Greenbelt Alliance

PROTECTING OPEN SPACE AND PROMOTING LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

March 14, 2005

Honorable Ron Gonzales &
Members of the Coyote Valley Specific Plan Task Force
San Jose City Hall
801 North First Street
San Jose, CA 95110

Dear Mayor Gonzales and Members of the Task Force:

Greenbelt Alliance recognizes that the Task Force, the consulting team and the planning staff are intent on crafting a plan for Coyote Valley that is innovative and based on smart growth principles. With a cutting edge plan, Coyote Valley can be a model for greenfield development and a remarkable addition to San Jose.

While we appreciate the intention to make the Coyote Valley Specific Plan as good as it can be, we continue to be concerned about many of the plan's components. Greenbelt Alliance does not believe that the plan, as currently drafted, will lead to a vibrant, walkable, transit-oriented community. We know that the expectation is that the plan will meet the City Council's 16 "Goals and Expected Outcomes", but if the planning process continues along its current path, we worry that several of these goals for Coyote Valley will not be met. One of the purposes of this letter is to clearly articulate why we believe the Specific Plan as currently drafted is inadequate to meet the aggressive goals established for the planning process.

Greenbelt Alliance believes that *Getting It Right*, our award winning vision for Coyote Valley, provides the basis for an alternative to the Specific Plan that is likely to be technically, economically and environmentally superior. In addition to our specific concerns with the Specific Plan, we note in this letter what we believe are the advantages of *Getting It Right* compared to the current version of the Specific Plan.

We appreciate some of the recent statements that the City is willing to explore components of *Getting It Right* as part of the alternatives analysis in the Specific Plan's Environmental Impact Report (EIR). *Getting It Right* is a vision document, not an alternative specific plan. Therefore, a point-by-point comparison of *Getting It Right* to the proposed Specific Plan is probably not the best way to determine if *Getting It Right* provides a superior approach, whether in total or in part, to development in Coyote Valley. Instead, we would like to request that the City craft a comprehensive EIR alternative based on framework elements of *Getting It Right*. To help in the development of a *Getting It Right*-based alternative, this letter also includes recommendations as to what should be the component pieces of the alternative. If additional information is needed from Greenbelt Alliance to properly craft a *Getting It Right*-based alternative, we would be happy to meet with staff to provide as much information as possible.

Greenbelt Alliance's Critique of the Specific Plan

The Coyote Valley Specific Plan could be a model for how to do greenfield development in accordance with smart growth principles. Unfortunately, the Specific Plan as it stands to date fails to meet this standard. In brief, the plan's urban form does not provide the framework for a transit-oriented, pedestrian friendly, bicycle friendly community. The proposed lake at the center of the downtown creates a barrier to

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using existing infrastructure in an efficient manner and may not be necessary from a flood management perspective. The transit proposal for the Valley does not adequately integrate with regional transit and may not be as effective as a system based on more common transit conventions. Together, the proposed urban form, lake and transit system are primary contributors to the plan's $1.5 billion price tag. This cost is generally understood to put the Specific Plan on the brink of being infeasible to privately finance. One implication of the plan's cost is that certain features, such as protecting the South Coyote Valley Greenbelt, guaranteeing affordable housing and providing subsidized community health clinics, may not be adequately addressed. The following sections provide additional detail on each of these concerns.

Urban Design Concerns

Greenbelt Alliance has asked a number of planning and urban design experts to review the available materials on the Specific Plan. Without exception, they are concerned that the urban design is neither truly transit oriented nor is it bicycle and pedestrian friendly. Instead, they believe the plan will likely foster an auto dependent community with associated significant traffic and air quality problems. More specifically:

