

VERNON WESTSIDE SPECIFIC PLAN
BASELINE STUDIES
OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS



JANUARY 28, 2021

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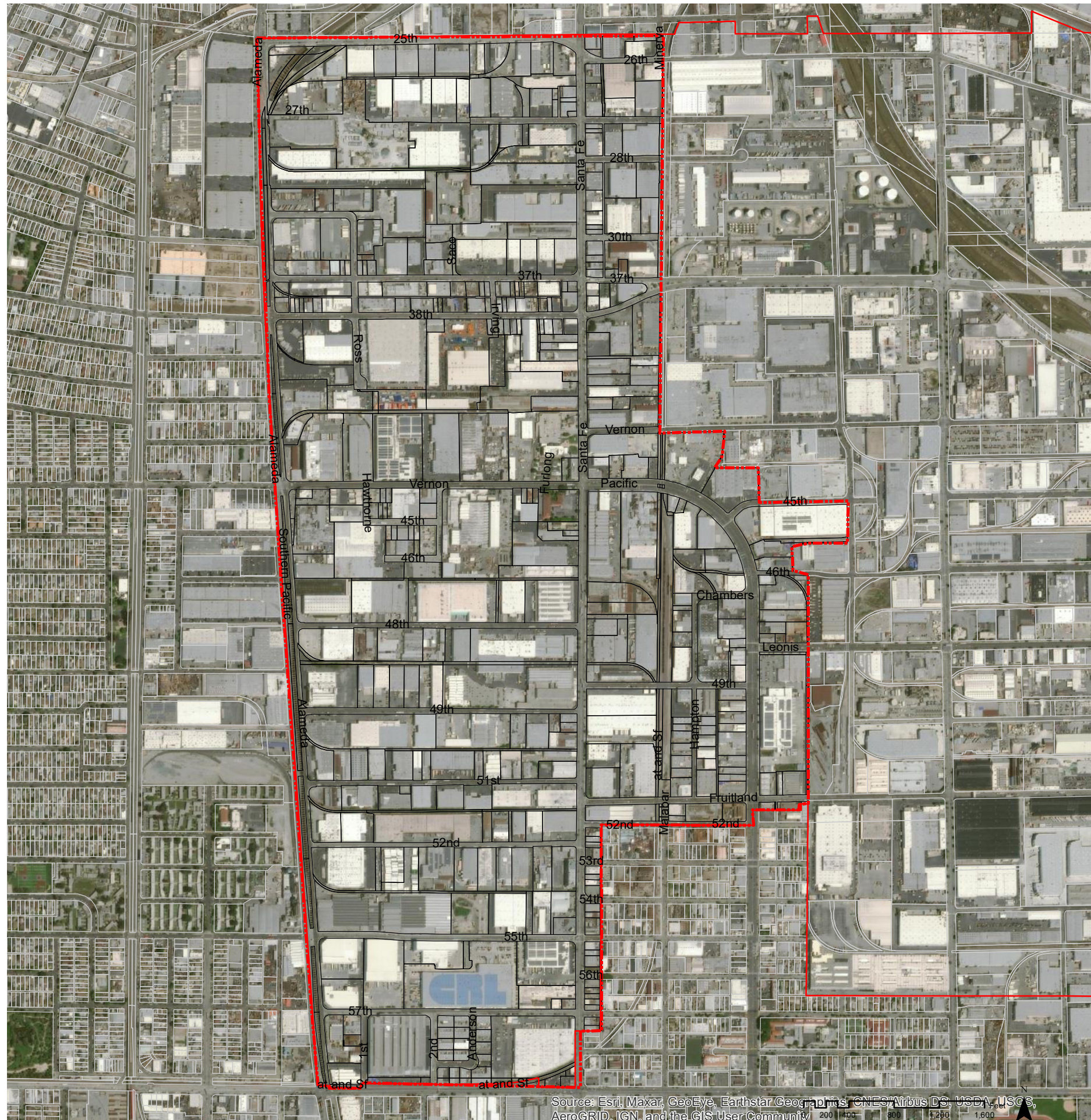
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of existing conditions and opportunities and constraints for diversifying the Westside of Vernon. Key takeaways, points and considerations for change are described in this Executive Summary and followed by an existing conditions inventory and detailed analysis of the market, existing building stock, parcel redevelopment suitability, transportation and infrastructure in the remaining chapters of the report.

Purpose of the Westside Specific Plan

Over the past century, Vernon's economy has gradually evolved from agricultural to heavy industrial to the current mix of manufacturing and warehousing. As the pace of economic change in Southern California accelerates in the years ahead, Vernon will continue to evolve in a manner which is not yet fully understood. The City of Vernon does not wish to leave this evolution to chance, but rather seeks to purposely direct it in a manner which will maintain its regional competitive advantage as a center of production, and create a more prosperous, diversified and resilient community with a strong positive identity. In support of this goal, the City will consider the addition of urban multifamily residential and mixed-use development, as well as other non-industrial uses, to the current largely industrial community.





STUDY AREA

The Westside of Vernon, with its present mixture of land uses, parcel sizes, and building configurations, together with its proximity to the Arts District in the City of Los Angeles, provides the first opportunity for creative new development and adaptive reuse. The Westside Specific Plan will create a vision for this area and establish the framework for its gradual evolution to fulfill that vision. The plan will set new zoning and development standards governing what can be developed in different portions of the Westside, and provide an implementation strategy describing catalytic projects, infrastructure improvements and financing mechanisms.

