

Visitacion Valley

Geography and street grid seemingly link Visitacion Valley not to San Francisco but to cities to the south: Brisbane and Daly City. The slopes of McLaren Park hide the rest of San Francisco from view while Highway 101 separates Visitacion Valley from South Bayshore. This, perhaps leads to its reputation as San Francisco's most overlooked Eastern Neighborhood. Recently, however, a number of community members arose in impassioned opposition to a Home Depot development proposed on one of the City's few remaining large and underused industrial parcels. Their determined resistance evolved into active mobilization of the rest of the community to start a community-based planning process for Visitacion Valley.

Visitacion Valley is in the basin located southeast of McLaren Park and reaching all the way out to the Bay. In 1777, a Franciscan priest first named the basin La Visitacion to commemorate the Virgin Mary's visit to her cousin St. Elizabeth. Nowadays, this valley is a collection of residential neighborhoods lying just below the park and surrounding a small industrial district. It is bounded by City borders to the south and Highway 101 to the east.

Bayshore Boulevard, the main artery in the neighborhood, runs north-south and bisects the Valley into the residential neighborhoods of Vis Valley and Little Hollywood. Leland Avenue, running east-west, is the neighborhood's commercial strip. Little Hollywood, with its pastel Southern California-style bungalows, is an unusually isolated San Francisco residential neighborhood for it lies between Visitacion Valley's industrial quarter and Highway 101. Sunnydale, a public housing neighborhood, is sometimes portrayed as distinct from the rest of Visitacion Valley. It was built in 1941 primarily to house low-income residents, including the war-time shipyard workers from the nearby Hunters Point naval shipyard.

Wedged between Vis Valley and Little Hollywood is the Valley's industrial quarter. The vacant Schlage Lock Factory facility is



located on a prime piece of industrially zoned land immediately east of Bayshore Boulevard. In operation for over 70 years, this manufacturing plant was once integral not only to the local economy of Visitacion Valley but the Bay Area region as well. The factory closed in 1999 and the 14-acre site remains underutilized. Home Depot, a national retail chain, recently attempted to locate a 108,000 square foot regional outlet on the site. But neighborhood opposition turned project developers away.

An Emerging Community

Visitacion Valley is home to a diverse, young, largely immigrant, and low-income population. Despite differences, Visitacion Valley residents are uniting to tackle problems often associated with poverty: petty and juvenile crime, low school scores and local unemployment. No longer willing to accept the lack of recreational space, Visitacion Valley residents linked up with non-profit organizations to create a much-needed open space on Leland Avenue.

Although Chinese Americans represent the largest ethnic group in the neighborhood, the ethnic blend of Visitacion Valley's population is more diverse than San Francisco. Approximately 14,000 people live in Visitacion Valley. Of this total, 59% are of

