

DEMOCRATIC CLUB REMARKS: THE DCP & OUR DOWNTOWN'S FUTURE – 3/30/16

What makes downtown Santa Monica unique? And what is our vision for its future? Will it have the warmth of local merchants or the coldness of indifferent mid-rise and hi-rise. Will it remain a relaxed and friendly beachfront community with its human scaled and walkable environment, or will we relinquish our interest in “community” in favor of “consumerism”?

Is it a great place to live or a great place to visit? How do we bridge our past and our future? To answer this, we need to understand what currently makes up our downtown. In contrast to other cities, Santa Monica’s downtown is iconic with its pier, palisades, ocean, its weather, blue skies and sunlight, human scale, promenade and farmers’ markets.

The downtown encompasses approximately 12 million square feet of development over its 140 year history with 70% of the buildings being 1 and 2 stories. With the remarkable success enjoyed by the Downtown, we need to build on what works and not overdevelop - adding to the new without taking away from the old.

What is currently happening has the potential to change forever the “character” that is Santa Monica. This approach is one of profit rather than quality of life. The proposed plan allows another 13 million square feet of development – effectively doubling the current size of our downtown.

Our downtown can either be urban or beachfront – but you can’t have both. With over 100% projected growth, traffic will dramatically increase and parking proportionately decrease, along with an increase in the city’s infrastructure as well as our tax bills.

LUCE “provides for an overall reduction in building height.” Our Santa Monica Architects group strongly suggests reducing the height limit to 50 foot and 4 stories.

A vibrant life within a downtown core is not enhanced with density, but with a diversity of building types and open space. Open spaces change the image of a city. Blue sky, sunlight, and ocean breezes are some of our city’s greatest “community benefits” that would be severely compromised if we continue to allow rows of tall, massive buildings.

And if the plan includes incentives, we could see a substantial adaptive reuse of older 1 and 2 story buildings which provide so much character, variety, and texture to our downtown. People want to be where there’s an interesting and exciting mix of old and new.

Santa Monica is inherently business friendly with its location and atmosphere. We should be more in line with other coastal communities by reducing building heights from 84 to 50 feet and avoiding further gridlock by reducing downtown density from 25 to 18 million square feet.

We don't need height to keep tourists coming or to be healthy economically.

1. snapshots of our downtown

This is an ANALYSIS of EXISTING DENSITY. The white and blue indicates that

- 69 % of our downtown area are either vacant lots or 1 & 2 story buildings
- 12million square feet of building area was built between 1876-2015
Current heights allow doubling this to 25 million square feet !! in the next 15-20 years
- redeveloping only 50% of the 1 & 2 story buildings to 3 & 4 stories could provide 4 million sq ft of additional development
- which equates to adding 3,000-4,500 residential units and 6,000-9,000 residents over the next 15-20 yrs – if we even need this much

2. One & Two story buildings

- 58% of downtown buildings and 67 vacant parking lots provide ample opportunity for adaptive reuse or redevelopment to 3 & 4 stories
- They provide scale, texture, and homes to local business

3. The stock of 4 story buildings would make any community proud

- 23% of downtown buildings are 3 & 4 stories
- Providing a variety of successful designs and courtyard experiences
- And they help to maintain local business

4. The recent flood of residential buildings

- Provides dull, balcony articulated building blocks - the “facadomy” of computer punchcards
- these canyonize our streets and there is no sense of courtyards which are part of Santa Monica's history and ethos

Instead of buildings cheek & jowl, separation of buildings above 1st floor would provide the openness of blue skies & corner windows for the residents

5. The mixed-use residential & commercial projects we've approved continues the same massive block design with some lipstick added and with no variation in roof heights

6. And our hotels should be “welcoming” – not decorated warehouses

- The 2 Gateway hotels define the entrance from EXPO to our downtown but are the same building block design being approved throughout downtown

7. –

- All new buildings are 6 & 7 stories forcing out “mom & pop” business and long time residents!
- 6 & 7 story buildings canyonize our streets producing shade and narrow sidewalks - there’s no need for 76’ & 100’ heights let’s compromise @ 4 floors – less monolithic and allows blue skies & sunlight!

8. Open space energizes a city

- Sidewalk setbacks can still be used commercially for dining, art, and courtyard entrances will humanize our neighborhoods

And mid block arcades extending east & west from the Promenade can benefit both developer & public while providing for small, local business

9. The proposed “Plaza @ Santa Monica” is the length & width of a football field turned on edge! It will cast enormous shadows across streets & buildings. We need to stop using public property for hotels & theatres

Instead a true “Town Center will add to the iconic character of our community rather than overwhelming it!

- It will provide sorely needed open space for the expanding downtown residential community and will add a variety of cultural & recreational opportunities
- And it can still meet city’s financial obligations!

