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7 Thoughtful Moments from Our Neighborhood Development Discussion

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Photo by Sam Hodgson

Voice of San Diego's "Neighborhood Development - What Can We Actually Do?" panel discussion at Snowflake Bakery in East Village.

Once you start talking about parking, you usually can't talk about anything else for the rest of the night.

That's what Planning Director Bill Fulton said, jokingly, at one point in our event on neighborhood development Tuesday night after the other panelists had gone back and forth on the city's auto-dependence.

There are a few other issues that are also bound to come up in discussions about how San Diego and its neighborhoods will prepare for future growth, including public transit, density and how to ensure growth doesn't come at the expense of low-income residents.

The panel, with Fulton, former development services director Marcela Escobar-Eck, architect-developer Lloyd Russell, Encanto planning group chair Ken Malbrough and Environmental Health Coalition advocate Georgette Gomez, batted those ideas around Tuesday night, but also tread less traveled grounds, like how public education affects planning and how to bring unrepresented voices into the conversation.

Here are a few highlights from the event. We also took audience questions, but weren't able to get to many of them, so we've put them together in their own post, which you can see here (<http://voiceofsandiego.org/the-plaza/#!/post/1386792764-995-681>).

San Diego is like an island.

The city needs to complete a series of efforts aimed at water and energy sustainability and independence, Fulton said, because in some ways, we're a lot like Hawaii.

One of the things I've come to realize is that in many ways San Diego is like living on an island. I did some work in my previous job with the government of Hawaii. Hawaii, as you may or may not know, has a four -to seven-day supply of food and energy on the island at any given time. So in other words, if you fly on vacation to Hawaii and you're there for seven days, the food and the energy you're going to need at the end of the week is floating in the Pacific Ocean. It is not there. I find certain similarities here, particularly in regard to water and energy, the vast majority of which we import. So when you think about the climate action plan (currently in development), which will be coming forward soon, which will set the goal of 100 percent renewables by 2035, and the other efforts we are doing, such as the possibility of a large water reuse system, I think we have a shot at true sustainability, even though we kind of live on an island.

Schools drive development.

One of the most common tropes in planning is the idea that there's a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma between building transit, and dense development. Residents want good transit before they'll accept increased density, but without increased density, it's hard to justify investing in transit.

But transit, Russell said, isn't the only issue that creates a feedback loop that makes it hard for urban neighborhoods to develop effectively.

If I move out of downtown, it'll be for one of two reasons. One of the reasons might be schools. I want my kid to go to a good school. When you talk to the school district, they won't build a school in an area like downtown, because there's no demand. So they'll build it out in the suburbs where there is demand, which will create more flight out to the suburbs, because of schools. It's the same thing as transit; it's a chicken or the egg. I'm an architect, I should be a proponent of beautiful buildings, but I always thought, 'If you want to do one really great thing for redevelopment, and this could be true for Encanto too, build a really great school.' Families will figure out ways to get to good schools. San Diego Unified doesn't operate like that.

Not so fast on characterizing transit and density as a chicken-egg dilemma.

Escobar-Eck said planners and developers often run into problems over dense projects if they're proposed in an area without much transit (that's the case for one project for which she's a consultant, Carmel Valley's One Paseo

(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/2013/01/09/one-paseos-fate-looms-in-2013/>). She said those projects lead to more and more highways being built:

People forget, everyone thinks transit, it's social welfare, it's a subsidy. Everyone forgets that our freeways are subsidized. So we continue to lose sight of that, that our freeways are just as much of a subsidy, if not higher in some cases, and yet we continue to add and add and add more lanes, and we're not going to be able to build our way out of it. And until we create a little bit of discomfort for the car, which is what Portland and its hippy code did, we're just not going to be able to pass that threshold in some cases.

Fulton disagreed with that premise. Planning doesn't force a binary choice between driving and transit use, he said.

I disagree that you have to have transit to have concentration of activity ... I think what we can do is create a situation where people are able to do lots of things in one place without getting back in a car. We have many places like that already, and once we start to do that, those places become more successful, and then people want to live in those places, they're more interested in different situations, people are more willing to be inconvenienced and then eventually when you build transit, it's obvious where it should go. ... It seems to me that getting people out of cars, it's not binary. It's about how people use cars, and how they use the built environment on a regular basis ... once you have concentrations of activities, you can easily transport between them via variety of methods. Car 2 Go is basically a taxi without a driver. You're not necessarily not using a car, but you've transformed the way you use a car, and the way you use the built environment. And you've vastly increased the area of land for profitable development.