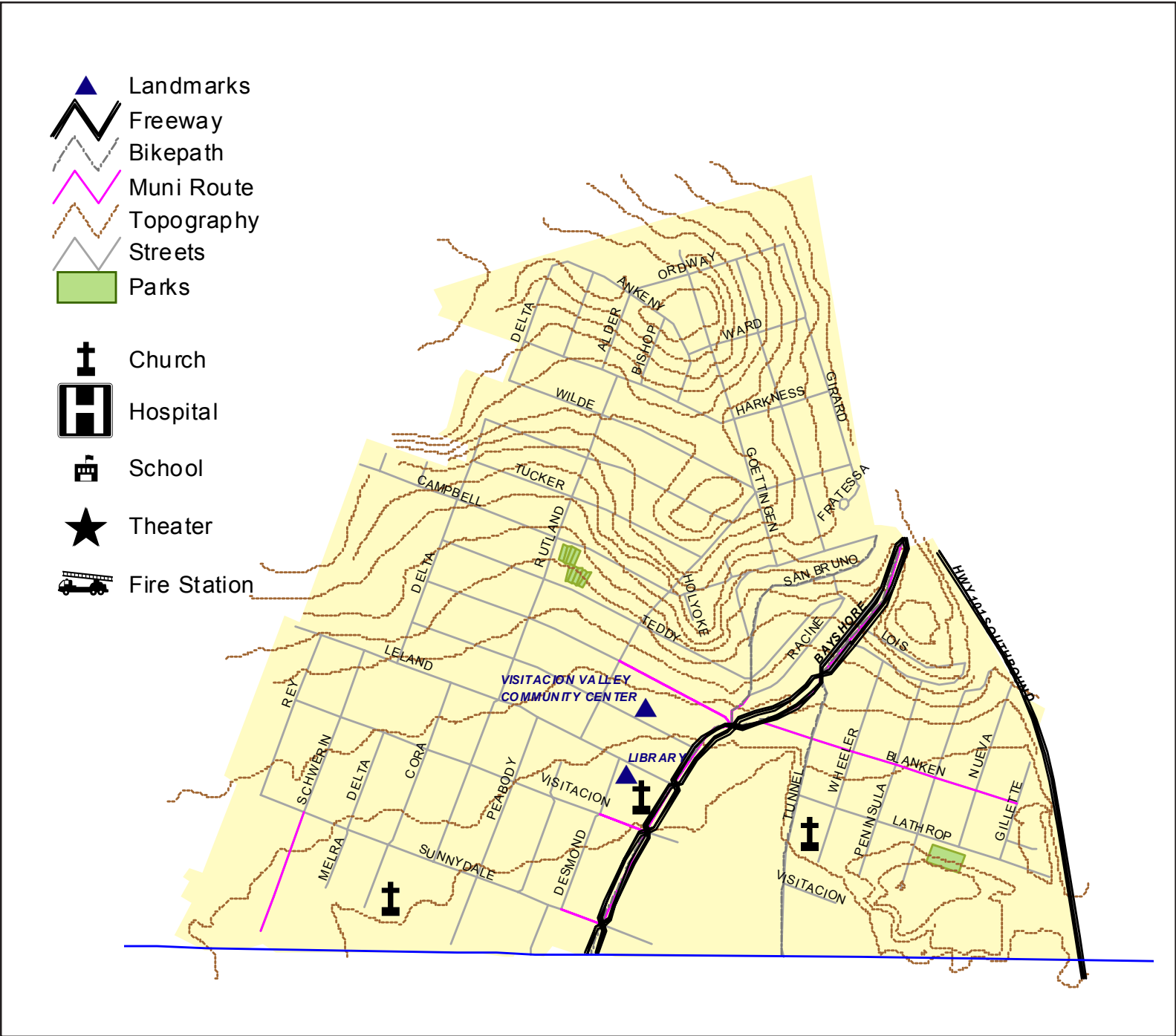


Figure 6.5.1 Visitacion Valley Community Facilities

Asian ancestry, 13% are African Americans and 15% are white. Some 2,200 people or about 16% are Hispanic. While this assortment of people is quite evenly spread, there is a concentrated pocket of poor, predominantly African Americans in Sunnydale.

Visitacion Valley has a young population. Unlike the City which exhibited an overall decrease in the numbers of San Franciscans under 18 years old (from 16% in 1990 to 14.5% in 2000), Visitacion Valley's children make up 22% of the population. The number of young adults between 18 and 24 has also declined slightly Citywide to 9%. The young adult age group makes up about 10% of the Visitacion Valley's population.

Visitacion Valley's population is relatively less well-off than the rest of the City. In 1999, their median household income was estimated to be \$43,700, compared to San Francisco's \$50,800. It is also estimated that about 20% of households in Visitacion Valley make less than \$15,000 a year. Unemployment in Visitacion Valley is particularly high among African Americans.

Immigrants make up a significant number of Visitacion Valley residents. This character is evidenced in Visitacion Valley Elementary School where 63% of the schoolchildren have limited English language proficiency. Though many Visitacion Valley residents are new immigrants, others have lived in the City for



years and have relocated to Visitacion Valley because of its relatively lower rents and home prices. While escaping the gentrification that other Eastern Neighborhoods went through in the last years of the 1990s, Visitacion Valley nevertheless saw its real estate values grow. However, it still remains affordable to some middle-income households.