- The road infrastructure described in the Specific Plan has many more suburban, auto-dependent characteristics than smart growth characteristics that contribute to transit-orientation and pedestrian and bicycle friendliness. There is no guarantee that the four-lane "parkway" will not become a six-lane "expressway", and our expert analysts fear that this outcome is in fact likely. If the parkway does indeed become a standard suburban arterial, it will be a significant barrier to pedestrians and bicyclists, and increased runoff from cars will threaten water quality in Fisher Creek. Instead of the pattern laid out in the Specific Plan, the road infrastructure should be a grid based on the Valley's existing network of roads.
- While a case may be able to be made that each neighborhood is internally walkable, adequate connections between neighborhoods and to neighborhood supporting services remain disjointed. The disconnected street pattern will make travel to adjacent neighborhoods difficult except by car. If the parkway becomes a high volume expressway as we fear, there will be significant barriers to residents and workers using anything other than automobiles to travel between neighborhoods.
- The winding pattern proposed in the Specific Plan for both the streets and the proposed fixed guideway transit system will likely lead to slow travel times on the transit system. Slow transit service discourages transit use and promotes auto use. A more traditional bus loop system would be a more effective internal transit system. However, if the fixed guideway system is abandoned and the proposed urban form remains, our concerns will not be alleviated because the convoluted street network proposed in the Specific Plan will almost certainly prevent the establishment of an efficient bus loop system.
- The average block size may be too large to be pedestrian friendly. The winding roadways and long blocks shown in the Specific Plan are characteristic of suburban style planning that de-emphasizes pedestrian movement and makes walking uncomfortable, unsafe and unfashionable. Coyote Valley's blocks should arise from a traditional grid pattern, and should be less than three acres. At this scale, people find it more inviting to walk between destinations.
- The suburban style street pattern will also likely make it more difficult and expensive to build high quality urban facades that face the street. Well designed facades create an incentive to walk and therefore contribute to the pedestrian friendliness of communities. Pedestrian friendly facades should be the standard for Coyote Valley.
- The Specific Plan does not make efficient use of existing infrastructure. The Specific Plan's foundation should be the Valley's current system of roads and infrastructure. Instead the plan requires that Coyote Valley's existing roads be demolished and replaced with a new road network. This will make incremental phasing of development more difficult and more costly. In order to pay for new infrastructure, development in the Valley will have to occur in relatively larger phases. Faster selling housing products (such as single family detached) are more likely to be built first, and less profitable housing (such as affordable multi-family) and public benefit projects are unlikely to be built until the very last. This increases the potential that development in the Valley will occur as a series of leap-frogging subdivisions that are neither transit-oriented nor pedestrian friendly.

- In Coyote Valley, San Jose has the opportunity to establish a community that discourages sprawl and traffic congestion. However, the proposed lake impedes orderly urban design and as such will contribute to sprawl and traffic congestion. The lake will break up Santa Teresa Boulevard, a major travel route between southern Santa Clara County and San Jose, likely forcing even more traffic onto Highway 101. The lake will also present a physical barrier between Highway 101 and the job centers on the west side of Coyote Valley. The difficulty of accessing job centers on the west side from Highway 101 will likely encourage more travel into Coyote Valley via Almaden Valley. This increased travel may spur pressure to expand the road between the two valleys, which in turn, could enhance the pressure to develop Almaden Valley. Greenbelt Alliance understands that the Dahlin Group argues that the lake serves as a tool to establishing community identity. However, we would like to note that literally thousands of vibrant, well-functioning communities have been established without a lake, or some equivalent, as a focal feature. We feel very strongly that the negative aspects of the lake significantly outweigh the perceived benefits.

Flood Management Concerns

Greenbelt Alliance recognizes that there is a regulatory requirement to identify a significant amount of floodwater detention capacity in Coyote Valley. However, we are concerned that the planning process has become narrowly focused on one detention approach – a downtown lake. We believe that there may well be other technically feasible options that are more suitable for a community based on smart growth principles. As noted above, the lake is an impediment to orderly urban design. From an environmental viewpoint, the proposal to fill portions of the historic Laguna Seca at the northern end of Coyote Valley and excavate a new lakebed in the center of the proposed urban community seems unnecessarily expensive and inconsistent with existing natural patterns. Other options that provide for adequate floodwater detention but do not negatively impact the community's urban form need to be explored and given full consideration. In particular, options that are more sustainable and integrated with Coyote Valley's natural hydrological and ecological systems, like using the Fisher Creek flood plain for detention, should be considered.

