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UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL

Ending a toxic mix / National City wants to redo century-old neighborhood

BY UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD, SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2010 AT 12:04 A.M.

National City this week is expected to erase a planning blunder made in the 1940s, one that allowed polluting businesses right next door to houses with families. The children of National City will breathe easier for it.

A favorable vote by the City Council on the Westside Specific Plan Tuesday night will unleash market forces, allowing them to overcome the planning, absentee ownership and tiny-lot obstacles that have locked a late 1800s neighborhood into steady decline.

The 100-acre district, called Westside or Old Town, is sprinkled with 142 businesses, many dealing with auto paints and noxious chemicals. It also has 420 households, plenty of them with children.

The plan passed the Planning Commission earlier this month on a 7-0 vote, with doctor after doctor begging for an end to the public health nightmare of monstrous proportions that the coexistence of homes and industry has created, and resident after resident saying, "Get on with it."

The effort to draw new planning zones has been five years in the making. Five- and six-story height limits in the north will encourage modern mixed uses and higher density. Two-story limits on the west will preserve community character, and less harmful businesses to the east will service the Mile of Cars. Affordable housing units, 201 of them, will be on the south. In the middle, a wider buffer zone will allow Paradise Creek to flourish, and here and there will be a tiny recreation or social center, so lacking now.

The effort almost unraveled in the summer of 2008 amid the clamor of competing interests. Credit five individuals – environmentalist, naturalist, educator, government figure and builder – who represented the major constituencies and spent 20 months devising an acceptable compromise.

The council must resist last-minute pleas. Grandfathering all businesses would only lock in the dismal status quo. Implementing the plan may be even more difficult. How many years should the worst of the polluters be allowed to remain before being forced to relocate? Create an implementation committee, along the lines of the panel that rescued this plan.

Others will be watching. San Diego's Barrio Logan is a fraternal twin, with similar issues and about a year behind in its process, a collaboration of the city and the San Diego Unified Port District. On Thursday a San Diego Planning Commission workshop will consider a comparable plan but one that depends upon market forces without induced relocations.

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National City is so small everyone knows the Westside. Mayor Ron Morrison knows it – both as a teenager who plunged into the issue so many decades ago and as a father whose grown daughter must carry two inhalers with her at all times. Deputy Mayor Alejandra Sotelo-Solis, a young, upcoming Latina, has never left her neighborhood. Veteran councilman Frank Parra knows this will be his last council vote ever. He is sliding over to become fire chief, the first of the 53 in the region who has an ambulance service background.

Come Tuesday night, we would be surprised by anything less than a unanimous vote – and a neighborhood-wide celebration.

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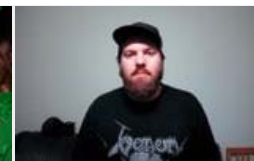
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