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# A healthier Old Town National City

BY RON MORRISON AND DANA RICHARDSON FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 2010 AT 12:04 A.M

Change is coming to Old Town National City.

On Tuesday, the City Council will hear the Westside/Old Town Specific Plan. If adopted, this plan will bring new vitality and hope to the neighborhood.

For decades, Old Town has suffered from an inconsistent pattern of planning that has diminished the quality of life for residents. Bordered on the south by Mile of Cars Way, on the west by Interstate 5, on the north by Plaza Boulevard and on the east by National City Boulevard, the community is a textbook example of how incompatible mixed use zoning leads to community instability.

Research conducted by the Environmental Health Coalition shows that industries in and around the neighborhood emit 23,000 pounds of air toxics each year, some of which are linked to diseases like asthma, cancer and reproductive illness. About 70 percent of the reported toxics come from auto body shops. More than 20 auto body shops operate near homes and schools in the 100-acre neighborhood of Old Town. The neighborhood is also home to a diesel-fuel bus station, which combines with traffic from Interstate 5 to create a high-level source of air pollution from motor vehicle emissions.

With no plan for development and no guide for the future, Old Town morphed over time from a primarily residential neighborhood into an unhealthy mix of industries and homes. This haphazard approach to land use left hardworking residents struggling with health issues linked to pollution from their industrial neighbors. Thirtyone percent of residents here live below the federal poverty line and 90 percent of families qualify for affordable housing. About 14 percent of children in Old Town suffer from asthma - twice the documented state average. More than half of the adults and a third of the children here also live without health insurance.

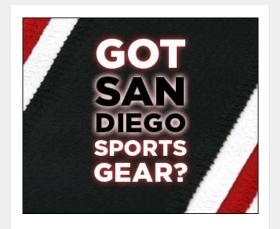
In recent years, community residents, in conjunction with the City Council, demanded that Old Town's residential neighborhood be respected. One of the key steps was to design the Westside (or Old Town) Specific Plan, which will lay out guidelines for development over the next 10 to 15 years. Both the city's planners and developers will look to this plan for direction in making any proposals for future development.

Council members, local business and community-based organizations working in Old Town made the Specific Plan a central priority, and worked to engage residents in the discussions and debates around pertinent issues.

In the five years since the beginning of the specific plan update process, more than 500 residents and stakeholders have participated, and have helped craft a plan for a healthier community and brighter future.

The guiding principles of the Old Town Specific Plan call for planning that preserves and enhances the

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residential characteristics of the area and allows new residential development that is compatible with the neighborhood's character. It also includes higher density in appropriate community corridors, where commercial, retail and more dense residential uses will be developed. The plan will improve the environmental health conditions of the neighborhood by reducing the co-location of houses with businesses that use, store or generate hazardous materials. In addition, the plan will allow mixed uses that increase local activity and create a neighborhood where goods, services, recreation and public transit are within walking distance.

Implementation of the city's amortization ordinance will, over time, lead to the relocation of existing polluting industrial businesses outside of Old Town and away from homes and schools. In an effort to enhance, improve and protect the natural environment of Paradise Creek, which flows through the community, the Specific Plan will limit polluting industrial and residential uses immediately adjacent to the creek and take advantage of this natural resource through the creation of a public park and walking trails. The plan also calls for street and sidewalk improvements that, along with increased park space, will further improve walkability and community activity, one of many combined efforts to reduce the high rates of obesity and diabetes among Old Town residents.

The Old Town Specific Plan represents the true spirit of collaboration. When elected officials, community leaders and local businesses work together, we create solutions that meet the needs of everyone. We look forward to adoption and implementation of this plan as National City continues its transformation into a safer, healthier, thriving community.

Morrison, a lifelong resident of National City and its immediate vicinity, was elected mayor of the city in 2006. Richardson is director of the Healthy Eating Active Communities Initiative and a resident of National City.

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