Visitacion Valley is one of the City's remaining affordable neighborhoods, perhaps because of its publicly-subsidized housing and nearby industrial uses. Nevertheless, new, attractive affordable housing projects such as Britton Court, Heritage Homes, and John King Senior Housing, are wiping away the stigma of Geneva Towers. It is possible that Visitacion Valley can continue to be a neighborhood where working class people can afford to live.

Visitacion Valley has large unused and vacant parcels east of the Bayshore Freeway that offer possibilities of uses other than industrial. Visitacion Valley residents' opposition to the proposed Home Depot development has led to community efforts to look at alternative land uses that would address the double need for more housing and bringing in more jobs.

Visitacion Valley is also about to realize two major improvements in the neighborhood: upgrade of the CalTrain Bayshore Station and construction of the southern terminus of the new Third Street Light Rail. These developments offer exciting opportunities to

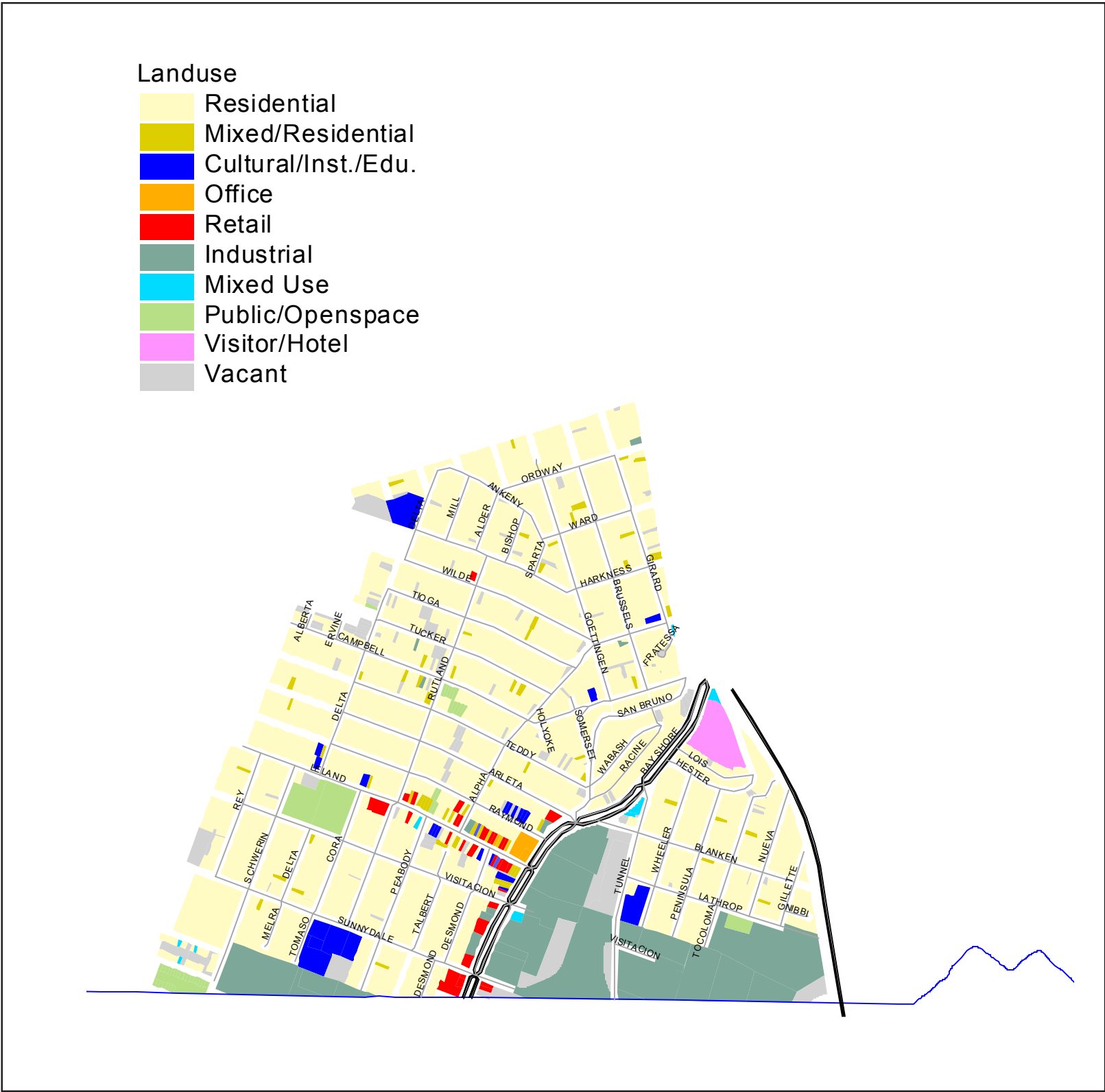


Figure 6.5.2 Visitacion Valley Land Use Map

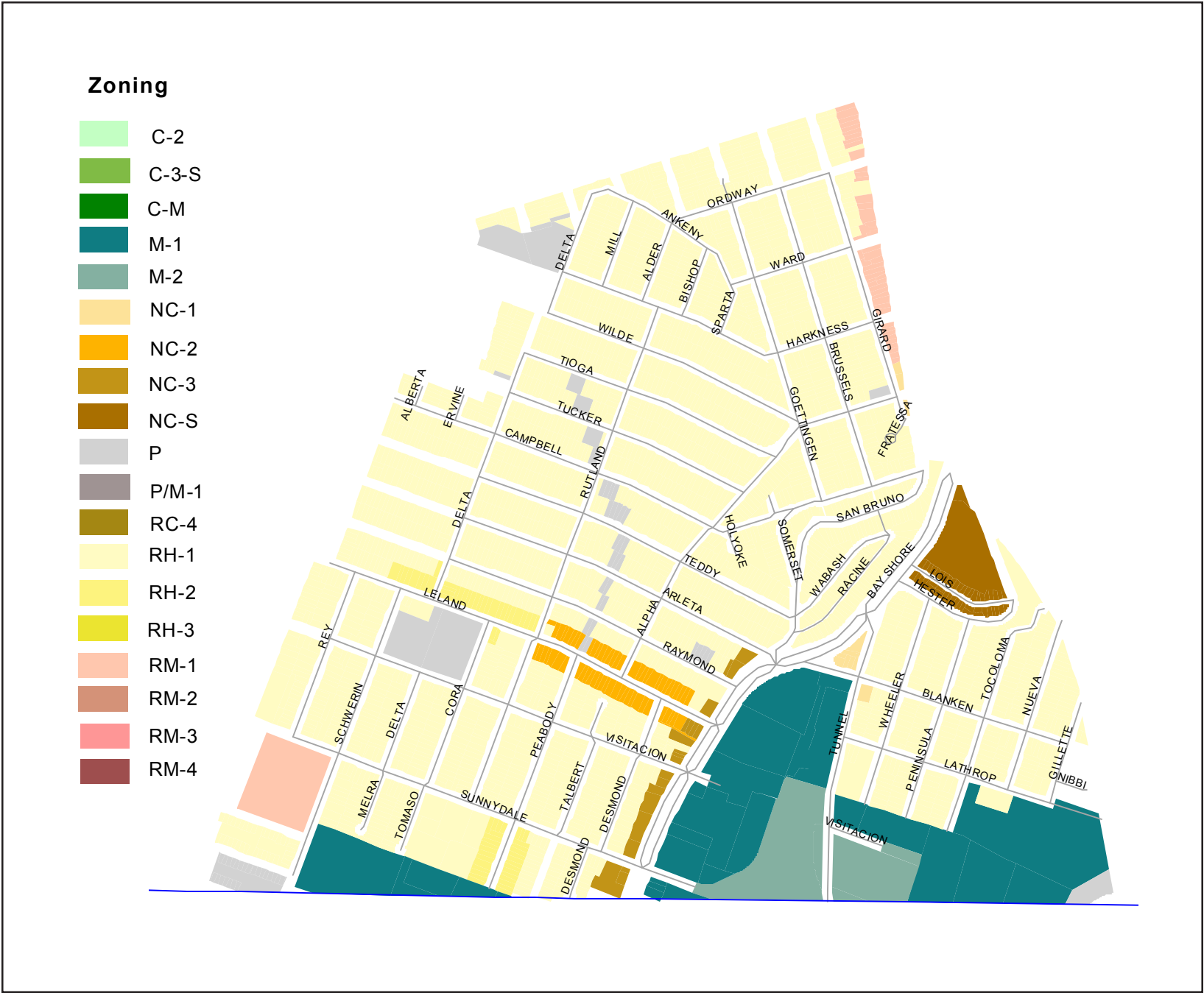


Figure 6.5.3 Visitacion Valley Zoning Regulations Map



weave back Visitacion Valley's divided residential neighborhoods. It will also provide the necessary means to link Visitacion Valley to other parts of the City and the Bay Area.

A Residential Neighborhood