Transit Concerns

We appreciate that City planning staff and the Dahlin Group suggest building the transit system during the early stages of the community's creation so that the first phases of residential and job supporting development occur along the transit line. However, the urban designers and planners who have examined the Specific Plan for Greenbelt Alliance have voiced a number of technical and practical concerns about the transit system proposed for Coyote Valley in the Specific Plan. These concerns include:

- Coyote Valley's transit system should ensure that transit is a viable option for both trips within the Valley and outside the Valley. The planned transit system does not meet this standard since it does not connect to the countywide light rail system. Furthermore, it is extremely unlikely that the fixed guideway system proposed in the Specific Plan will ever be able to be effectively connected to light rail. Instead, the plan relies on CalTrain as the sole transit connection outside the Valley. CalTrain is a reasonable transportation option for some, but is not geared to meeting the travel needs of a wide population. In the coming years, it is at least as likely that CalTrain will reduce service south of downtown San Jose as it is that service will increase. As such, under the Specific Plan, almost all trips outside of Coyote Valley will occur by car.
- Also, because the proposed location of the lake will cut the north-south connection along Santa Teresa Boulevard, the existing VTA regional bus route that runs on Santa Teresa will be effectively eliminated. Removing the lake so that Santa Teresa Boulevard is not broken up would eliminate this problem.
- As mentioned above, for trips within Coyote Valley we are concerned that, if the urban design remains as proposed, travel times on either the proposed fixed guideway system, or an alternative internal bus network, will be too slow to make using transit a viable alternative to driving. A grid street network with bus loops linking transit-oriented mixed-use neighborhood centers and a Bus Rapid Transit line along Santa Teresa Boulevard would move more people more quickly than what is proposed in the Specific Plan.

- Practically, Greenbelt Alliance is concerned that the uncommon, fixed guideway system has a greater risk of becoming obsolete than a system based on more widely used technology such as a bus loop network.

Cost Concern

Greenbelt Alliance believes that the proposed urban form, the downtown lake and the proposed transit system are problematic not only from a functional perspective. We also believe they are problematic from a cost perspective. These three elements contribute significantly to the $1.5 billion price tag for build out of the proposed Specific Plan. At $1.5 billion, the plan is already close to being infeasible to finance privately, and this price tag is very likely to increase over the remaining year of the planning process. Specifically, Greenbelt Alliance believes that:

- The proposed road network for the Valley unnecessarily contributes to the overall cost because it requires the demolition of Coyote Valley's existing road system and the construction of a new circuitous network.
- The proposed lake will not only be costly to create, but also costly to continuously maintain. If the maintenance burden falls on the local residents and other property owners alone, they may eventually choose to abandon the lake, creating a flood management and land use problem.
- The proposed transit system may be more expensive to establish, maintain and operate than a system based on more widely used technology. Questions also arise as to what entity will operate and maintain the system, and if that entity will be able to do so in a cost-effective manner. Will a Coyote Valley-specific entity have the experience and expertise to efficiently run the system? If the responsibility falls to the Valley Transportation Authority, will the agency be able to effectively take on the responsibility, particularly in view of VTA's current substantial budget problems?

South Coyote Valley Greenbelt and Other Open Space Concerns

Greenbelt Alliance is extremely concerned that there is still no comprehensive plan for how to maintain the South Coyote Valley Greenbelt as a true non-urban buffer between San Jose and Morgan Hill. We realize that planning for the long term maintenance of the Greenbelt as a non-urban buffer presents a significant planning challenge, and that this challenge is complicated by the fact that protecting the Greenbelt requires a high level of cooperation with Santa Clara County. The planning challenge aside, we are concerned that not enough money, in the form of mitigation fees from development in Coyote Valley, is targeted to Greenbelt protection. We recognize that mitigation fees from the development are not likely to be the only source of funding for protecting the Greenbelt, but the $15 million for mitigation that has been proposed in the Specific Plan is not an adequate contribution.

In addition to the South Coyote Valley Greenbelt, we are concerned that the planning process has yet to address how the proposed Specific Plan will impact open space lands outside Coyote Valley. There has been no mention in the plan as to how to protect the hillsides that surround Coyote Valley. The growth inducing impacts of Coyote Valley on Almaden Valley and communities to the south have also not been given sufficient attention and must be addressed during the environmental review process.