Benefits of the plan are anticipated to include:

- Increased economic opportunity for property and business owners through the facilitation of potential new industries and uses
- Increased amenities for residents and employees of the area
- Predictable rules governing new development and protecting existing businesses
- Long-term stability and strengthening of the City's fiscal position, service provision and talent pool for elected officials
- Greater resilience to future economic shifts, natural shocks and climate change

THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

In an exclusively industrial city such as Vernon, it can be difficult for the casual observer to imagine how and where changes could be introduced into the urban fabric. A deliberate process is needed in order to formulate a vision and urban design framework that can serve the goals of the community. We have outlined five idealized “steps” to this process which are named below and represented in the diagram on this page:

Opportunities and Constraints Identification

1. Listening and goal setting
2. Identification of assets and opportunities

Urban Design Framework

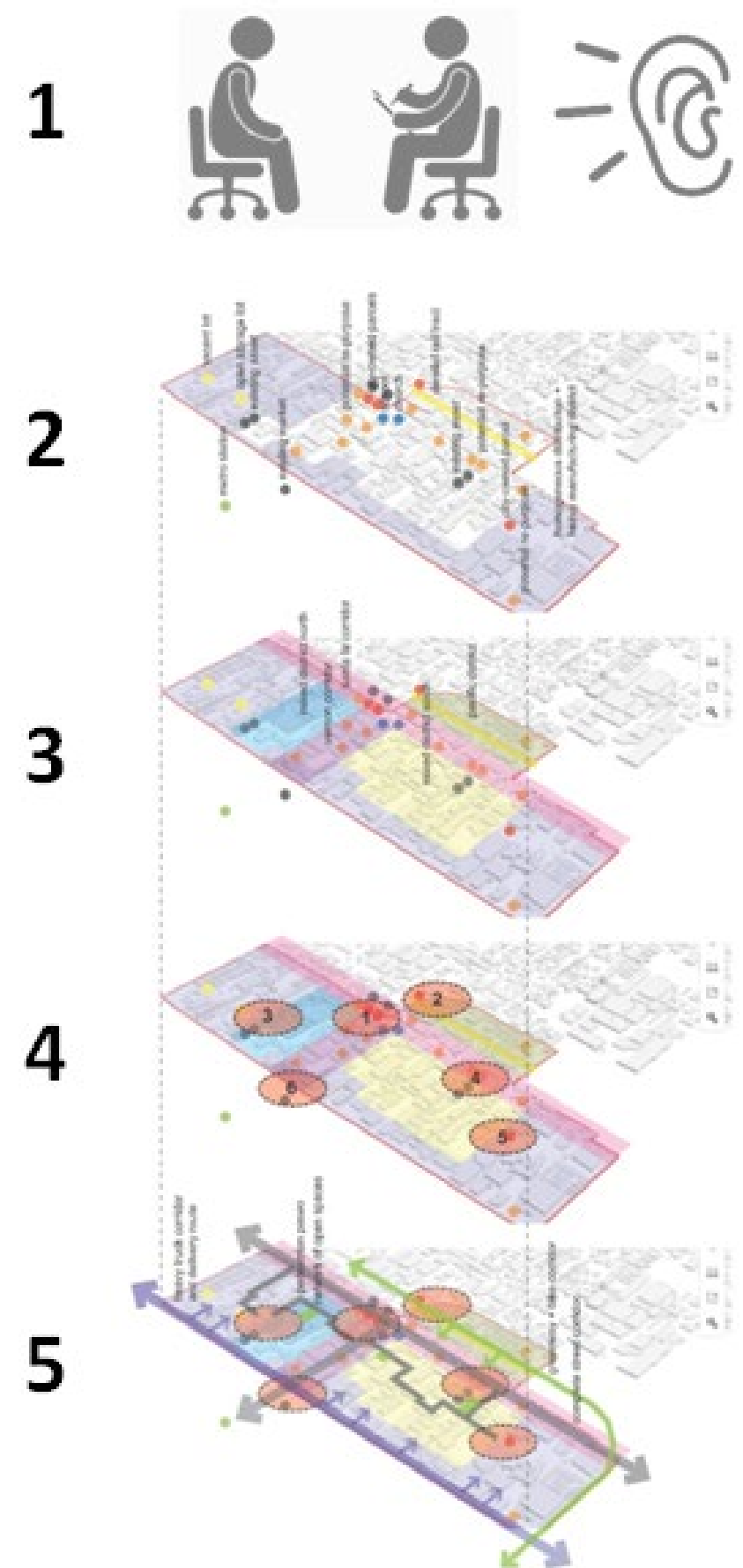
3. Study area districting
4. Development catalyst ‘hotspots’
5. Networks of connectivity

