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Teens present vision of San Jose's future

THEY WANT TO HAVE THEIR SAY AS CITY UPDATES GENERAL PLAN

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What would downtown San Jose look like if a bunch of creative kids designed it from scratch?

Forget high-rise glass boxes.

Forget massive parking garages.

Picture a huge central park with a roller coaster that's also a mass-transit system. An outdoor movie theater and an art museum where you can make your own art. Fanciful architecture, energy-efficient buildings and lots of roof gardens.

Oh, and an 80,000-square-foot youth center with a skate park, soccer field and recording studio.

What a fun place to live, work or just hang out. What a far cry from what we have now.

But could this really be the future?

San Jose is in the process of updating its general plan, envisioning the city in 2040. Lots of serious grown-ups are holding meetings and talking and talking about what they'd like the downtown to look like in 30 years.

The teenagers at the Montalvo Arts Center's Youth Action Coalition feel they should have a say in San Jose 2040, too. After all, it's going to be their city.

So, for the past three months, 15 youths age 15-18 have been creating a room-size model of their dream downtown. They met with architects, urban designers and city officials. Then, under the guidance of Oakland artist/teachers Rosa Gonzalez and Simon Hanukai, they produced videos about the community of the future and designed a city where all the housing is affordable and all the energy is renewable.

The model city, made from cardboard and recyclable stuff (Togo's wrappers make great trees) portrays a fanciful landscape. Where the Fairmont hotel is now, there's a giant Ferris wheel. At the end of the block, across from the St. Claire Hotel, is the Rites of Passage Celebration Hall, a

big building with candles on top to be used for bar mitzvahs, sweet 16 parties and quinceañeras.

The streets are designed so people can do their shopping on foot. Small stores like Vanessa's Flowers and Fred's Funky Hat Shop are wedged between gravity-defying apartment buildings.

Then there's the really creative stuff: a waste treatment plant that emits sweet-smelling air and water so clean you can surf in the holding tank. And a space elevator, which will launch you into space without burning tons of rocket fuel.

"Some of the things were a little, you know, out there," said Lyka Sethi, 16. "But for the most part, people thought most of the things were plausible."

The purpose of the project, of course, is to provide a teen-eye view of the city to the adults who will do the actual planning. Lyka's part of the exhibit is a set of 2040 public service announcements about biking and recycling. She and her colleagues worry a lot about the condition of the planet - and the city - that we're leaving them.

Bad planning

"It's important that we speak out because we *are* the future," she said. "If we are given an opportunity to shape the future, we will be able to make better decisions."

Better decisions? There's an idea. San Jose is the product of generations of bad planning decisions. If people 50 years ago had cared about what downtown would look like today, they never would have allowed City Hall to move out to First Street or filled the neighborhoods with board and care homes. They never would have envisioned Valley Fair or Santana Row.

The kids' ideas may not all be realistic, but their vision of a vibrant, attractive and sustainable downtown is right on the mark.

I hope city officials - and you - will go out to the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga and take a look at their work.

The project will be unveiled at public reception from 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday at Villa Montalvo. After that, the gallery will be open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. every Thursday through Sunday through Sept. 29. For information go to www.montalvoarts.org or call (408) 961-5800.

Like any big-city redesign, this downtown is a work in progress. And everyone can help complete it. The young designers left several city blocks vacant so visitors can come up with their own far-out designs and build them right there with cardboard, paper and glue.

So go ahead. Build your outrageous vision. Dream big. In a city with a space elevator, not even the sky's the limit.