Affordable Housing and Community Facilities Concerns

We are happy to have been told by planning staff that there is an expectation that the City Council's affordable housing mandate for Coyote Valley will be met. We also recognize that San Jose has an excellent track record in providing affordable housing. However, we are also aware that the private developers who will take on the financial responsibility of Coyote Valley's development feel that they will have a difficult time funding affordable housing development and other community facilities, such as community health clinics for low income residents, that are not currently in the Specific Plan. At a recent Technical Advisory Committee meeting, a homebuilders' representative said they are "tapped out" and cannot subsidize additional mitigations.

If appropriate affordable housing and facilities to meet the needs of low income residents are not provided in Coyote Valley, pressure will be placed on San Jose's other neighborhoods, as well as other communities, to meet the housing demand and other needs generated by development in Coyote Valley. If this scenario comes to fruition, it will exacerbate the region's existing sprawl problems leading to more congestion on freeways and poorer air quality. By reducing or eliminating the costs associated with the artificial lake, tearing up the existing road system and installing an uncommon, less effective transit technology, the City could target more funding toward affordable housing and community facilities.

Advantages of *Getting It Right*

Greenbelt Alliance believes that, at minimum, the plan for future development in Coyote Valley should be consistent with the 16 "Goals and Expected Outcomes" established by the City Council. *Getting It Right* meets the City's requirement to provide 25,000 housing units and 50,000 primary jobs in Coyote Valley and is consistent with the "Goals and Expected Outcomes". The *Getting It Right* vision meets these standards, while using less land, thus creating a smaller development footprint. The following sections provide additional detail as to why we believe *Getting It Right* sets forth an approach to planning for Coyote Valley's future that better reflects smart growth principles, is more environmentally sustainable, and is more consistent with Council direction than the currently proposed Specific Plan.

Urban Design

In *Getting It Right*, we recommend an urban form that grows from Coyote Valley's existing grid of roads. Greenbelt Alliance believes that the urban form proposed in *Getting It Right* will be much less auto-dependent than that proposed in the Specific Plan and thereby will be more environmentally sound. We also feel that the urban form we propose will be more environmentally sound because it will require significantly less environmental disturbance from the demolition and reconstruction of the road network. Additionally, we believe *Getting It Right's* urban form would provide residents and workers with greater access to neighborhood services and a greater sense of community identity. Specifically:

- In *Getting It Right* we recommend relatively narrow streets and small blocks, thereby discouraging auto-dependency and encouraging walking, elements that are generally consistent with San Jose's adopted Residential Design Guidelines. We call for each neighborhood to have a mixed-use center where basic services can be accessed either by foot or by bicycle. Of course, every neighborhood will not have every service, but because of the orderly street grid proposed in *Getting It Right*, a transit system would be able to easily operate in the Valley, and people will be able to get to services in other neighborhoods via transit, on foot or by bicycle.
- If the urban form is based on the existing grid of streets, it will be easier and more cost effective to build the community's infrastructure in an incremental fashion. As such, the community will be able to grow in an orderly fashion with each new phase of development occurring within easy reach of existing development, thus increasing the efficiency of the street network, and the transit-orientation and pedestrian friendliness of the community. This form also will not encourage isolated leap-frog development on the edges of the Valley or the foothills as we believe the Specific Plan likely will.
- *Getting It Right* demonstrates that if development west of Monterey Highway has an average density of 28.5 units to the acre, then development east of Monterey is not necessary to meet the City's development targets and can instead be preserved as farmland or in other open space uses. Protecting this land as open space will have a substantial positive environmental benefit for the Coyote Creek Parkway.
- Floodwater detention facilities are located outside of downtown so that they do not interfere with the evolution of an orderly, easily accessible urban form.
- In *Getting It Right* we suggest that relatively high densities can be stimulated along transit lines on Bailey and Santa Teresa. In North San Jose, as well as other parts of the Bay Area, relatively high-density, transit-oriented development has occurred in greenfield areas.
- *Getting It Right* includes design standards for commercial buildings that would allow them to be multi-functional for generations and industries to come. The demolition of commercial and

industrial buildings every 20 years because they are not flexible enough to be used by a new tenant is a substantial waste of capital, resources, and energy.