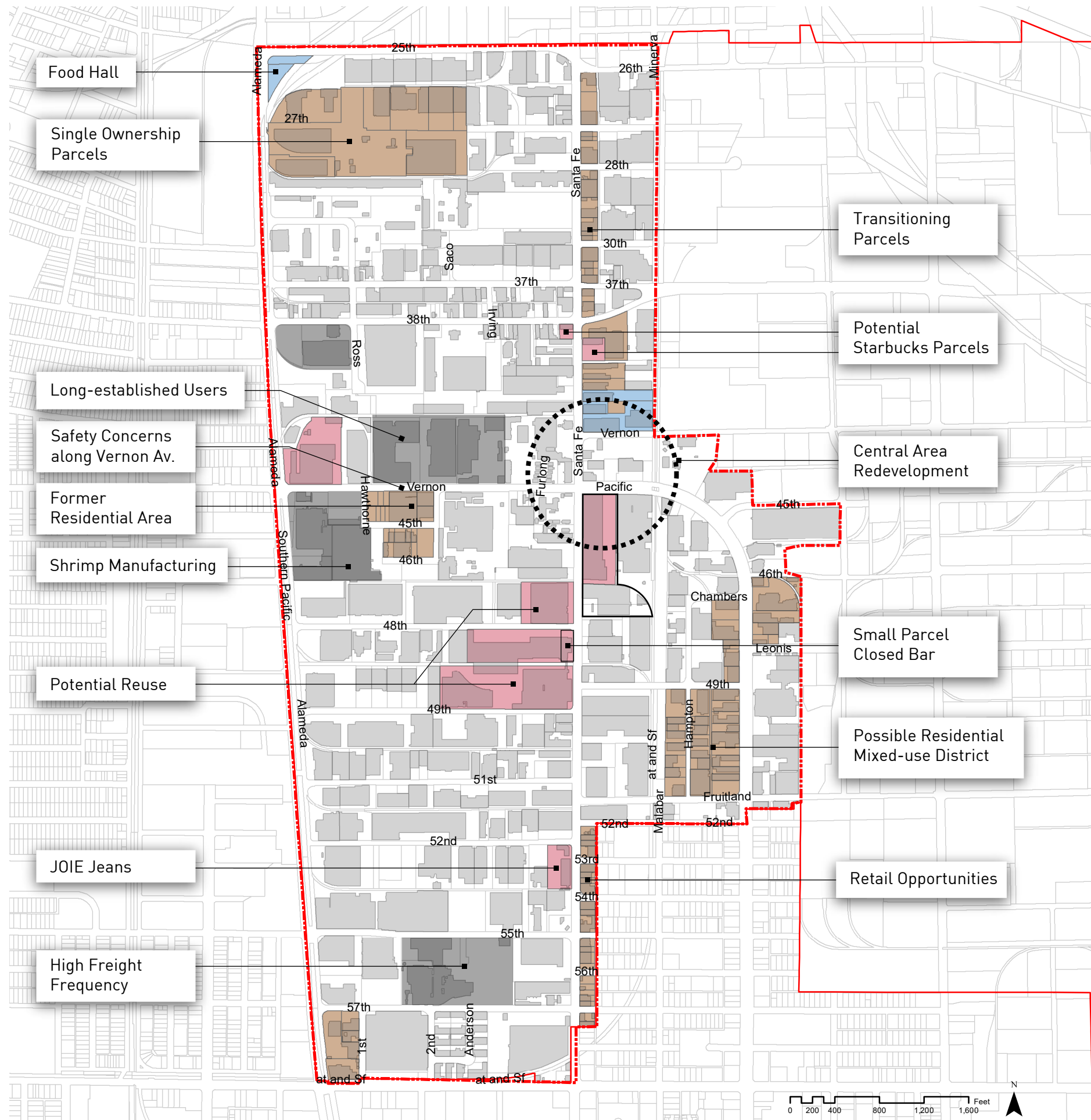
This report presents the findings of steps 1 and 2 of this process. After understanding the goals of the process, we lead with identifying assets for development because our experience with other transitioning industrial areas indicates that transition is based on unique assets available in those areas. For example, the Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles got its start because of historic buildings that were low priced, yet very well suited to adaptive reuse into residential uses. This analysis identifies the assets upon which transformation

can occur in Vernon and prepares the City of Vernon, Stakeholders Advisory Committee and the Vernon Westside Specific Plan Team with the necessary information and synthesis to undertake the design stages 3, 4 and 5.

Opportunities identified in this report are intended to be evaluated by City staff and the Westside Specific Plan Stakeholders Advisory Committee for follow-up in the design process. The Stakeholders Advisory Committee will be a body incorporating members of the Vernon City Council, residents, business owners, property owners, developers, brokers and other key members of the Vernon community that will play a key role in driving the direction for the Specific Plan.

The various chapters of this report represent the application of different study lenses to the Specific Plan area, helping to unravel the often-complicated dynamics and interrelationships that make up the district. A summary of the key assets, opportunities and constraints identified in each chapter is presented below, after a discussion of stakeholder inputs.





STAKEHOLDER SUGGESTED REDEVELOPMENT SITES

During stakeholder interviews (see page 8), stakeholders were asked which sites they considered appropriate areas for redevelopment or adaptive reuse. Some named districts, while others named specific sites. The suggested focal areas for redevelopment are spread throughout the Specific Plan and differed substantially between one stakeholder and another.

Stakeholder suggestions and observations about each site are shown in the call-out boxes. Note that sites were not suggested by property owners, but by other members of the Vernon community. The willingness of property owners to redevelop is unknown at this time.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW SUMMARY AND INITIAL PROJECT GOALS

Outreach to stakeholders was an important first step to provide the Westside Specific Plan team with a better understanding of the community and its desires and concerns regarding the future of the City. The list of key stakeholders for interview was prepared by Dan Wall, the Director of Public Works and staff member in charge of the Westside Specific Plan. Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom with the following individuals:

Leticia Lopez	Mayor
Melissa Ybarra	Mayor Pro-Tem & Long-Term Resident
Diana Gonzales	City Council
Carol Menke	City Council
Bill Davis	City Council
Carlos Fandino	City Administrator
Marisa Olguin	Chamber of Commerce CEO
Doug Williams	Chamber of Commerce President
Jack Cline	Industrial Broker
Tom Condon	Industrial Broker
Richard Lucas	CEG Construction, VP Construction
Joe Tack	Sweetener Products, President & CEO
Bill Tolen	Matheson Tri-Gas, Director of Operations
Arty Feles	CR Laurence, CFO

Several of the interviews were with owners, operators, brokers and/or developers of industrial uses, both manufacturing and warehousing. They all stated that Vernon is a good place to do business. The City is “business friendly.” Development permits are much easier to obtain than in most other cities. Utility rates have historically been attractively low, although recent increases in electric power rates have reduced Vernon’s competitive advantage. Although not directly served by freeways, the City is well located in the region, with easy access to Downtown Los Angeles and to the Ports.



Those manufacturers who create noise, traffic and/or unpleasant odor have concerns about the idea of encouraging development of residential and other sensitive uses. These businesses originally located in Vernon because it was a totally industrial city where such environmental disturbances were fully tolerated. They are already feeling some pressure from various government agencies to become more environmentally friendly. Those with large capital investment would find it difficult to leave the area, but they might be forced to do so if the public pressure and remediation costs become too high.

On the other hand, businesses which generate little local environmental disturbance have a neutral stance on proposed diversification of land use. They recognize that the City is facing fiscal problems, and they understand that the introduction of residential and retail uses, with the expected additional income which they might bring, would allow utility rates and businesses taxes to remain low. Some owners of industrial property view diversification as a potential benefit to them economically, as a broader range of permitted uses could raise rents and property values. These owners are willing to accept office, residential, live/work, retail, or even casino uses.

