

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Look who's coming to the middle Editor:

Not all that long ago, President Bush vowed to spend political capital to get his agenda through Congress, no matter what the Democrats wanted. Now all of a sudden, he is talking about bipartisanship and cooperation. Oh right, he and the Republicans lost Congress to the Democrats.

Mike Kirwan
Venice

City Hall is pushing too far Editor:

(Editor's note: The following is an open letter previously sent to the Santa Monica City Council, Planning Commission and Architectural Review Board.) Over the past two decades, Santa Monica residents have been staunch supporters of preserving and creating affordable housing in our city. At the same time, under your leadership, our city has aggressively implemented, and even exceeded, the affordable housing goals expressed in Proposition "R," adopted by Santa Monica voters in 1990. According to a recent city report, 769 affordable housing units, representing 37 percent of the total 2,089 units have been constructed from 1994 to 2005.

The City Council now has before it a proposal to adopt an ordinance which will permanently exempt 100 percent affordable housing projects of 50 units or less from public review by eliminating development review or conditional use permits in multi-family districts and enumerated commercial districts respectively.

SMCLC believes eliminating public review would be a mistake. As supporters of affordable housing, SMCLC is concerned that the lack of reviewed public input will erode support for it.

Public review of any large development which impacts a neighborhood is a vital part of the planning process. Public review is important so that Santa Monica residents will (1) have confidence in the planning process; (2) understand what goals are being met; (3) have full disclosure of the possible tradeoffs of such a project, e.g., size, scale, use (including neighborhood serving businesses), location, traffic, parking; and (4) have a meaningful opportunity to have their concerns heard and addressed.

Because we support affordable housing, we are concerned that if local residents are not allowed meaningful input into these developments, our city runs the risk that residents will come to view these projects as one more way in which developers are unfairly favored over residents.

Additionally, the lack of public review can lead to a process that results in poorly conceived projects. The staff report to the planning commission recognized that residents "overwhelmingly" do not support being disenfranchised from zoning planning review by this ordinance on such a key community issue, and disenfranchising residents is clearly at odds with residents' goals of greater community involvement in future land-use decisions, as expressed in our ongoing LUCE update process.

Two arguments have been advanced against public review. The first is that it could slow down the planning process which, in turn, could jeopardize a project's funding. But the intricate funding for these projects is already in place by the time the approval process commences and the process is already expedited to enable them to be built quickly. So there is no credible reason why public review cannot be part of an expedited schedule.

The second argument is that a discretionary review process might make a project more vulnerable to lawsuits, thereby killing the project. However, in the history of Santa Monica, to our knowledge, only one lawsuit has even been filed to stop an affordable housing project. The concern about this extremely rare occurrence should not be used to trump the public's right of review.

To enact an ordinance that permanently eliminates public input and development review is not in the public interest. Further, by the time the project is before the Architectural Review Board solely for design review, public input is irrelevant as to many of the very issues that residents want to have considered, frustrating the board and the public alike.

For these reasons, SMCLC urges the Council not to adopt this ordinance and to ensure that the public has the right to be heard on affordable housing projects of 50 units or less in multi-family and commercial districts.

Santa Monica Coalition for a Livable City

Council is trying to put a muzzle on us



MY WRITE
BY BILL BAUER

Tomorrow night, the City Council will act on a proposal to exempt "affordable housing projects consisting of not more than 50 residential units from any requirement to obtain Development Review permits and/or Conditional Use Permits."

I wrote about this last month (Dec. 4, Page 4), when it was before the Planning Commission. Despite the commission forwarding the ball to City Council for approval, my objections still stand.

In Santa Monica, it's "residents be damned," because our politicians' and bureaucrats' desire for low income housing preempts our right to speak out. If anything, City Council should be opening up all development to public scrutiny and comment, including low income housing, board and care, congregate housing and homeless shelters already exempt from review in most neighborhoods.

This proposal will exempt 100 percent of affordable housing projects of 50 units or less from the development review requirement in multifamily neighborhoods and eliminate the Conditional Use Permit (CUP) requirement in the Main Street commercial (CM), special office commercial (C5) and industrial conservation (M1) districts.

Council approval of the review exemptions would extend and codify temporary regulations that allow the kinds of ugly, oversized, multi-unit buildings we now see going up at Main and Pacific streets, 15th Street and Broadway, 26th Street and Santa Monica Boulevard, and Santa Monica Boulevard and Berkeley Street to virtually every multifamily neighborhood in town.

In a nutshell, developers of low income, rental housing can build larger buildings with more units, greater massing, higher density, reduced setbacks and less on-site parking than developers of market-rate housing where there's no ceiling on income. The size and scale of low income housing is governed by existing city codes and state regulations.

Over the years, City Council has routinely implemented regulations making it easier and more profitable for developers to build low income housing including restricting public review to speed up the development process. City Hall's housing policy "continues to provide development incentives and reduced planning fees for development of affordable housing," says a staff report.

So, low income apartment projects are approved administratively behind closed doors and "fast tracked" into construction without any public input, including suggestions that might mitigate negative aspects on neighbors. According to Councilman Kevin

McKeown, funding cycles on low income rental projects are so short that a lengthy review process could jeopardize their financing. And, we know the social engineers on City Council want to provide as much affordable housing as possible in the shortest period of time.

Last year, the city exceeded its quota of affordable housing. There are already at least 68 property tax exempt, low income, apartment buildings in Santa Monica. Most of them were built and/or operated by Community Corporation of Santa Monica — a City-affiliated developer of low income housing. CCSM manages well over 1,000 low income units spread throughout the various multifamily and low scale commercial neighborhoods, especially the Pico corridor. Other providers, including L.A. County, manage low income buildings within our borders.

MAYBE WE'VE REACHED THE POINT THAT THERE'S TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

How much low income housing do we need? Why the big rush to build more? Like with the homeless problem, "doing our small part to help those less fortunate" has become an obsession that's negatively impacting the community. Most tenants in our low income housing came from out of town. In fact, CCSM actively recruits prospective tenants from all over the county.

What is particularly self-serving is architect and Planning Commission Chair, Gwynne Pugh's vote to uphold the proposal and send it to City Council for approval. CCSM is a client of Pugh's firm, Pugh + Scarpa. They designed the controversial, low income project at 15th Street and Broadway, among others. Heaven forbid the "pesky public" gets in their way and gums up the works.

We're now dealing with increased traffic and parking issues, school overcrowding and crime impacts because so many of these projects are in our midst. Maybe we've reached the point that there's too much of a good thing?

But, to deny residents the right to review and comment on any sizable, large scale development (no matter its noble purpose) and expand restrictions on public input or exclude citizen participation in decisions that affect our neighborhoods and community livability is undemocratic and unacceptable.

Before tomorrow night, e-mail, phone, fax or write City Council — or just show up. Tell 'em, "Don't muzzle my voice on the community's future."

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