



Candy Rosales <candy.rosales@lacity.org>

Hollywood Community Plan

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poonsy6603@aol.com <poonsy6603@aol.com>

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To: poonsy6603@aol.com

The Hollywood Community Plan Update – From Bad to Worse

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Former LA City Planner Dick Platkin has been closely watching the evolution of the Hollywood Community Plan ([2012-2-24 CPC Determination Letter – Hollywood CPU](#)) as it moves toward approval by the City Council and becomes the model for future development throughout LA. Teacher, writer and consultant to community groups on LA planning issues, Platkin's in-depth analysis of the revised Hollywood Plan goes straight to the heart of the matter: Will it provide the basis for "a revival of the quality of life in Los Angeles, or even to an authentic, sustainable urban expansion" as city officials claim or will it "boomerang and accelerate the deterioration of an already stagnant city." The information and insights he provides and the conclusions he reaches need to be taken seriously both inside and outside City Hall.

By Dick Platkin

LA's Vanished History of Population and Economic Expansion: In lieu of updating the General Plan Framework Element, the legally adopted citywide plan for the entire city of Los Angeles, based on the latest 2010 census data, the Department of City Planning is slowly updating 35 local community plans on a scattershot basis, based on old census data. While this a methodologically shoddy approach to planning Los Angeles in an era of economic hard times, budget cutbacks, certain natural disasters, peak oil, and climate change, this choice does not result from politicians who snuck out of workshops on municipal governance or planners who skipped a critical lecture on urban general plans. In both cases, sloppy planning should not be confused with lack of knowledge.

The real reason for this piecemeal approach to planning Los Angeles for the early 21st Century is that the old data still depicts Los Angeles as a young, growing metropolis. These data portray a city that has decades of expanding population and employment ahead of it. The only limitation to this vision is LA's finite land and the reluctance of residential neighborhoods to be further bulldozed or hidden by nearby mega-projects and McMansions. Therefore,

recent citywide plans, in particular the General Plan Framework Element, called for new commercial and residential real estate projects to be concentrated in commercial centers and on the major mass transit corridors connecting these centers. This vision, which attempted to please all parties, is the essence of the original General Plan Centers Concept plan of the 1970's and its reincarnation in the General Plan Framework Element of the 1990's.

Annual Monitoring Program: The General Plan Framework Element, however, ratcheted up the Centers concept by focusing on all categories of infrastructure, not just transit, to serve an ever-growing city. Furthermore, the Framework insisted that the city's population, housing, and employment trends, as well as all major infrastructure categories, must be carefully monitored on an annual basis to ensure that the Framework's citywide policies and programs performed as anticipated. If the annual monitoring report indicated that the General Plan was not unfolding as intended — such as population growth that was higher or lower than expected or infrastructure user demand and capacity that was unforeseen — then the Planning Department was to revise to the Framework's policies and programs in response to these changes.

While this approach is admirable, it is important to examine what has remained the same and what has changed since the Los Angeles City Council adopted the Framework in 1996. One thing that has remained the same is the rhetoric of the old plans, that Los Angeles needs to accommodate future population and employment growth — *should it occur* — through large scale commercial development in centers and major transit corridor. This approach, in fact, is part of the political and press campaign to heavily promote the proposed Update of the Hollywood Community Plan, despite massive opposition from Hollywood's residents and their many civic organizations. For example, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa held a special press event on the roof a Hollywood apartment building on Monday, December 19, 2011, to promote the proposed Update of the Hollywood Community Plan based on this exact premise.

While the rhetoric of the General Plan has not changed, its underlying basis is now much different. Unlike the post-WWII era, Los Angeles is no longer a growing a city. According to William Foster, author of The Reluctant Metropolis, Los Angeles is now an older city, similar to those in the east coast or mid-west, and it gave up its boomtown status at least a decade ago. In recent decades, in fact, Los Angeles has lost much of its industrial and financial base. It no longer hosts the headquarters of any Fortune 500 companies. Entertainment production has migrated to many other cities, such as Vancouver, British Columbia. Major employers of well paid, unionized, blue-collar workers, such as auto, metals, and even aerospace, have largely vanished. Even low wage industries, like the garment industry, have seen flat to declining employment. Overall, LA City and LA County have had no employment gain in the past two decades, the 1990 base year for the General Plan Framework, which was supposed to be replaced or updated when the new 2010 census data became available.

Two Changed Features: Furthermore, at least two other features have also changed. The population boom never appeared, and, in fact, most Los Angeles neighborhoods had static or declining population between 1990 to 2010, especially during the past decade. Hollywood, for example, lost 15,000 people during this period, while the number of housing units in Hollywood barely increased. These latter figures, furthermore, are inflated because they reflect new housing construction, not the number of housing units lost to demolition or taken off the market due to disrepair or alternative uses.

Another important change is in the status of public infrastructure and public services. Waves of public sector budget cuts have resulted in significant reductions in maintenance across all categories. As a result, the second part of the Framework's comprehensive approach has been undercut. Not only has anticipated growth in population, housing, and employment been much lower than predicted, but investment in public infrastructure and public services to maintain existing levels and upgrade them to meet increases in user demand have not appeared. This development, of course, is critical because even a static population can have increased demands for automobile use, electricity, water, sewage, recreation, and related infrastructure categories. For example, a family moving into a new McMansion will use far more resources and generate far more waste than a similar family living in a traditional single family home or apartment. The contrast between these recent trends and those predicted for the same time period in the Framework is substantial.