The existing few residents of Vernon, together with the Vernon City Government, are much more interested in land use diversification. They all believe that Vernon must remain primarily an industrial city, but many would like it to become a more interesting and attractive place to live and visit. Although newer Vernon residents in the affordable housing project are likely less invested in the City's future (none were interviewed as stakeholders), all of the long-term residents and many of the long-term business owners have strong positive feelings about Vernon. For all its uniqueness, Vernon is a small community that presents a comfort with the familiar and a confidence that anyone can have a voice and even become a member of the City Council, with the stature that such an elected office brings. Residents recognize that Vernon is currently "ugly" and "dull," but they picture a future with nearby convenience shopping, a variety of restaurants, attractive gathering places, and interesting night life.

Practically all of the residents and government officials interviewed support residential development, but not single-family. Rather, they foresee mixed use and live/work, in repurposed industrial buildings or in new mid-rise or even high-rise structures. There seems to be little opposition to affordable housing, and several suggested housing for homeless veterans. Potential sites for residential development were identified, almost all along Santa Fe Avenue. Some of those interviewed favored development in the far north as an extension of the Los Angeles Arts District, while others favored development in the far south as an extension of family-friendly Huntington Park. Concern was expressed about possible extension of the Los Angeles community to the west along Vernon Avenue, since this area is perceived as having significant gang and drug activity.

There is an important fiscal motivation to the opportunity of diversifying land uses. As the economic base has gradually shifted from manufacturing toward warehousing, the City's main income stream from sale of electricity has dwindled. Because most State and Federal grant programs are tied to population, Vernon receives very little. Without retail uses, there is little income from sales taxes. The small population also provides a limited pool of qualified persons to serve on the City Council and imperils the long-term viability of the good governance reforms begun approximately ten years ago. City leaders believe that a diversification of land use, and the increased population that it would bring, would give the City a more stable tax base, even though it might also increase the demand for public services.

In summary, there is currently no commonly held vision for Vernon's future. There are those who favor the status quo, believing that the past reality of a highly successful industrial community is also the best vision for its future. Even they, however, recognize that the rapidly changing economic base of the region and the country are forcing Vernon to question the viability of this future. On the opposite side are those who picture a Vernon which

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW SUMMARY AND INITIAL PROJECT GOALS

maintains its competitive advantage by embracing the rapid changes in technology and social norms. They might be viewed as visionaries, hoping that Vernon will become the diversified community that they see existing and developing in several prominent L.A.-area industrial areas. Fortunately, both the advocates of status quo and the visionaries seem open minded enough to understand the other's point of view. The willingness to cooperate and compromise presents a clear opportunity to forge a commonly held vision. The Westside Specific Plan can be the vehicle for developing that realistic vision for Vernon's future.

Initial Project Goals

1. Diversify and reorient the Westside's land uses to take advantage of changes in the economic landscape of Southern California
2. Maintain the City's competitive advantage as a center of production
3. Increase the residential population in order to help meet regional needs, increase access to proportionally allocated funding and provide more voters and candidates for elected office, strengthening the City's long-term governance
4. Strengthen and provide long-term stability to the City's fiscal position
5. Increase amenities available to local residents and workers
6. Create a physical environment that is supportive of diversified land uses, welcoming to the larger region, and enhancing to the City's image and identity

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Site Inventory (Chapter 2)

This chapter presents basic inventory maps referenced in other chapters of the report, including the existing land use makeup and property ownership of the Specific Plan area. According to market data, the Specific Plan area is currently 52% warehousing and 37% manufacturing, with very few non-industrial uses.

Market Scan (Chapter 3)

This chapter presents key metrics describing the makeup and performance of the Vernon Westside real estate market and compares it to three other industrial areas which have transitioned into a more mixed-use environment.

- The industrial market in Vernon is performing well, with increasing rents and low vacancy. This could be a barrier to entry for businesses or developers interested in adaptively reusing or redeveloping industrial properties.
- Industrial areas in transition like the Arts District, Frogtown and Smoky Hollow are attractive to businesses or developers looking to take advantage of flexible zoning and broader permitted uses such as breweries, distilleries, coffee roasters and studios. Other common uses found in these districts are live/work units, independent food and beverage establishments, “process retail” businesses that involve production and consumer sales on the same property, and in some cases, proximity to larger research and development campuses.
- Adaptive reuse of industrial properties can be profitable for a property owner because non-industrial uses often achieve higher rent. However, the cost of converting properties from industrial to other uses may be prohibitive.



- Retail makes up a smaller percentage (less than 10 percent) of the overall land use makeup in the transitioning areas than other land uses like office or residential. This suggests that office and residential uses tend to be more significant drivers of neighborhood transformation than new retail. However, retail is an important amenity for any new office or residential uses while also serving as a draw for visitors to the area.

Building Assessment and Asset Identification (Chapter 4)

This chapter begins with an extensive inventory and evaluation of the building stock in the Specific Plan area for conversion into residential or hybrid industrial uses.

- Older buildings within the Specific Plan area, particularly multi-story buildings, are less desired by today's traditional manufacturing and warehouse users, but they are the most attractive to creative residential, creative office, or R&D users. As there is little vacant or publicly-owned land in the Specific Plan area, adaptive reuse of these buildings represents some of the greatest opportunities for catalytic projects.
- The most likely areas for redevelopment are in areas where a cluster of viable building assets is located in proximity to contextual clues and amenities such as possible streetscape or open space connections or amenities inside or outside the Specific Plan area. Four such clusters were identified; of these, the two most promising clusters are found along Santa Fe Avenue: one between 28th Street and Vernon Avenue, and one between 49th Street and 55th Street.
- Linkages among buildings within the clusters are generally poor and present a major constraint for transformation. In particular, the street environment of Santa Fe Avenue is uninviting and uncomfortable, with high automobile and truck traffic, noise and vibration.

Parcel Redevelopment Analysis (Chapter 5)

This chapter presents GIS mapping of other important economic, environmental and fiscal impact characteristics that influence the suitability or desirability of land use change of these parcels, culminating in an estimation of overall redevelopment suitability for each parcel.

- Odors, noise, vibration, air pollution and soil contamination affect nearly all portions of the Specific Plan area and are a major constraint to development. Truck traffic, certain types of heavy industrial uses within the study area, and the eastern side of Vernon's rendering plants are the main causes of these constraints.
- Each building asset cluster identified in Chapter 4 is proximate to other parcels that are good candidates for redevelopment.

