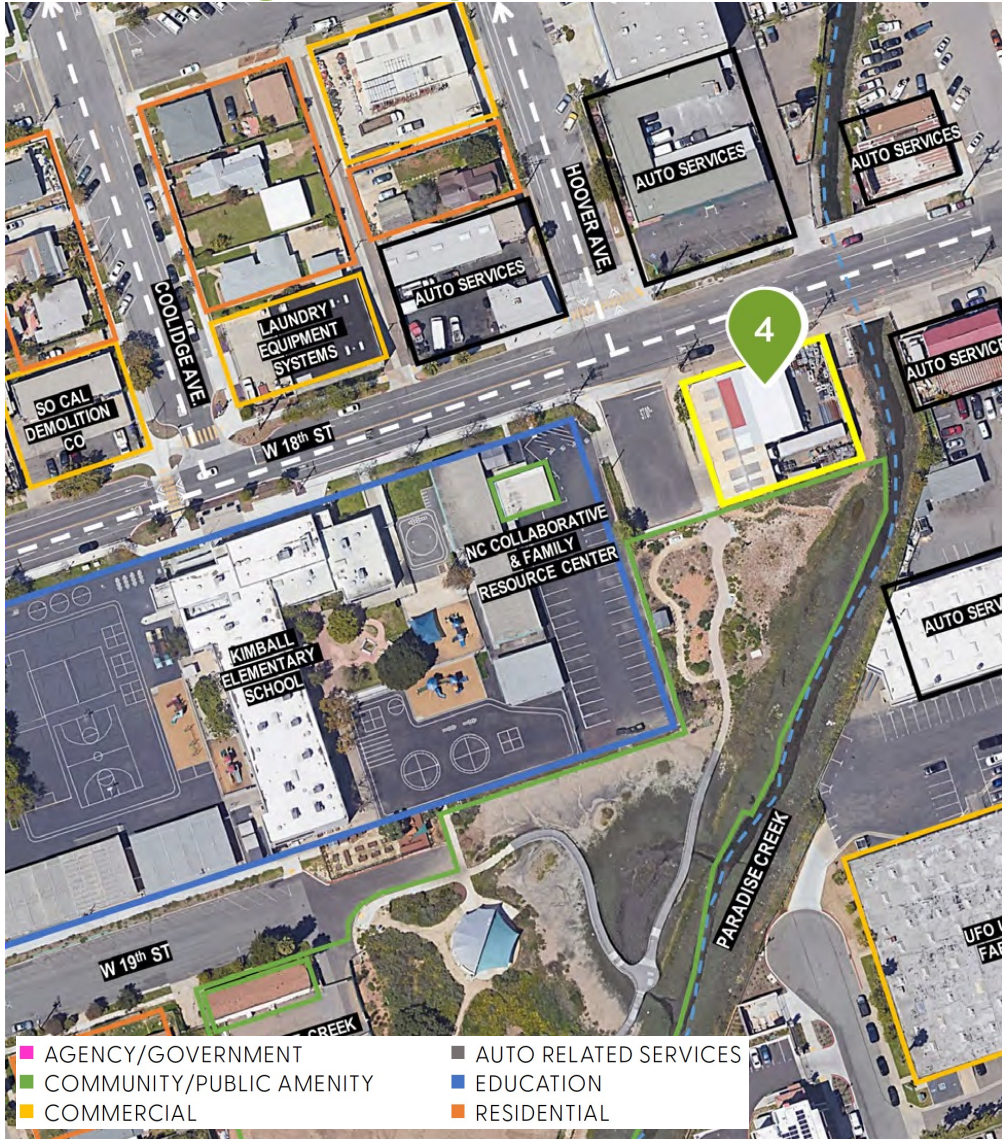
*El Pueblo Ribera is a twelve-unit complex of duplexes, located in La Jolla. In these units the interior and exterior are integrated, helping to reduce the footprint of the buildings and creating private and shared courtyards for the entire complex.*





## SITE 4

# Welding Shop



## Observations

- Existing vacant structure needs addressing
- Adjacent elementary school
- Nature path and interactive, educational elements
- Adjacent affordable housing community separated from creek by fencing
- Chain link fence along creek front on 18th Street
- Flooding on site and across 18th Street with high tide



Welding Shop, 140 W 18th St.