For example, the Framework predicted that Los Angeles would have 4,300,000 residents in 2010, 550,000 people higher than the actual 3,750,000 people counted by the 2010 Census.

Los Angeles is stagnant city: Rather than being a perpetual motion machine, Los Angeles has been overtaken by entropy. Everything is slowing down or declining, yet the City's Plans are based on the old growth model. A city that was predicted to grow at historic rates and provide the necessary services and infrastructure to serve this growth has achieved neither. It is stagnating on both fronts.

Instead, we are left with a hollowed out vision. Tinsel town is old and tired. Furthermore it had two major civil disturbances, and one, in 1992, was the most destructive such event in the United States since the Civil War. And, not only are the socioeconomic conditions which gave rise to that upheaval still present, but Los Angeles is still ripe for a killer earthquake dubbed "The Big One", while climate change is also bound to exacerbate the floods and fires that periodically threaten Los Angeles.

If this is not an overall scenario for returning to basics and fundamentally update the city's outdated General Plan Framework Element, based on actual trends carefully extrapolated into the future, and then confirmed through a comprehensive monitoring program, then it is hard to imagine what other conditions would trigger an update of the citywide General Plan.

Into this snake pit the City's elected officials have pushed hard for the Update of the Hollywood Community Plan, followed by similar updates for other community plans. While the proposed plan ignores the trends outlined above, it nevertheless is a plan based on economic stagnation. While one hand denies stagnation, the other hand attempts to alleviate it through yet another real estate bubble. This is why the Hollywood Community Plan Update fails to consider any of the demographic or infrastructure trends noted above, and instead resorts to large scale up-zoning and up-planning of Hollywood's commercial corridors, as well as some residential neighborhoods.

The proposed Update is based on the neo-liberal premise that if real estate investment is deregulated, developers will pursue what their business models recommend, resulting in private sector mega-projects and skyscrapers whose economic benefits will then ripple across the entire local economy. Stripped of its boosterism, the proposed Hollywood Plan Update is nothing more than the application of Reaganomics and Clintonomics to municipal real estate.

Will it work? Only time will tell. There are, after all, mountains of cash warehoused around the world searching for profitable investment outlets. Plus, we know from the still ongoing financial crisis that began in 2008, that there is no shortage of institutional and individual investors who are willing to take a chance on highly risky real estate projects. Furthermore, we know from the current crisis, as well as the Savings and Loan Crisis on the 1980's, that the Federal Government has a rich history of bailing out bad real estate deals when their failures reach epidemic levels. Few people are ever prosecuted during these busts, and most of the bad projects were sold back to the investors who initially lost them at a dime on the dollar.

Replicating the Hollywood Plan throughout Los Angeles: But, what will happen in Hollywood, as well as the rest of Los Angeles, if the Hollywood Update model is replicated? Will a city that can already accommodate 8 million people based on existing plans and zones suddenly boom if it is up-planned and up-zoned to accommodate 12 or 15 million people? The answer is that this strategy is doomed to fail. Even if hundreds of thousands of new residents streamed into Los Angeles, the city's already strapped infrastructure and public services would be overwhelmed.

While no one's crystal ball is fool proof, the Miracle Mile on Wilshire Boulevard is an indication that most of the mega-projects that would appear in Hollywood when the zones and plan designations are relaxed will be fiascos. Anyone who drives on the Miracle Mile in the day will see half a dozen new mid-rise, mixed-use projects. They are large buildings, with apartments or condos stacked on top of ground floor retail. So far, so good, but take the same drive at night, and you will notice that few lights are on. Most of the residential units and many of the storefronts are vacant.

Is it any wonder? In a city with a hollowed-out economy, poverty and inequality appear in lieu of new jobs. Meanwhile City Hall's reluctance to engage in any economic planning and monitoring, as well as adequately invest in public

services and public infrastructure, ensures that there will be few high end consumers to buy, lease, rent, or shop at the new stores and residential units. While the now famous 1 percent, or the less well-known top 10 percent, possess enough consumer power to support luxury stores in Beverly Hills and new shopping centers, like The Grove, there just are not enough of these well off shoppers to fuel another real estate bubble. Just because there is enough idle cash, lobbyists and publicists, compliant politicians, and in-house zoning technicians to inflate a real estate bubble, does not mean there are enough affluent consumers to sustain it.

Furthermore, what will give Los Angeles an edge to attract these new residents consumers, when it fails to maintain or improve its infrastructure, or even its appearance? In the final analysis, there just is not much that is appealing about high unemployment rates, traffic congestion, pot holes, unreliable and uncomfortable buses, 20 miles of subway, bad air, bill boards and supergraphics, treeless streets and boulevards, overhead utility lines, buckled sidewalks, cracker box apartments, and rundown parks and schools.

The chance that a city whose long-term approach to municipal governance is based on low regulation and low public amenities can successfully revive itself through a real estate bubble pitched to high end consumers is not good.

The prospects that the Hollywood Community Plan Update, alone or expanded to the other 34 community plan areas, will actually lead to a revival of the quality of life in Los Angeles, or even to an authentic, sustainable urban expansion that will not implode on itself, is minimal.

Instead the chance that it will boomerang and accelerate the deterioration of an already stagnant city is nearly certain. Since these outcomes are so obvious to so many people — at least those out of the City Hall orbit — the really tough question is what drives this folly? Until those making these decisions reveal their phone logs, release their financial records, report on their private close door meetings, or dictate their memoirs in their gated and gilded compounds, we will just have to assume that they had more change jangling in their pockets downstairs than common sense upstairs.