

City Hall sustaining itself in a self-induced development binge



OUR TOWN BY TED WINTERER

I've mouthed off in my last two columns about Santa Monica's Sustainable City Plan and the ways, such as the continuing McMansionization of public facilities, in which city officials disregard the precepts of sustainability. This will be my last rant on the topic for a while, lest my editor relegate "Our Town" to the back pages between the comics and the classifieds. Imagine the indignity of being read only by devotees of "The Dinette Set" and the massage ads.

Although the plan is an admirable and vital document, it fails to address the 800-pound gorilla: The unsustainable growth of City Hall itself.

Santa Monica's population decreased by 3,000 from 1990 to 2000 — to 84,000. Yet in the last 10 years, the number of municipal employees rose from 1,312 to 1,741, according to city staff. An optimist could extrapolate a future when every resident has their own staff person at City Hall: "Joe, it's Ted. The street trees in front of my house need trimming. Free for lunch?"

Consequently, salaries and wages now account for 71 percent of disbursements from City Hall's general fund, according to city documents. That makes it harder to allocate monies for other beneficial uses, such as books for libraries or public restrooms.

More alarming are the statistics on City Hall's revenues and expenditures, according to city documents. Since the 1996-1997 fiscal year, expenditures have risen roughly 45 percent while revenues have grown only about 30 percent — both increases far outpace the rate of inflation. I'll never be Nobel laureate in economics, but that doesn't strike me as a sustainable trend. And it's predicted that in the next five years the dollars the city takes in will expand by only 14.6 percent while the amount it pays out will swell by 18.7 percent, according to press reports detailing the city budget earlier this year.

Then there's city officials' ambitious plans for capital improvements over the next decade: \$680 million in spending on public works, including \$85 million on a City Hall renovation and new city services building, ostensibly required by the growth of our government. Anyone who's watched the ballooning of the original estimates for the new library or the Public Safety Building might surmise that the true cost for these proposed projects is more like a cool billion dollars. Sure, lots

of that may be paid for by other sources such as grants, partnerships or bonds, but a good chunk will have to come from annual revenues. Something's got to give.

Now, don't start thinking I just returned from the Howard Jarvis Boot Camp, and want to roll back taxes and cut government to its bare bones. I enjoy the bevy of services and amenities provided by City Hall. What troubles me is the chronic disparity between income and expenses means that City Hall must always be looking for new revenue to feed its maw. And that hunger distorts policy decisions.

It's no accident that Santa Monica spends little on homelessness relative to its other outlays: Providing shelter and counsel to unfortunates doesn't generate a dime of taxes. Same goes for traffic woes — solving them doesn't yield a farthing. But parking, the third in the troika of resident priorities, that's a different story: You can charge for parking.

Thus the curious movement afoot at the Pier Restoration Corp. to expand parking north of the pier, even though the beach lots are already underutilized. The reason? To hold more revenue-generating events such as "Cavalia." Those blasted beaches don't earn a red cent but, hey, pave 'em with asphalt and we'll make a few bucks.

Or consider City Hall's ambitions for rebuilding the recycling and transfer station at the city yards, even when the private hauler next door has offered to take over waste management at a competitive price. The 2003 staff report acknowledges the "land might be usable for park-type uses, including playfields." But the report concludes that "(n)one of the alternative uses of this space discussed above would generate the same amount of revenue" and instead recommends a new facility that could make even more money by importing trash from other cities. Those pesky parks: Maybe we ought to start charging for their use.

And why would city staff encourage the Macerich Co. to design a new Santa Monica Place with 21-story towers instead of remodeling the existing building? Ignore the rhetoric about a world-class project to put our town on the map. Nope, it's all about the tax dollars a behemoth project would generate.

So perhaps it's time to slow the growth of our government and stop the imprudent decisions wrought by the need for more revenues. After all, sustainability is really about living within your means.

(Ted Winterer also has trouble balancing his checkbook and could use some more revenue. He can be reached at ourtownsmdp@aol.com.)