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Plan Santa Barbara: A Vision for Visionaries

By Paul Hernadi

Five years of planning and discussions are about to culminate in City Council's six work sessions between July 13 and August 3. So we are almost at the top of a magic mountain from which three seemingly disparate visions of Santa Barbara's future could appear ready to be integrated after all.

This integrated vision holds out the promise of reconciling the community's need for diverse housing opportunities with its long-standing commitment to sustain the city's historically evolved character while living within our limited resources.

To achieve such intertwining of our core social, historical, and environmental values, Plan Santa Barbara should, as proposed,

- maintain the city's current residential growth rate of about 6.9 percent (2,800 new dwelling units over 20 years) and
- insist that most new residential units be small enough to be "affordable by design" because the housing needs of our work force cannot be met by increased legal requirements and public or employer subsidies alone.

In addition, the Plan should

- limit new commercial growth to 1 million square feet because the originally proposed 2 million square-foot limit would further deteriorate our jobs/housing imbalance.

As a regional center for culture, higher education, tourism, administration, and health care, Santa Barbara will never achieve complete balance between its employment and housing opportunities. But Planning Commission's preference for limiting the commercial growth of the next twenty years to 1 million square feet makes sense because we shouldn't expect other communities to house an increasing proportion of our work force any more than other communities should expect us to employ an increasing proportion of their residents.

To be sure, some of the public debates to date were generating more heat than light, and some proponents of certain policies kept ignoring the likelihood of serious unintended consequences. To reveal my own foremost reservation, widely shared in the community: I don't understand why several planning commissioners favor the establishment of large High Density zones with up to 45 dwelling units per acre as their "base density." With the additional 25 percent inclusionary housing requirement, also favored by the Commission, such a baseline would permit 56 or 57 dwelling units per acre to be built on top of a commercial ground floor which could additionally re-develop the commercial square footage currently existing on the site. It is one thing for La Casa de las Fuentes and other fully affordable housing developments to receive discretionary approvals for 57 price-fixed or rent-controlled dwelling units per acre. But it is a completely different thing to propose routine approvals of the same residential density for mixed use projects whose additional commercial component, along with 75

percent of the 57 dwelling units, would be sold at market-rate prices to the highest bidders.

Beyond doubt, numerous clarifications and considerable fine-tuning are needed before City Council can responsibly approve finalizing the Draft General Plan and the Draft Environmental Impact Report. For example, questions like the following should be answered concerning various consultant reports and other topics:

- Would congestion in the city increase or decrease if long-distance commuters were to relocate their entire families into the city?
- Would downtown businesses lose or gain customers if metered curbside parking made easy access to their merchandise costly but more reliably available?
- How much distance should be required between the air pollution generated by heavy stop-and-go traffic and any new residential developments downtown or along congested transit corridors?
- Would our single-family neighborhoods turn into crowded duplex zones if the current standards for secondary units (e.g., the affordability, open space, and on-site parking requirement) were relaxed?
- How much assured profit would sufficiently motivate private developers to propose a larger than the required number of affordably price-controlled condominiums? The consultant's report suggested that 15 percent profit would be minimally needed but failed to consider the likely moderating impact of stricter land use policies on the cost of producing affordable housing for the work force.

Major clarifications will be offered, one hopes, in City Council's work sessions during the summer. That would encourage more of us to read the two-dimensional planning documents with the visionary's 3D glasses on and to glimpse the image of Santa Barbara as it could and should be in 2030: a cautiously growing city whose preserved small town charm and diverse metropolitan culture continue to delight residents, commuters, and visitors alike while its balance between local jobs and local housing steadily improves. And with that inspiring image in mind, we could resolve to help each other and City Council to turn the vision into reality.

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