

Where have all the First Graders gone?

Todd Collins, Palo Alto Weekly, October 4, 2019

Our First Graders are missing! Throughout the Bay Area, and especially on the Peninsula, enrollment of first graders has dropped by 10-25% since 2010. From working class school districts to affluent suburbs, we see a rapid and steady drop in young families and their children.

Palo Alto is no exception. Many think of Palo Alto as a magnet for young families with school age children. But after decades of steady growth, PAUSD's first grade enrollment has dropped by 19% since its peak in 2011; the drop in Kindergartners is even greater. Overall, PAUSD elementary enrollment dropped 2% this year, its sixth consecutive year of decline. This trend nearly always means similar drops in later grades in a few years.

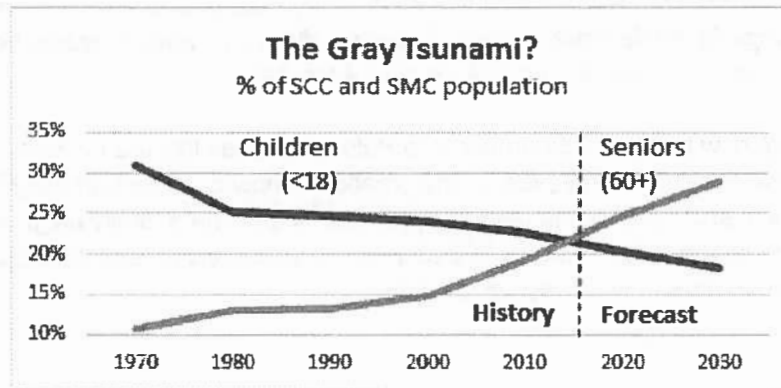
In fact, family formation all over the Bay Area is going the way of the Sony Walkman or Palm Pilot. This has big implications for the future of our communities, including as we consider new housing.

Why is this happening?

The drop in young families isn't mysterious. Rising housing costs price out many in the family formation stage of life, when they have modest incomes but growing housing needs. Gentrification in working-class towns drives up prices and replaces low-cost units with newer, higher priced ones.

Demographic trends also play an important role. California has seen a dramatic drop in its birth rate since the Great Recession of 2008. Birth rates often drop during recessions, but this time they have not recovered and continue to fall. California's birth rate today is almost half that of 1990.

Finally, more and more housing in family-friendly neighborhoods is occupied by seniors, the fastest growing demographic group on the Peninsula. State demographers expect this "gray tsunami" to grow to 29% of the Peninsula population over the next 20 years, which means their homes won't be available for younger families.



Source: California Dept. of Finance, Population Projections

What does it mean?

As Eve said to Adam as they left the Garden of Eden, "My dear, we live in a time of transition." These trends suggest Palo Alto, along with suburban towns all over the Peninsula, may be shifting to a paradigm different from that of the last 50 years.

Category	Old Paradigm	New Paradigm?
Housing	Family-centric	Workforce-centric
Core Institution	Public Schools	Employers
Civic Programs	Support children	Support Seniors & Businesses

We may be moving from communities built around families and schools to ones where they play a secondary role to companies and their employees.

What, if anything, should we do?

We could do nothing or even help it along - many see these changes as inevitable, and not necessarily problematic. Some advocate building more "workforce housing," continuing expansion of large employers, and creation of larger senior facilities.

Others oppose most new housing - they worry that towns are "built out" and the roads can't handle more traffic. Ironically, both positions will lead to a significant change in our communities as the number of young families continues to decline.

There are alternatives. If we do build housing, we can influence our new neighbors by the kind of housing we try to create. By watching school enrollment trends, we've learned a lot about what kind of housing and neighborhood situations attract families - and which do not.

The main features that make housing family-friendly aren't just bedrooms and square-footage - it's pricing and, most importantly, neighborhoods. Expensive apartments on busy streets, far from schools and parks, will not attract many young families looking to put down roots in a community.

Ideas to Support Family-Friendly Housing

Much of the housing debate focuses on "how many" (units) and "how much" (affordability). We should shift the focus to "who" - **if we want to remain a family-oriented community, we will need family-friendly housing.**

Since the key to family-friendly housing is neighborhoods, one option is to stimulate housing in or near existing neighborhoods. Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and multi-family duplex to quadplex units already co-exist in many neighborhoods alongside single family homes. These smaller scale units preserve both the scale and character of a neighborhood, while opening up more room for families.

Another option is to create new family neighborhoods. In Palo Alto, areas like the Frys site, downtown Palo Alto, and the Stanford Research Park are being eyed for the creation of new or expanded neighborhoods. But there's a critical oversight - schools aren't part of the planning process. The ultimate family neighborhood amenity is a neighborhood school. The community should insist that school districts, cities, and developers work together to ensure new housing is near either new or existing schools.

Conclusion

The debate over housing growth has centered on "more housing" vs. "quality of life" (less housing). But there's another dimension - not just how many, but **what kind** of neighbors do we want. People - our neighbors - determine the character of a community. Today 17% of Santa Clara County residents are school-age children; in Palo Alto, it is 19%; San Francisco (like Manhattan) has just 9%.

The dramatic loss of young families - our missing First Graders - should grab our attention; it's a signal that our community is changing in a fundamental way. I like First Graders and all they represent, and I hope we will work to create communities that bring us more of them.