Transportation (Chapter 6)

This chapter provides an overview of how people travel to, through and from the Westside of Vernon today, examining the existing transportation network and safety record for automobiles, trucks, pedestrians, cyclists and public transit.

- Despite the existence of a moderate-wage, largely local workforce, travel to and around the Specific Plan area is overwhelmingly by automobile. The 268 collisions registered within the Specific Plan area over the last five years (several fatal), as well as the forthcoming Metro West Santa Ana Branch rail line, present arguments for a safer and more balanced transportation network and policies which encourage travel by non-automobile modes.
- Today, all routes are truck routes. Taking streets off of the truck route map could open up possibilities for more pedestrian-friendly roadway features such as tree wells, on-street parking, and crossings with median refuges. In particular, directing truck traffic away from Santa Fe Avenue onto Alameda East would create opportunities on Santa Fe Avenue.
- Each of the three through north/south roadways around the study area (Alameda Street West, Santa Fe Avenue and Soto Street) are near capacity, making some complete streets interventions difficult. East/west streets and Pacific Boulevard present much more available capacity; there may be an opportunity to shift traffic from the southern

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- portion of Santa Fe Avenue to Pacific Boulevard. Importantly, Alameda Street East is nowhere near capacity.
- As properties are redeveloped and new land uses introduced to Vernon, opportunities to add to the transportation network should be considered to enhance connectivity throughout the westside of Vernon, providing alternate routes to congested arterials. The abandoned rail lines that run east/west in the middle of many blocks present intriguing opportunities for walking or biking paths and green infrastructure.

Infrastructure (Chapter 7)

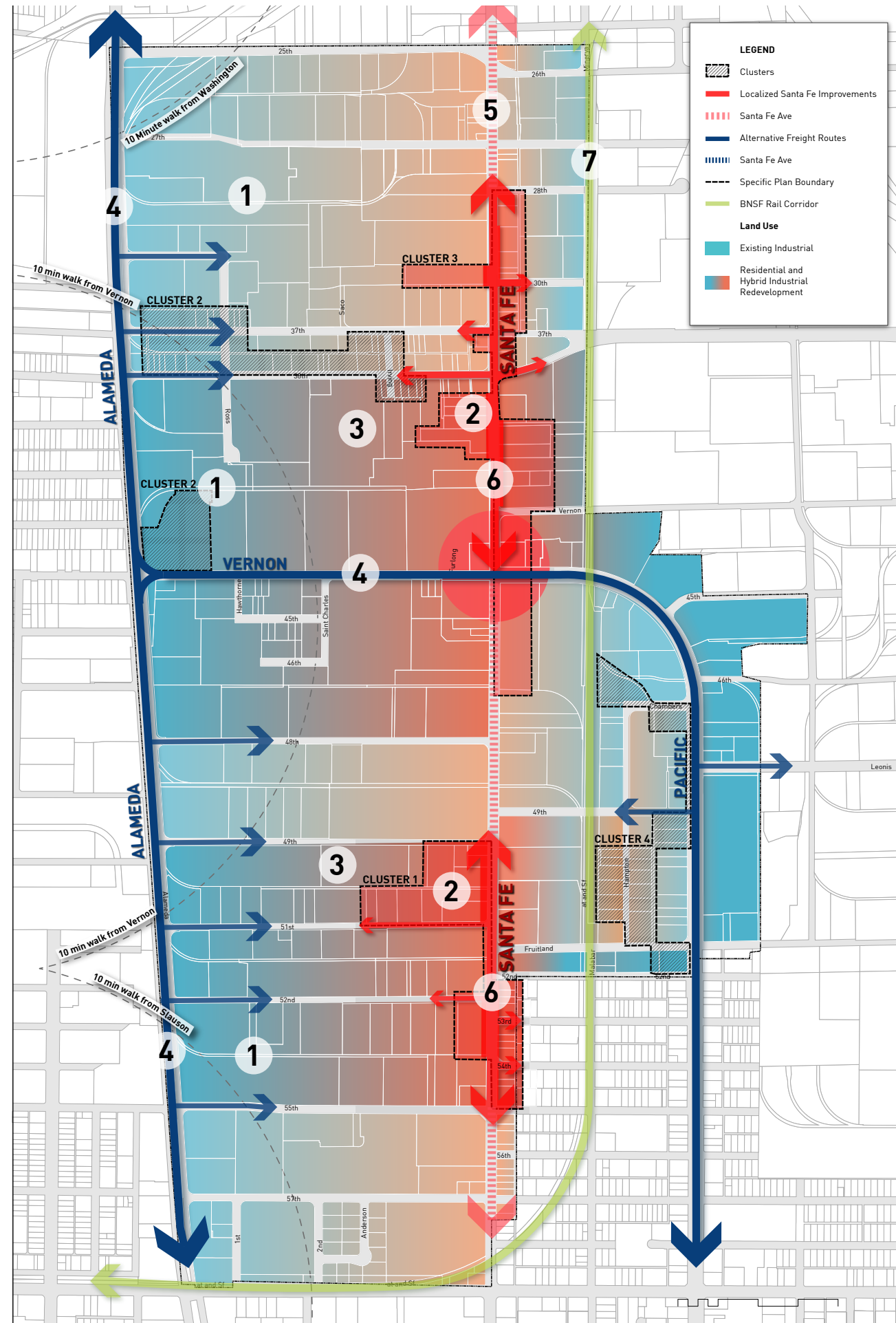
This chapter maps and describes the City of Vernon's utility systems, and identifies potentials and recommendations.

