

Santa Monica is experiencing some growing pains



OUR TOWN BY TED WINTERER

Growth in our town has been a hot topic of late. Many feel new developments need to be downsized, if not stopped all together. Others believe they're necessary to provide more housing and power the local economic engine.

My own perspective is shaped by what I humbly call the "Ted Winterer Theory of Movie-going and Growth." It used to be, in pretty recent memory, that Santa Monica was a sleepy little burg. If you wanted to see a movie, you drove to Westwood or the Marina. Then along came the Third Street Promenade and the rebirth of downtown, large office complexes and new jobs, an expanded tourist industry and a revitalized pier. Suddenly that sleepy little burg was a cosmopolitan city with movie theaters.

I'm not opposed to these consequences of remaking our town. I like the energy of a livelier city. I enjoy a wider choice in nightlife and shopping, and appreciate an increased tax base funding infrastructure

for improvements and more services.

But now many people find it too arduous to see a movie on the Promenade, especially weekends. Rather than battle traffic, difficult parking and crowds, they drive to Westwood or the Marina to catch a flick. Now that we've come full circle on locals' cinema habits, my theory states that we need to slow things down.

So how does one manage growth in a sensible manner that reflects the community's vision? One can write an angry letter to the editor regarding traffic at Fourth Street and Colorado Avenue, or bend the ear of a City Council member about the new towers proposed at Santa Monica Place. Venting gas in a column is another way to reduce stress over these issues and better than kicking the dog or swilling too much pinot noir.

But by far the preferable route is to rewrite the documents that govern the future of Santa Monica. (Warning: What follows here is stuff generally fit for consumption only by policy wonks. But try to resist the urge to put down this paper and refill your latte.)

City Hall is updating two key components of its general plan. Just what is a general plan and why should you care? It's a set of book-length documents that detail the policies and means for attaining

the community's goals in various elements: Land use, circulation, housing, open space, safety, noise, historic preservation and conservation.

Still with me? For the first time since 1984, City Hall is revising what's known as the "Land Use Element," which sets policy for land use and urban design, and its companion document, the "Zoning Ordinance," which executes these goals by specifying building height, mass and the like. Also in the works is a new "Circulation Element" to guide transportation policy. It governs how you get around town, whether by car, bus, bike or foot.

Now I know all of this is about as exciting as making toast. But the revisions to these vital documents will determine whether Santa Monica retains what's left of its small-town atmosphere or becomes another Miami Beach. And community input from all is vital. Otherwise, these decisions will be left to the Planning Commission and the City Council — part-time officials who will have to rely on scant input from the handful of activists and gadflies who regularly show up for their meetings and on feedback from city staff.

And without input from the community, city staff will have to formulate its own recommendations for the plan revisions that might not reflect the goals of the peo-

ple. Now I don't suggest city staff might have a conscious bias toward more growth. But if you had a job for Santa Monica, wouldn't you find it more interesting to shepherd new buildings from plans through construction rather than write code to regulate squirrel feeding? We all share that primal urge to build that made Lincoln Logs and Tinker Toys so fascinating when we were young.

So if you can't navigate downtown without getting a migraine or worry about a soulless condo next door that overwhelms your historic bungalow, get involved. Check out the city's two Web sites: www.shapethefuture2025.net, to participate in the update of development standards, and <http://motion.santa-monica.org>, to provide input on the transportation guidelines. Get involved in your local neighborhood organization's effort to poll the area. And attend the Community Workshop on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at John Adams Middle School at Pine and 17th streets.

I don't care if you want skyscrapers and clogged streets. Just participate and make it our general plan for our town.

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