The residential character of Visitacion Valley is apparent to one visiting the neighborhood. Single-family, one-story above garage-type housing dominate the landscape. Most of the housing in Visitacion Valley was built during and immediately after the Second World War. While many appear rundown, these houses are structurally sound.

The lone high-rise in the area, Geneva Towers, was imploded by the City in 1998 after years of neglect and steady deterioration. The 20-story public housing towers had become symbolic of all the socio-economic problems typical of a poor, minority and underserved population. Following its demolition, new affordable townhouses and senior housing were built, with the 1,000 or so former residents given first priority for rentals or homeownership.

Sunnydale is home to about 2,000 people. Unlike Geneva Towers, Sunnydale's barrack style public housing was renovated. The infusion of about \$19 million to modernize and improve some 770 units is believed to have boosted Sunnydale residents' sense of community spirit.

Leland Avenue: A Thriving Neighborhood Commercial Strip

A small but lively commercial strip along Leland Avenue provides day-to-day neighborhood shopping and services to Visitacion Valley residents. A limited grouping of retail and small business establishments can also be found along Bayshore Boulevard. The predominance of auto-related shops on this part of Bayshore Boulevard however, suggests that these are more than just local neighborhood-serving businesses.

The restaurants, convenience markets, and herb shops on Leland Avenue reflect Visitacion Valley's largely Asian population. Indeed, the four commercial blocks along Leland Avenue has earned the nickname 'Fourth Chinatown.' Despite the worn out frontages, a walk on Leland Avenue reveals a thriving neighborhood retail and service district. Beauty shops and nail salons are





typical businesses, probably because these have low start-up costs that many enterprising, newly arrived immigrants can manage to fund. Laundromats, dry cleaners, barber shops and pharmacies, complete the neighborhood retail establishments easily accessed by pedestrians. Yet, for other Visitacion Valley residents ñ especially those living in Little Hollywood and Sunnydale ñ there are no neighborhood services similar to that found along Leland Avenue. For Little Hollywood and Sunnydale, the nearest major commercial strip accessible by car or transit is over two miles to the north on Mission Street.

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Dun and Bradstreet
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Grubb & Ellis
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Mayor Willie L. Brown

Planning Commission

Hector Chinchilla, President

William W. Fay, Vice-President

Roslyn Baltimore

Cynthia Joe

Myrna Lim

Jim Salinas

Anita Theoharis

Planning Department

Gerald G. Green, Director of Planning

Amit K. Ghosh, Chief of Comprehensive Planning

Project Manager

Miriam Chion

Project Coordinators

Susan Exline

Stephen Shotland

Jill Slater

Project Team

Catherine Bauman

Scott Edmondson

Rocio Lam

Jonathan Lau

Chitra Moitra

Teresa Ojeda

Julie Smith

Elaine Tope

GIS Coordinator

Chitra Moitra

Graphic Design

Rocio Lam