10. Sustainability

And last but certainly not least is the issue of sustainability – with taller buildings preventing access to sunlight for solar power, and creating wind & shade issues, while lower buildings are more resilient and accessible in times of emergencies – such as power outages, fires or earthquakes

It’s unfortunate that Santa Monica years ago should have had a master plan for its 8.3 sq miles and a master plan for its 228 acre downtown.

So does the Community Plan answer these issues – unfortunately not. It is simply 263 pages supporting increased density and height – and there are a number of inconsistencies in the draft plan – both general & specific, for instance

pg 4 – states “city should have a clear and realistic vision of what Downtown is and can become”

- but there is no mention of how much square foot area
- how much housing area
- “ “ office area
- “ many hotel rooms
- “ much infrastructure is required – a school, park, water, etc.

pg 8 – only 15% of downtown will be redeveloped over 20 yrs? – but over 600 units have been approved in 4 projects in just the last 9 months

pg 8 – also says “downtown is largely characterized by 3 & 4 story buildings.” - but there are almost 3 times as many 1 & 2 story buildings as there are 3 & 4 stories

pg 21 – says the success of Promenade relies on “human-scale environment created by buildings” and the “development standards limit height & FAR to preserve the ambiance integral to Santa Monica’s identity” – and yet the height limit allows 100 ft including ornamental features

pg 34 – says “downtown provides the largest share of housing in the next 20 years” but boulevards can provide 3 times as much

& pg 35 – provides an incentive for a 15% increase for residential above 1st floor commercial - why a 15% increase with the biggest market today being housing?

pg 38 – says “proximity to Roosevelt Elementary & Lincoln Middle School will serve downtown, but from the center of the downtown residential village – you are 9 & 11 blocks away and crossing 2 major boulevards, basically requiring parents driving to & from

pg 39 – says the “scarcity of available space poses a challenge to economic sustainability” - but again the boulevards can easily absorb 12-15m sq ft w/in a 3 story height limit

pg 46 – stresses “cultural strategies – w/emphasis on live outdoor events”

- wouldn’t a civic plaza & park be more appropriate @ 4th/5th & Arizona than a behemoth of a project the size of the Colosseum football field turned on edge

pg 77 – clearly states “the city is not a major landowner in downtown”

- but in fact it’s the largest landowner with properties at 4th & Arizona, the Blue Bus yard, apparently the 4th street garage all totaling approx. 10-12 acres

pg 85 – says “paseos are encouraged” but not required

- why not require an 8-10’ midblock arcade – the city can provide a range of incentives from lower taxes to additional floor area and the developer can benefit with more marketable retail space

pg 130 – says a “shared circulator to get quickly from one end of downtown to the other” – how is this possible with traffic approaching gridlock

pg 132 – “encourage private parking lots to open to public during evenings & weekends by displaying city-issued signs” – why just encourage, why not enter into a public private partnership to utilize private parking lots from 7-11, 7 days a week and include peripheral lots such as the Broad at 11th which sits empty half the time. Everyone benefits – the public, the city, as well as the property owner.

pg 153 – “ensure adequate light” – but how, with buildings 84’ to 100’ tall and only 55’-60’ across the street from each other

pg 169 – heights can increase from 84’ to 100’ w/parapets or other ornamental features – this means

- 12% of our downtown can be 76’
- 19% can be 90’
- while 69% of downtown area can be 100’ and 10% of that area can be 146’
- while currently 67% of downtown is 32’ or less - so in effect we are more than tripling the overall height of the existing downtown

The Downtown Plan needs to be rewritten & simplified, w/out the fluff and a third the number of pages, and with far less height and density

In conclusion, these are 2 very different visions for our downtown. So the question remains, what do you want our city’s “sense of place” to be – a tall, densely populated urban place simply adjacent to a beach - or to remain part of its beach and ocean environment?

It took 140 years to develop a downtown of 12m sq ft. The 1984 general plan allowed an additional 7m sq ft. But the current plan allows twice that or the equivalent of adding almost 2 Santa Monica Place shopping centers every year for the next 20 years. With an excess of 4-6m

sq ft of potential development at 3 & 4 story limits, there is absolutely no need or justification for continuing to write plans and approving 6 & 7 story buildings 84 & 100' tall.

We can build an enormous amount of housing w/in 3 & 4 story limits and if you're concerned about affordable housing, approximately 300-400 units in a garden apartment environment could be built on ½ the Blue Bus yard which is totally underused. This is roughly the equivalent of 9-12 new 7 story projects downtown.

And the height of all buildings downtown can be more than tripled. Is this what we want to maintain a beachfront community. Does the Community Plan as written answer this? In a word – no!

“Our biggest challenge is to manage our success so that we can hold onto our values.” This is a pivotal point in our city's history – let the council, city manager, and our planning director know where you stand!

If city staff & council won't stand up to this reality, then the residents have no choice but to approve the LUVÉ Initiative. The SMA.r.t. group is not against development but we want responsible development.