- Vernon's municipally owned utilities have for many years been distinguished by a high level of quality, service, reliability and low cost, providing a competitive advantage to businesses that operate in the City.
- There is an opportunity to expand recycled water services into the Specific Plan area to serve industrial and irrigation needs; consumers could see reduced prices, and the City could alleviate their groundwater and imported water supplies, reduce drought risk, and realize long-term cost savings.
- Green corridors could be created along abandoned rail right-of-ways or, possibly, public streets to improve urban ventilation and reduce heat island effect while providing spaces for stormwater retention.
- The City's high-quality electric service and central location could make it an ideal place for electric vehicle charging for passenger cars, Metro buses and port-bound electric freight transport.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS - OVERALL

Opportunities for diversification begin with the adaptive reuse of historic buildings into residential lofts or live/work units, or commercial and industrial uses including process/artisanal retail and research and development (R&D) facilities. Since the majority of these historic buildings are located along or very near to Santa Fe Avenue, there is an opportunity to transition portions of the Santa Fe corridor into a more creative, activated and mixed-use district. The street itself would need pedestrian and parking improvements and modifications to reduce truck-caused noise and vibration. Initially, this might be achieved by taking it off the list of truck routes in the City; later, larger benefits might be realized through a road diet south of the intersection of West Vernon Avenue/Pacific Boulevard.

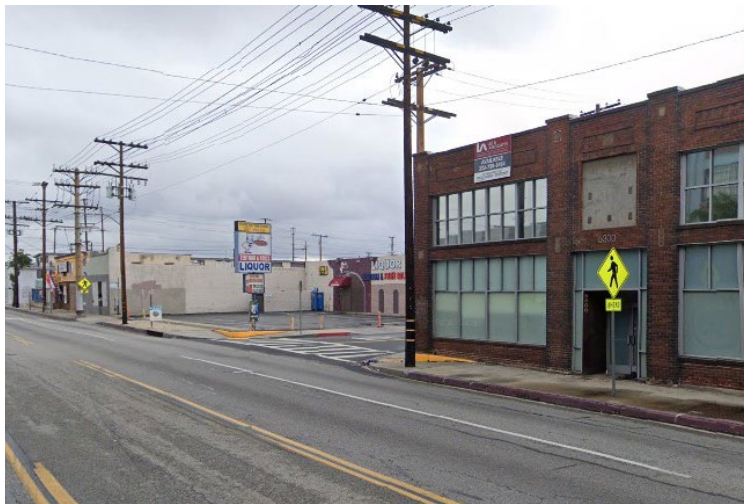
Much of the Specific Plan area is well suited to continue its traditional industrial orientation. Alameda Street East can be emphasized as a freight access corridor for these uses. Within these areas, heavy industrial businesses can operate at a safe distance from existing or new sensitive uses, while still benefitting from access to the mixed-use district's amenities, transportation and talent.



- 1 Preserve existing industrial land uses and operations throughout the majority of the district.



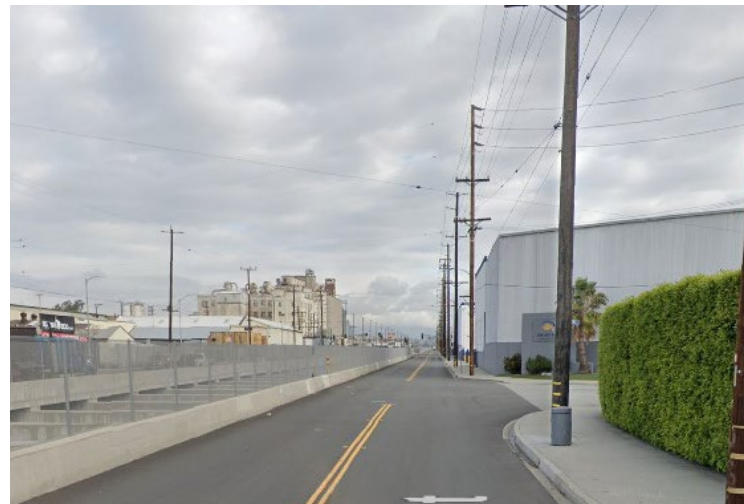
- 2 Focus initial redevelopment opportunities at existing asset clusters in and around the eastern edge of the district, including along Santa Fe Ave.



- 3 Focus preliminary catalyst development around existing assets and transition redevelopment westward as opportunity and the market allows.



- 4 Designate Alameda, Vernon Ave, and Pacific Ave as primary freight routes. These primary routes can then feed secondary freight routes along east-west roadways to local businesses. Keep as much freight as possible off of Santa Fe Ave.



DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES - OVERALL

- 5 Emphasize Santa Fe Avenue as a feature corridor for the City, connected to the Arts District and Huntington Park, with improved experience for drivers of passenger vehicles and pedestrians.



- 6 Implement traffic calming measures to create a more pedestrian- and retail-friendly environment along Santa Fe Avenue within existing asset clusters.