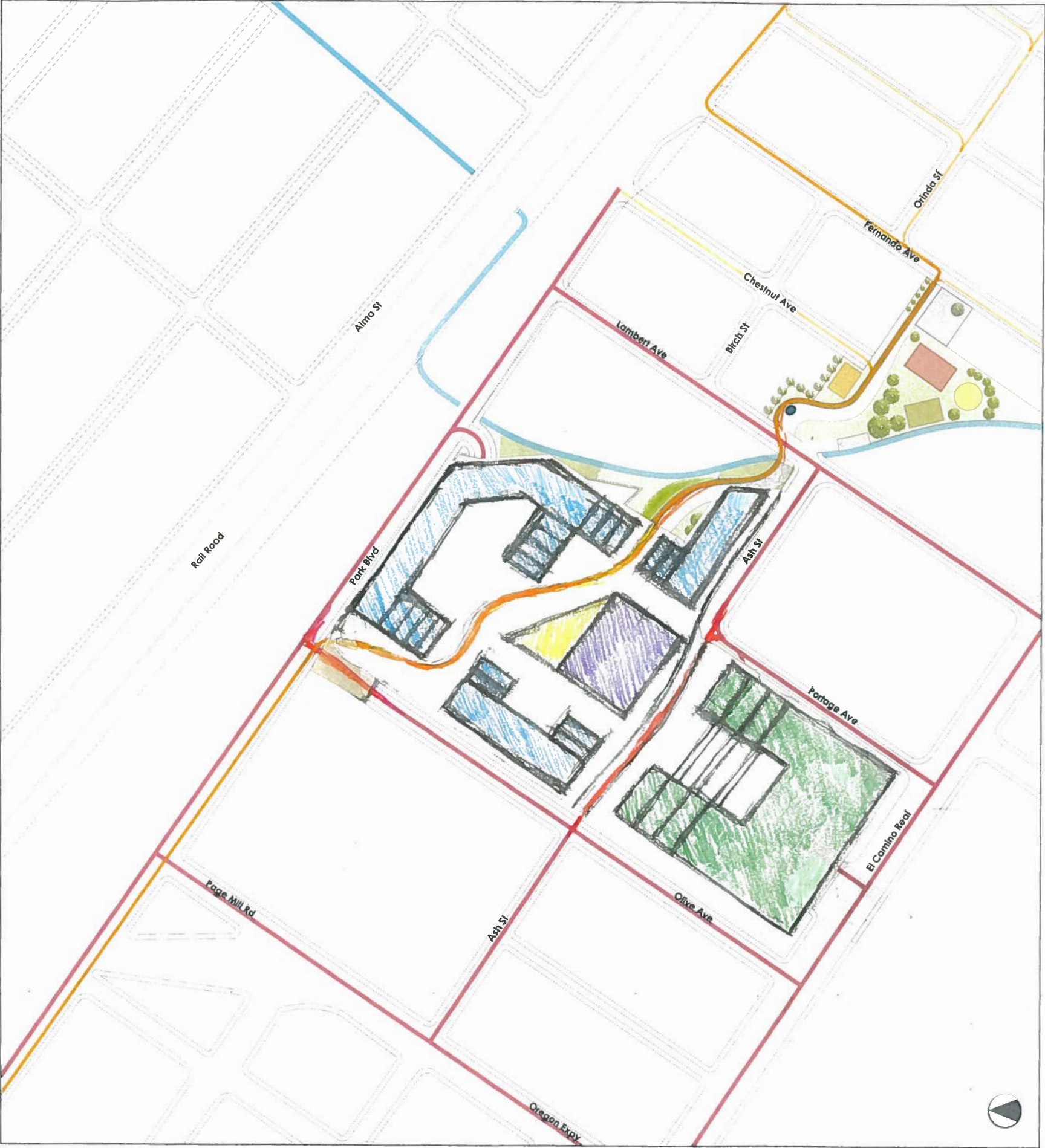
Cal-Ventura Greenway

This scheme is an alternative to the Perkins and Will submission. There are several major distinctions:

Ash Street is connected from Lambert to Page Mill separating the site into two distinctly different uses, with housing (blue) and a section of Fry's (purple) to the East and a significant office building (green) to the West. No other street penetrates the site.

The Housing is composed of several ribbon-like elements, which establishes the perimeter border of the site. Projections from these linear structures are stepped elements that create deck spaces for the apartments within from the top of the first floor to the topmost floor.

To maximize the sunlight in the inner courtyard, the housing on the West side is lower (3 stories) than the housing adjacent to Park Blvd. on the East (5 stories). The two reasons for this decision are: 1. To encourage the growth of a natural landscape and 2. To provide emphasis on Fry's.



The Greenway is a path through the development exclusively for bicycles and pedestrians. It extends from Park Blvd. and Olive Street on a meandering path between the housing structures to the planned activity spaces of Boulware Park and exits onto the local streets of Ventura.

A large section of Fry's is retained at the middle of the site to be a focal point for the Ventura community and the local residents. It can house many varied activities as suggested by Perkins and Will, but these uses should not conflict with or detract from the important development of California Street. The area designated in yellow is a large raised deck for entertainment events and beer fests.

The office building (green), which also steps down from 4-stories on El Camino to a single story at Ash provides outdoor decks at each level of the steps. It is assumed that there is a substantial amount of below grade parking for the office tenants as well as the new tenants, the general neighborhood and visitors to the area.

A Caution: Dividing the site with new roads, sewers and utilities is extremely expensive. This scheme avoids these pitfalls by locating all new buildings adjacent to existing facilities.

- Vehicular Path
- Bike Path
- Caltrain

