

SUBMISSION TO: *Plan Santa Barbara*
RE: Draft General Plan revision

THE NEED TO PRESERVE OLDER NEAR- DOWNTOWN RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOODS

The draft General Plan fails to recognize and appreciate the critical role played by our older, near-downtown residential neighborhoods - and the need to preserve and protect them from transformational development.

Page 83 of the Draft Land Use Element lists, under “Neighborhood Qualities”:

- A sense of place and small town and intimate scale feel, particularly in the single family and historical districts

I take issue with the qualification: “...*particularly in the single family ...* (if by that is meant primarily those that are *zoned* single family), and the limitation to “*historical districts*” (if by that is meant only those currently afforded some sort of formal historical recognition or protection).

I contend that it is the close-in, old residential neighborhoods – most of which are currently zoned multi-family (R-2, R-3, or that fall within the commercial zones) that especially give our city its sense of place, small-town charm and intimacy. And it is these that require protection if they are to continue to do so.

What is our “Small Town Character” anyway?

What *really* gives Santa Barbara its small town flavor? It is a very unique feature that somehow endeavored to survive here: **the older, primarily single family and duplex residential neighborhoods that immediately surround the downtown: neighborhoods that exist very much in the original form in which they developed in the early part of the last century.**

These old neighborhoods - that provide us glimpses of life here from the late Victorian era through the 20s and 30s - are seamlessly contiguous with the urbanized downtown core (no belts of “transitional” buffer intervene). Ours is one of the rare cities where you can literally walk a few blocks from downtown into neighborhoods that evoke images from Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson.

This is a trait usually limited to our most charming *small* cities (examples like Natchez, Marblehead, Ojai, Naples (FL) come to mind). It is exceedingly rare in medium sized cities (beside Boulder, I can think of very few). We can’t afford to lose these

neighborhoods, even for the sake of pursuing hopes of achieving housing affordability (there are better places for the location of new housing - such as right in the downtown core, where there are numerous sites that could benefit esthetically from well-designed mixed use buildings).

If we *really* want to preserve our traditional small town character and charm, we should preserve this unique aspect of Santa Barbara.

What puts these neighborhoods at risk?

These old streets, houses and neighborhoods are really under-appreciated assets - *endangered* assets. My fear is that one of our most unique, essential resources may suffer the fate of so many things that get ignored simply because they are too close, too familiar, and hiding right under our noses.

The need to preserve our older residential streetscapes and neighborhoods can easily be overlooked. For example, some of the old houses on the streets just off lower State might look, today, a little seedy, funky and disposable (sometimes cited as “opportunity” sites for new multi-unit projects). We need only look to what is being done in some other cities that have come to appreciate what proper nurturing of old neighborhoods can afford them.

Instead of trying to protect what historic character exists, we allow, as a matter of policy, the existence of past instances of incompatible development within these neighborhoods to serve as justification the development of new incompatible structures, which further erode their character. We allow transformational development on the basis of existing zoning that does not reflect the *de facto* character of these neighborhoods. We fail to reward these neighborhoods for having “preserved themselves”, in spite of archaic zoning that has existed for generations and would have, if exploited, permitted their transformation.

Gems of houses and streetscapes that lie within the downtown commercial zone are subject to unconscionable instances of incompatible development as the result of the recent dropping the setback requirements for mixed use projects that can be built within those neighborhoods.

What are we missing?

Anybody with a little foresight can see that these dwellings may one day be integral parts of charming neighborhoods that border and complement a downtown core that itself could become vital, lively and filled with residents. We see this happening in other places throughout the country, as people begin to cherish and embrace every bit of physical history that can be salvaged and incorporated into their cities’ modern fabric.

This approach could also greatly benefit our tourism industry. Opportunities to visit and experience authentic and viable “retro-oriented” residential communities are enduringly -

and increasingly - popular. And this is one tourist industry boon that benefits local residents - by enhancing our sense of “community”. (These phenomena became very evident to me during a recent trip to the old cities of the Mississippi Delta.)

What about the potentials of Historic Protection?

The lack of historical protection afforded old residential neighborhoods in this city– in light of the lip service given our “historical and traditional” ethic - has always astounded me. We walk through gems of old neighborhoods – like those just off of, and literally the length of, the downtown core (both east and west) – and realize that, with the exception of one street (Brinkerhoff), they are unprotected. In contrast to the degree to which we dote over the historic commercial downtown (El Pueblo), the lack of appreciation afforded the nearby residential areas is shocking.

I lived in a North Carolina town, much smaller and relatively ordinary in comparison to Santa Barbara, that today has eleven historical districts, most of them protecting residential neighborhoods. This is not uncommon in cities in which historical consciousness weighs heavily.

The timidity with which we approach the subject of historical protection of our neighborhoods is appalling. The attitude seems to prevail here that only neighborhoods of pristine and unadulterated authenticity qualify for protection consideration. Judging by what is being done in other cities, this is not at all necessary. Our adherence to such a standard has greatly inhibited the potential for preserving an urban element that is responsible in large measure for the character (and tourism potential) of this city.

This deserves a place in the General Plan

It would be a shame if the new General Plan should not give this matter its due attention. Failure to do so would be an opportunity lost that will haunt us in the future.

Respectfully Submitted,
Joe Rution
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