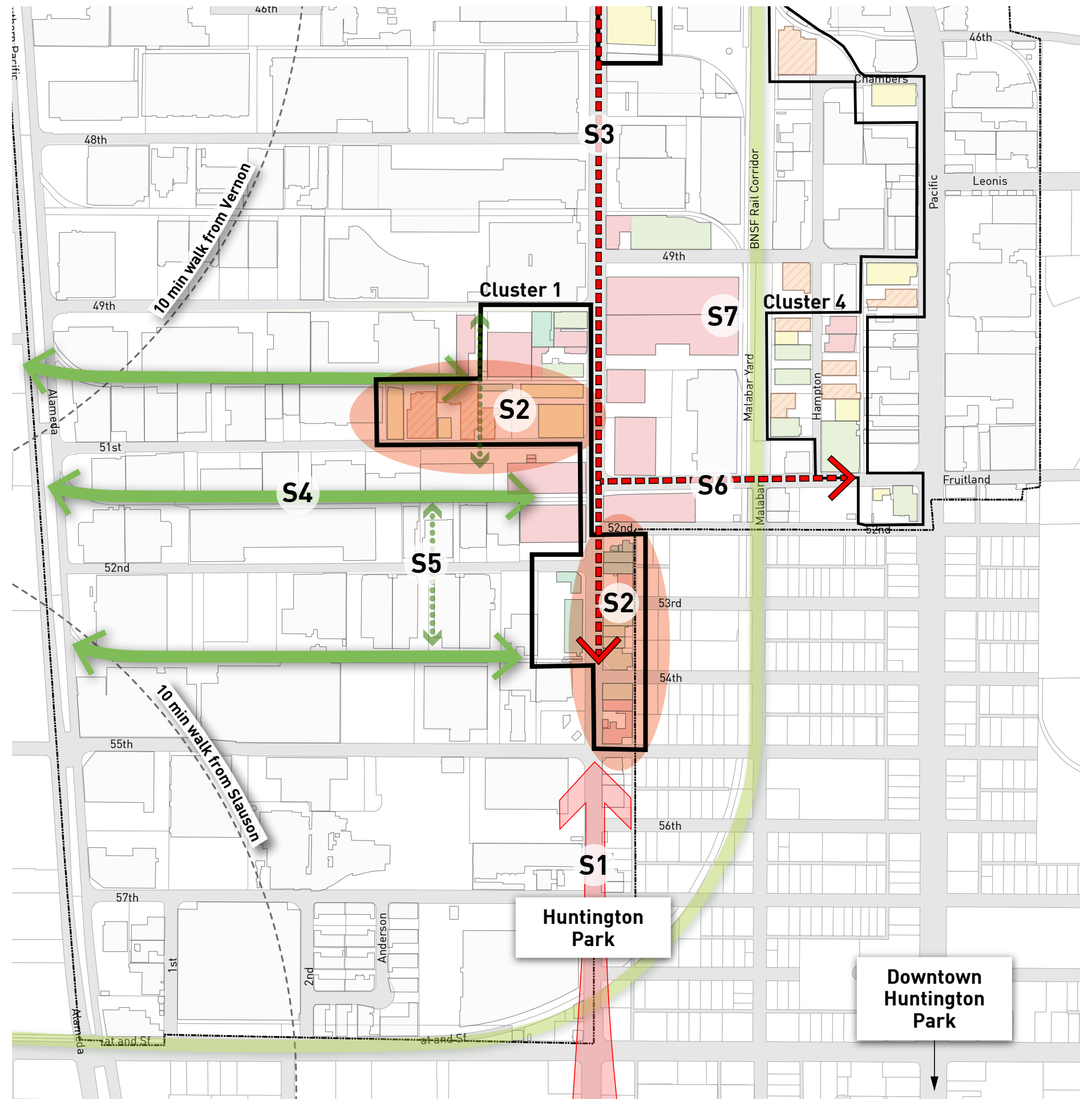
OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS- SOUTH SANTA FE (CLUSTER 1)

The South Santa Fe cluster contains high-quality historic buildings which present clear opportunities for creative adaptive reuse within the Specific Plan area. Indeed, a significant number of buildings on 51st Street and Santa Fe Avenue have already been refurbished and converted into creative offices. Residential is also a possibility in this area, despite the existence of some heavy industrial uses in proximity to key building assets and its proximity to the Malabar rail yard to the east. New residents in the south Santa Fe cluster would be closer to traditional neighborhood amenities such as grocery stores, pharmacies, etc. which are located in Huntington Park, and Huntington Park residents might visit retail uses in this cluster.

Due to this cluster being south of the Santa Fe/Pacific split, there are more opportunities to create a calmer, more pedestrian- and retail-friendly Santa Fe Avenue, including designating it as a non-truck route, reducing lanes, and undertaking temporary street closures for events. Many buildings on narrow lots face Santa Fe Avenue, enhancing this segment of the street's walkability potential over time.

This cluster is potentially related to the Fruitland/Pacific cluster via Fruitland Avenue. It may also grow to the west on development sites that present opportunities for ground-up office/industrial development.

Finally, there exists at least one suitable development parcel in the southwestern corner of the Specific Plan area which backs up to Slauson Avenue. This area may present limited opportunities for transit-oriented development related to Metro's Slauson station and the conversion of the Slauson-adjacent rail line into a multimodal path.



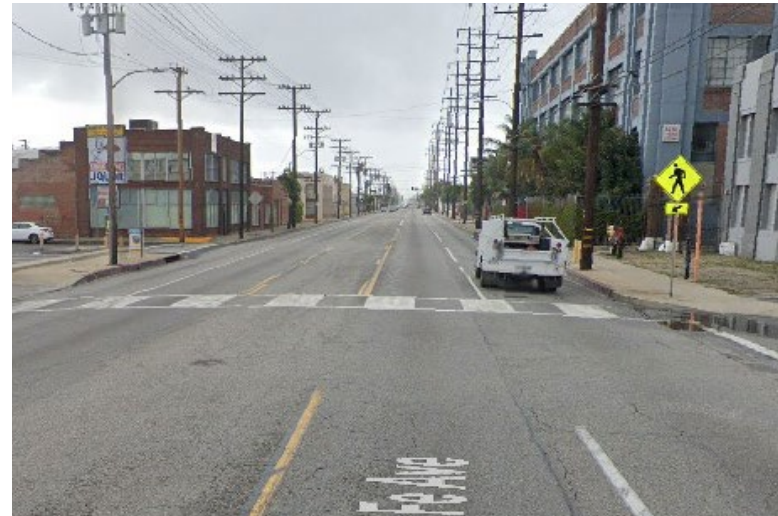
S1 Develop Cluster 1 as a southern gateway into the City of Vernon, related to and supported by the market and residential services available in nearby Huntington Park.



S2 Generate reuse and redevelopment around underutilized buildings which are prime for redevelopment, as well as buildings which have already been redeveloped.



S3 Implement successive measures to calm traffic on Santa Fe Ave, eventually creating more of a 'Main Street' environment.



S4 Link existing businesses and any future outlier development to new uses through the creation of unique east-west pedestrian and bicycle ways on abandoned rail right-of-ways to avoid the more freight-focused roadway corridors.



OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS- SOUTH SANTA FE (CLUSTER 1)

S5 Explore opportunities to break down long blocks west of Santa Fe Ave with new streets, access alleys or paseos.

S6 Create multimodal connections with Cluster 4 through Fruitland Ave or 52nd St.

S7 Mitigate noxious conditions associated with existing heavy industrial uses.