Parking is the single biggest land use constraint on any project.

When Russell's planning a project, he said, the starting point is usually how much parking he's required to build, based on the city's zoning.

What I tell students is, for every car in America, there's four parking spaces. You look at the size of four parking spaces, in terms of land use, that's the size of an affordable unit. Put two and two together. So there's tradeoffs, and you have to balance these things.

When he was building a project in Portland, he said, he wasn't allowed to build more than two parking spaces for the entire project.

They wouldn't let you build more parking. In San Diego you have a minimum, but you can park more; Portland's the opposite. They say you can only park two, and in the they go on a hippy tangent and say 'because we want people to take alternative transit like bikes, busses, skateboards whatever.' It's kind of funny, but from an architect's perspective, I look at that and I go, 'Wow, I can do anything within a 30-foot height limit?' So then the first thing I think about is, 'How do I build a good building?' When I get a project in San Diego, that's not necessarily the first thing you can think about when you get a project.

Community planning requires education.

Malbrough said he'd never imagined he'd know as much as he does about urban planning when he retired as a deputy fire chief.

But now, as chair of the Encanto Neighborhoods Community Planning Group, he said planning groups and the city need to give residents the tools to make good decisions if they're going to be expected to play a role in the planning process.

The thing I'd like to see more ... is preparing citizens more to do this. They only have so much time to teach you what you need to know so you can understand it. You can't learn it by sitting in 12 meetings, and then make a decision that's going to last 25 years. You have to get out and do your homework, and I've done more homework than I've wanted to do on this, and at the same time, I believe it'd be more helpful if the city were to say, 'We're starting three months down the road on a community plan update, well, we need to give residents more training, more education and knowledge of how this process goes.'

Malbrough's community, and others surrounding it, watches millions of dollars go to other communities each year, he said, because there aren't enough grocery stores,

restaurants, and retail options in the community to serve people's needs. But he said the city and planning groups need to explain the pros and cons associated with how to provide those services, such as by increasing density, which many residents don't want.

Bring planning to people; don't expect people to come to planning.

Gomez was part of a stakeholder group formed to help write Barrio Logan's new community plan

(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/2013/10/03/how-a-nine-block-area-in-barrio-logan-became-a-vast-gulf/>). She said the group worked hard to address the needs of residents in the area that might not otherwise be part of the process.

It's looking beyond planning groups or the City Council or the Planning Commission. Those are entities set up for making decisions. We need to challenge ourselves to look at, where are people congregating? There's churches, there's parent groups, we have to challenge ourselves to go to the people, rather than the people coming to us. Because we're talking about people who, at least who I work with, are working-class people. They have more than one job. Going to another meeting is the last thing (they can do). We do everything: We go to schools, churches, host intimate house meetings, do one-on-ones. Think of any idea you can think of, that's what we do. It's not about the cookie-cutter type of engagement. If the city is serious, we have to look beyond what we normally do. In addition, we are not a 100 percent English-speaking society. We also have to provide multi-cultural languages, disability, child care and things like that, that we're thinking of when we talk about community engagement.

City development is unpredictable – here, and everywhere else.

Russell voiced a common concern of many developers: There's just no telling how long it's gonna take to get a permit approved.

"The biggest obstacle from a developer standpoint is not knowing," he said. On a project he's currently working on in Bankers Hill, he said the project manager with Development Services told him it would take about nine months to secure a necessary permit, even though he'd earned "expedited review." Could it take more like four to six months, he asked? Unlikely: Another permit the project manager was working on was going on 14 months for approval.

"So, Andrew, I might build an Orchid (a local award for the best architecture in the city), but I might go out of business doing it," he said. "And that kind of stuff scares me. I wish that there was more predictability."

Fulton said that concern is hardly particular to San Diego.

I've worked in hundreds of cities as a consultant, and I was a mayor in one (Ventura), and every single developer I've talked to in every single one said this is the worst city to get a permit in that they've ever seen, and they all honestly believed it.

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