Flood Management

Instead of a lake as proposed in the Specific Plan, *Getting It Right* envisions a flood plain on either side of Fisher Creek that can serve as a floodwater detention facility. While we show a specific location and size for the flood plain in *Getting It Right*, it can be located and sized as the specific planning process deems most appropriate. While the flood plain approach has not been subject to significant feasibility studies, we believe it has several advantages over the downtown lake approach and feel that it deserves significant attention as the planning process moves forward. The potential advantages of the flood plain approach include:

- The Fisher Creek flood plain would be multi-functional. In *Getting It Right* we recommend that facilities that can be used when the land is dry, like picnic areas and trails for bicycling and jogging, be located in the flood plain.
- In *Getting It Right* we propose restoring native plants to Fisher Creek that have evolved to co-exist with water levels that rise and recede throughout the year. This vegetation would provide valuable habitat for wildlife.
- With regard to the floodwater detention function, if adequately sized, the flood plain would be able to serve the same function as the lake, without the costly maintenance commitment to ensure it is filled with water year round.
- As well, *Getting It Right* provides for additional floodwater detention on land in the Laguna Seca at the northern end of the planning area. This land is currently farmed in the dry season and allowed to flood during the rainy season and this use pattern should continue.

Transit

In *Getting It Right*, Greenbelt Alliance proposes a transit system that we believe would be significantly more effective and user-friendly than the system proposed in the Specific Plan. Bus loops would service each neighborhood center, providing all residents and workers with easy access to transit. Since the buses would be able to efficiently travel along the Valley's grid of streets, travel times and frequency between buses would be relatively short, making transit a viable option to driving. Since the bus loop system does not require fixed guideways, the loops can easily be altered over time to meet the Valley's needs as the community evolves. For external trips, not only do we call for a CalTrain connection in *Getting It Right*, but also a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line along Santa Teresa Boulevard. The BRT line would connect to VTA's light rail (the BRT line could in fact become a light rail extension if eventually deemed appropriate and feasible), as well as the bus loop system within Coyote Valley. By providing multiple transit options for trips outside Coyote Valley we believe the likelihood that a significant number of residents and workers will use transit for such trips will increase. By relying on a well established technology and providing for functional extension of the existing light rail system, both the feasibility and reliability of future transit use is improved over the proposed system.

Cost

A detailed economic analysis was not prepared for *Getting It Right*; however, we believe that our vision would provide significant cost savings compared to the proposed Specific Plan. The amount of demolition and reconstruction of the road system would be significantly less under *Getting It Right*, delivering a substantial savings. Constructing the Fisher Creek flood plain is likely to be much less expensive than constructing the downtown lake and maintaining the flood plain would almost certainly be less expensive than maintaining the lake. Because the transit system proposed in *Getting It Right* relies on existing technology, it too is likely to be less expensive to establish and maintain than the alternative proposed in the Specific Plan. While Greenbelt Alliance feels there are significant technical advantages to the urban form, flood management and transit components of *Getting It Right*, we also believe that, based on the potential financial benefits alone, these fundamental components of our vision merit additional consideration.

South Coyote Valley Greenbelt and Other Open Space

As noted earlier in this letter, Greenbelt Alliance recognizes the challenge of crafting a workable plan to maintain the South Coyote Valley Greenbelt as a non-urban buffer between Morgan Hill and San Jose. We appreciate that the City has explored some of the ideas developed for the "Food Belt" concept that we laid out in *Getting It Right* and we encourage the City to continue to develop these ideas and to incorporate them into the Specific Plan. Regardless of the details of the plan for protecting the Greenbelt, we believe that any successful plan will require a significant monetary commitment to be successful. By reducing the cost of development as discussed above, we believe that *Getting It Right* provides the opportunity to free up funds for protecting both the Greenbelt and the hillsides surrounding Coyote Valley.