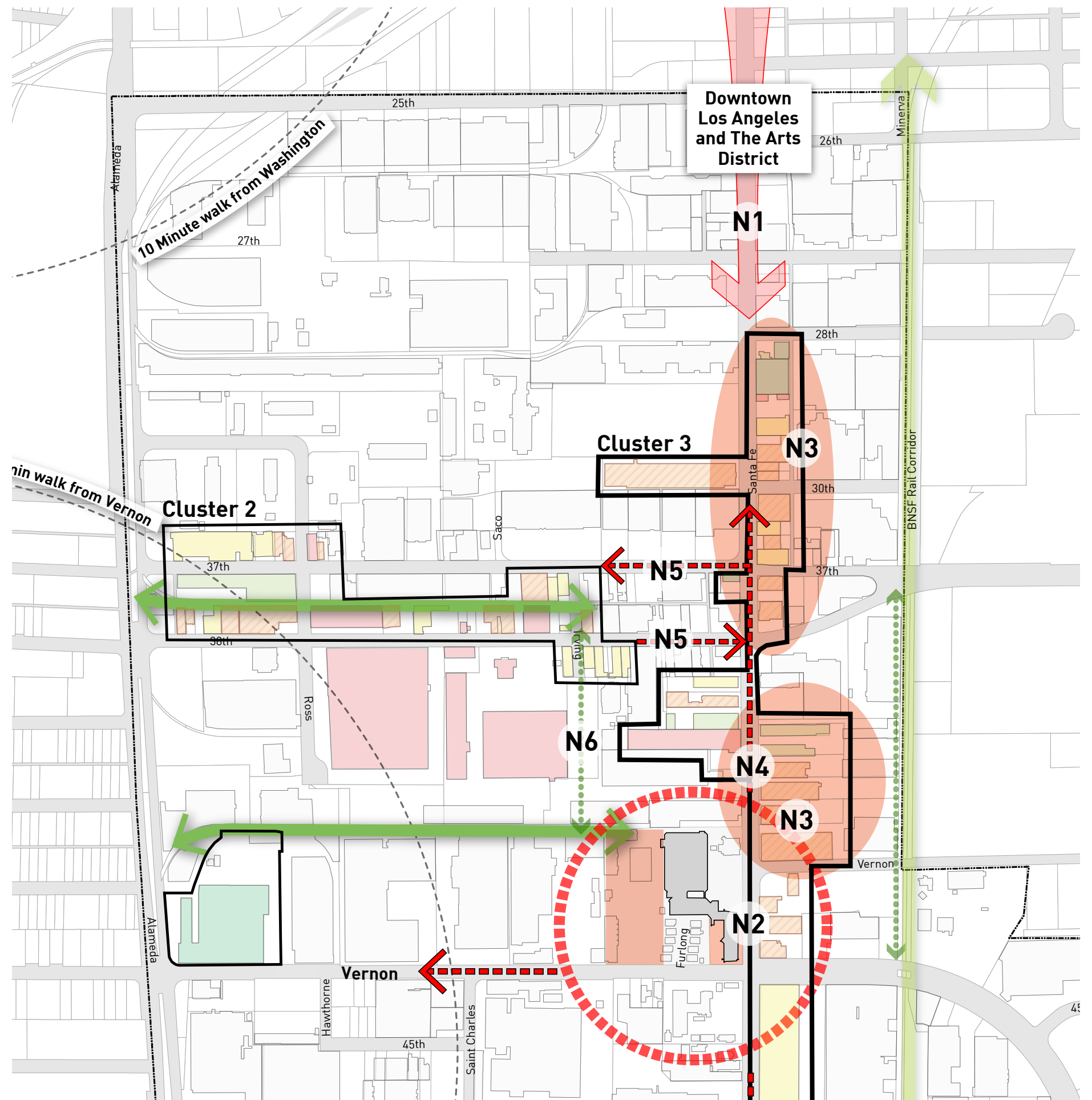


OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS - NORTH SANTA FE (CLUSTER 3)

The North Santa Fe cluster is a loose collection of light industrial and commercial buildings along Santa Fe Avenue, many of which are intact and of good historic character. This cluster includes City Hall, its landscaped forecourt, and the residential and civic uses surrounding it. Some industrial buildings have been refurbished and converted for office and light industrial combinations, such as fashion design and manufacturing. This cluster has the greatest visibility of all the clusters and can most easily pick up on the development and cultural momentum from the Arts District. Live/work development is already occurring on the border of this area in the City of Los Angeles, and mixed industrial, office and retail developments are also good possibilities here.

Santa Fe Avenue presents severe challenges in this portion of the study area due to traffic volumes in excess of 30,000 vehicles per day. As a result, even historic buildings which have been refurbished have oriented their activity away from the street. However, removal of through truck traffic from the street could open up opportunities for these buildings to re-engage the street, and to add on-street parking and pedestrian improvements.

The cluster presents opportunities for linkage to the emerging artisan and production-retail cluster along 37th and 38th Streets west of Santa Fe (Cluster 2), and to Vernon Station along Vernon Avenue. The large multistory building near the corner of Vernon Avenue and Alameda Street is isolated, yet still a considerable opportunity for transit-oriented development.



N1 Develop Cluster 3 as a new northern gateway into Vernon, drawing on the energy and development from Downtown Los Angeles and the Arts District.



N2 Enhance Civic Center and area around it with retail amenities and other redevelopment. Potentially create prime activated corners at Santa Fe/East Vernon or Santa Fe/West Vernon/Pacific Blvd.



N3 Generate reuse and redevelopment around groupings of already operating destination businesses and redeveloped properties, mostly along the eastern edge of Santa Fe.



N4 Transforming the character of Santa Fe north of Vernon Ave will be a long-term project but the corridor offers the opportunity to become a 'Main Street' focused experience linking the corridor-facing existing and new redevelopment parcels into a compact and walkable sub-district.



OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS - NORTH SANTA FE (CLUSTER 3)

N5 Connect along east-west roadways and abandoned rail right-of-ways to connect existing businesses, future outlier development, Cluster 2 and Metro Rail.



N6 Explore ways to break down large blocks east and west of Santa Fe with new streets, access alleys or pedestrian paseos.