## SITE 4

### Vision

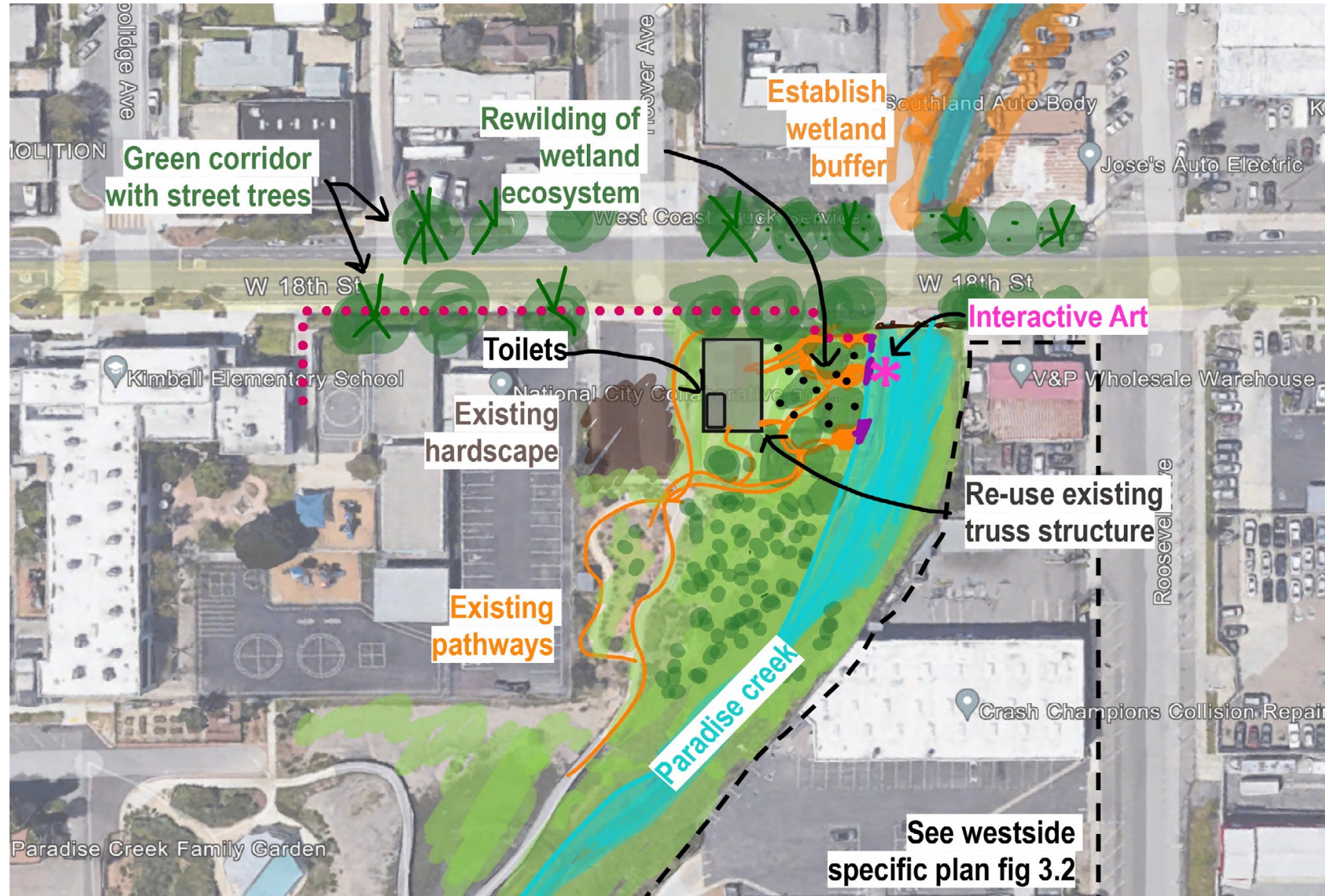
The persistent flooding at this site, combined with expectations of continued sea level rise, inspired our panel to present two options for this site.

#### Option 1 - Low Impact:

The low-impact approach involves removing the vacant welding shop entirely, allowing for a more thorough rewilding of the site. Restore riparian habitat and create upland habitat by partnering with Paradise Creek Educational Park, Inc.

#### Option 2 - Medium Impact:

The medium-impact approach involves all strategies articulated in the low impact approach but keeping the existing truss structure of the welding shop as a shade structure pavilion.





📍 SITE 4



*Lines is an interactive site-specific installation that uses sensors and LED lights to mark the sea level rise from climate change.*

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*The Tijuana Estuary offers recreational opportunities like hiking and biking trails, horseback riding, and exploring nature and wildlife.*

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📍 SITE 4



*Seattle converted the Seattle Gas Light Company gasification plant into Gas Works Park, letting nature take over.*



*In Portland, a burned-out and abandoned Hawthorne Asylum was converted into a food cart pod without major intervention, just revitalizing the existing structures.*

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CITY



# Permitting & Project Processing

**House National City** is a potentially beneficial approach to local programming to **help spur development and increase unit count in the city**, as evidenced in the San Diego Complete Communities Program and should extend into National City's downtown **without the requirements of a discretionary review**.

