The Grand Boulevard Initiative—

A Transformative Vision for El Camino Real

By Lennie Roberts and Helen Chapman

El Camino Real (“The Royal Road”), was established by the Spanish missionaries as California’s first transportation artery, extending 600 miles from San Diego in the south to Sonoma County in the north. Today, this historic road that originally linked 21 missions by foot and horseback, has been overwhelmed by the automobile and all that goes with it—whether good, bad, or ugly.

The Royal Road deserves better! There is tremendous potential to transform El Camino’s undistinguished urban/suburban continuum into a vibrant and attractive place where residents can work, live, shop, and play, and where links can be created between communities that promote walking and transit.

The vision is of a boulevard that connects communities by a mix of land uses designed to attract people. Cities are encouraged to design for neighborhoods that include high quality building designs and diverse land uses, preserve historic buildings and places, and enhance our economic and cultural diversity, with the broad involvement of residents, workers, and local businesses. Roadway improvements will continue to meet the need to move people and commerce and preserve environmental resources. The El Camino of the future will incorporate our history and create a sense of community in each of the 19 cities beginning at the northern Daly City city limit, where it is named Mission Street, and ending near the Diridon Station in central San Jose, where it is named The Alameda.

The Grand Boulevard Initiative, (GBI), established in 2005, is a collaboration of 19 cities, local and regional agencies, environmentalists, labor, developers, and advocates for housing, transit, bicyclists, and economic development. Lennie Roberts, CGF’s San Mateo County Advocate, is a member of the GBI’s Task Force that endeavors to coordinate planning efforts, develop incentives, and secure funding to make this vision a reality.

The connection to the Grand Boulevard is especially significant to the San Jose residents and businesses surrounding The Alameda—historically known as “The Beautiful Way.” It is one of the primary entry points from Interstate 880 into San Jose and carries significant vehicle traffic, especially at commute times. The City of San Jose is currently in the midst of updating its General Plan with emphasis given to the Diridon area because of the pending plans for High Speed Rail and proposed Baseball Stadium. In the last five years, 2,300 units of housing were built around this area alone and hundreds more are in various planning stages. However, the current streetscape lacks the amenities needed to make the street livable and safe for pedestrians and bicyclists and could use a shot in the arm to attract vibrant businesses.

The community banded together with the local businesses and City officials to address the long-term needs of The Alameda and to seek solutions to concerns about pedestrian safety, access and increased traffic. A grant was sought after and awarded that allowed the community to work with a design consulting team to find consensus on the assets and problems of the streetscape. What has resulted after years of hard work is a vision for The Alameda that ties directly into priorities set by the Grand Boulevard Initiative Task Force. Another grant was recently awarded that will provide the dollars needed to start the first phase of the project.

The latest news of the passage of AB 1670 that will authorize the relinquishment of State Highway 82 and 130 to the City San Jose to maintain and improve will move the vision of the Alameda one step further into a reality for the community.

Co-author Helen Chapman is a CGF Board member and President of the Shasta Hanchett Park Neighborhood Association which is directly adjacent to the Alameda Business District and has been directly involved in the visioning process.