Affordable Housing and Community Facilities

In *Getting It Right*, clear affordable housing targets are discussed, as are mechanisms for ensuring that affordable housing actually gets built. We encourage the City to consider our vision as a guide for how to meet your own very aggressive affordable housing goals for this area. As with open space protection, we are convinced that significant funding will be necessary to provide affordable housing and community facilities, like community health clinics. Since the framework for development provided in *Getting It Right* requires less money for infrastructure in Coyote Valley, we believe that more resources will be available for affordable housing and community facilities under the *Getting It Right* framework. Ensuring that affordable housing is available in Coyote Valley will contribute to San Jose's already outstanding track record on affordable housing and reduce the need to provide it elsewhere, thereby reducing the sprawl pressure in places such as Almaden Valley, Evergreen, and communities south of Coyote Valley.

Suggestions for a *Getting It Right*-Based EIR Alternative

Greenbelt Alliance strongly believes that *Getting it Right* provides a foundation for a promising alternative to the proposed Specific Plan. It is important to emphasize, as mentioned in the introduction of this letter, that *Getting It Right* is not, and was never meant to be, a fully fleshed out alternative specific plan. Instead, it is a vision document and as such lacks much of the fine grain detail and focused technical analysis needed for a Specific Plan. Because *Getting It Right* is only a vision, Greenbelt Alliance does not believe that it is appropriate to attempt to simply compare it to the current version of the Specific Plan during the EIR process.

Instead, we suggest basing an EIR alternative on the framework components of *Getting It Right*. Those framework components include a grid-based urban form based on Coyote Valley's existing network of roads, flood management that uses the Fisher Creek flood plain instead of a downtown lake for detention and a transit system – based on standard, proven technology – that takes advantage of a grid road network and better connects to regional transit. If certain features of the *Getting It Right* framework prove to be infeasible after detailed analysis, they should be altered so that they are feasible but as consistent as possible with the intent. For example, if a large detention basin, instead of a flood plain is determined to be essential for flood management, it should be sited so that it has as little negative impact on the urban form and the environment as possible.

We understand that some of the "fine grain" details included in *Getting It Right* may not be viable, based on site-specific physical conditions or requirements identified during the planning process. For example, since the planning process found that more schools will be needed than shown in our vision, the alternative should be drafted to accommodate those schools. However, we encourage the City to make these accommodations in ways that do not undermine the framework elements of *Getting It Right*.

Once the *Getting It Right*-based alternative has been developed, the cost of its components should be computed and compared to the cost of the similar components of the Specific Plan. We are confident that the *Getting It Right*-based alternative will have significant benefits from both a functional and a cost

perspective, and that the savings realized from the *Getting It Right*-based alternative could be used for Greenbelt and open space protection, affordable housing and other community facilities.

Conclusion

With a cutting edge plan, the future community in Coyote Valley is something that San Jose – and all of us in the Bay Area – can be proud of for decades to come. However, we believe that the Specific Plan as currently crafted is neither sufficiently based on smart growth principles nor fully consistent with the 16 "Goals and Expected Outcomes" laid out by the City Council. In particular, the urban form, flood management and transit components of the plan provide a framework for a community that is more similar to a sprawling suburb than a vital, innovative, walkable, transit-oriented community. In addition to being technically deficient, these components as presently proposed contribute substantially to the plan's $1.5 billion price tag and thereby may prevent San Jose from ever adequately providing for open space protection, affordable housing and other facilities like community health clinics in Coyote Valley.

As the specific planning process moves into the environmental review phase, San Jose has an opportunity to look at alternative approaches to developing Coyote Valley. We strongly encourage the City to develop an alternative that is based on the framework components of *Getting It Right*. We are confident that a *Getting It Right*-based alternative will provide a better foundation for an environmentally sound, transit-oriented, pedestrian and bicycle friendly community. We believe that the cost associated with the *Getting It Right*-based alternative may well be significantly lower than those associated with the Specific Plan, thereby freeing up money for priorities like open space protection, affordable housing and community health clinics. Only through a detailed analysis in the EIR, will we be able to determine if *Getting It Right* does indeed provide a blueprint for a plan that is technically, economically and environmental superior to the Specific Plan as currently drafted.

If such a meeting would be helpful, we are available to meet with staff to discuss the formulation of a *Getting It Right*-based alternative.

Sincerely,

Michele Beasley

Michele Beasley
South Bay Field Representative