The discretionary review in the Downtown Specific Plan process leaves developers with a significant level of uncertainty when analyzing potential deals.

The panel learned that **permitting durations are of concern for businesses** that may occupy commercial spaces. The City of San Diego demonstrates a model worth considering to address this issue. San Diego has connected its **Small Businesses department** with an online appointment system that **allows small businesses to ask initial questions about the process from licenses to planning**.





# Business Improvement Districts

The panel encourages National City's efforts to create a **Business Improvement District (BID)** in its downtown and feels that Little Italy and downtown Chula Vista serve as good models.

The focus should be on attracting, educating, and welcoming business, development, and more residents to the downtown. The BID can help provide National City residents a reason to stay in the city to dine, shop, and recreate. Market on 8th is a great example of how business can start to create a destination.





# Parking

One stakeholder's comment, **"would you rather have a home or a car?"** resonated with our panel, and we believe priorities should be structured and supported accordingly.

National City should update its tally of how much parking is available in the city to support prioritizing housing over cars going forward. The City of San Diego has implemented a **Transit Priority Area (TPA) amenity scorecard that specifies ways for a developer to exclude parking** (and thereby reduce pass-through costs) in exchange for bicycle storage or repair stations; transit pass subsidies; micro mobility options; EV charging spaces; or on-site healthy food retail or day care facilities.

National City should implement a similar amenity score card system. **The city's FRANC shuttle service could be funded by a developer trade for not providing parking.**



# Connecting the Parks

National City has tremendous natural resources that aren't being maximized. **Connecting its parks and celebrating its creek would elevate the beauty and walkability of National City.**

From the 24th Street Transit Center, use **Paradise Creek Education Park as a gateway to the city center.** In addition to the recommendations for Site 4, the panel suggests **creating a natural buffer** along Paradise Creek after it crosses under 18th Street and runs along businesses that are often flooded during high tide.

**Ideally, a greenway path would connect all the way to Kimball Park.** Explore the feasibility of the triangular lot and the southwest corner lot of Kimball Park as a future site for a museum or cultural center.

This strategy could address several issues raised during stakeholder interviews, including:

- Preserving the past
- Respecting/celebrating Kumeyaay, Hispanic and Filipino cultures
- Increasing walkability





# Temporary Uses

SDSU and National City should be proud of the impressive community engagement occurring as part of SDSU's brownfield grants process. **While planners, city staff, and developers know that noticeable change can take years, other citizens typically expect more rapid results after being drawn into the community engagement process.**

Our panel suggests showing the community that **progress is being made by implementing the following strategies** at brownfield and nearby sites - especially those owned by the city:

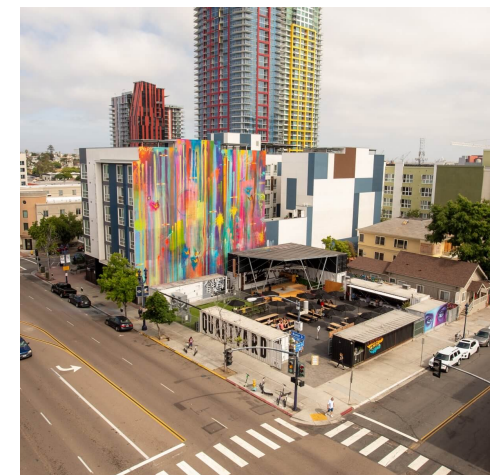
- Art installations
- Food truck pods
- Farmers' and makers' markets
- Morgan Square improvements (including adding trees to create shade cover)



*SIL0 used a vacant area in San Diego's Makers Quarter and turned it into a vibrant and thriving cultural enclave.*



*Left: Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network transforms everyday public places into hubs of playful learning. An example of this is the Urban Thinkscape project, a bus stop that provides playful learning to Philadelphia's Belmont community.*



*Right: Quartyard was an event venue and urban park built from repurposed shipping containers on a vacant lot in the East Village neighborhood of downtown San Diego.*

NEXT STEPS



# Next Steps

## **Early 2024**

- SDSU team and Brownfields Advisory Committee continue community outreach efforts and identify second set of suspected brownfields sites.

## **Summer / Fall 2024**

- ULI conducts Brownfield TAP #2 with second set of sites.
- ULI develops and delivers second TAP report.



# Get Involved

## How to request a TAP for your community or site

- Contact ULI San Diego – Tijuana Executive Director at [Chris.Clark@uli.org](mailto:Chris.Clark@uli.org) to inquire.

## How to get involved as a volunteer TAP Panelist

- Visit the ULI website to submit a short volunteer application:



# Contact Us

Contact ULI San Diego – Tijuana for questions related to partnering on a TAP project or supporting our work. Contact [Chris.Clark@uli.org](mailto:Chris.Clark@uli.org) to learn more.

Q&A