



Santa Monica Coalition for a Livable City

STEERING
COMMITTEE
& ADVISORS

March 5, 2014

To: City Council
From: Santa Monica Coalition for a Livable City (“SMCLC”)

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RE: City Survey of Residents’ Views of Development in the Downtown

Residents have spoken clearly in the poll the City just released on downtown development. There is no silent majority speaking with a different voice than the hundreds of residents who have appeared before the Council opposing the onslaught of massive development.

Coinciding with its draft Downtown Specific Plan (“DSP”), the City released its resident poll in order to determine whether there is a mandate from residents for taller, denser development. The results demonstrate that no such mandate exists. Quite the contrary.

The poll shows what the Council has been repeatedly told at many community planning and council meetings—residents as a whole overwhelmingly **oppose** taller heights and more dense development; want any growth to be within existing zoning for the downtown (at most 6 or 7 stories) even for “architecturally distinctive” hotels; want less, not more, traffic downtown; and want better, more affordable parking. And residents were firm in these beliefs, rejecting the argument that “community benefits” justify increased downtown heights and densities.

Specifically, the poll found that residents by 71% support existing zoning limits, reject “any more tall buildings” by greater than 2 to 1, and want to keep buildings “as low as possible.” When asked their vision for how downtown should be developed, over 70% responded that their vision of downtown was less traffic, better parking, more open space, and no or slow growth, and then only for small, non-chain businesses, such as restaurants.

A Review of the Key Poll Findings Demonstrates Strong Resident Opposition to Increased Density and Heights Downtown.

The crux of the poll, and its most significant inquiry, is **Question 18**-- the poll’s only open-ended, non-scripted question, which asks the ultimate question: **“Now that we have discussed the issue in more detail, what type of development would you like to see in Downtown Santa Monica?”**

Residents **overwhelmingly** responded to Question 18 that they want the terrible traffic and shortage of parking alleviated and want modest or no development, and then only for small, public places, like restaurants. Not dense development.

--fully **72.6%** responded that what they want for downtown is to control the existing traffic, make parking easier, build open space, or a variety of other answers that add up to no more growth, very little or slow growth, restaurants, small businesses or nightlife, or to preserve the downtown's appearance as it is.

--this is contrasted by only **23.6%** who responded with a variety of answers indicating what they want for downtown is more commercial or residential, hotel, apartment or condo development, and even this number includes those who wanted these with "height limits" and affordability.

Thus, **by more than 3 to 1**, when asked directly what they wanted for downtown, after first being presented with "the issue in more detail," residents across ages, genders and ethnicity spoke as one. We want less traffic, better parking, nice restaurants and small businesses, and more open space. Not significant growth. Not bulky, dense buildings or tall towers. (See attached mark up of responses to Q18.)¹

The responses to Question 18 are confirmed by residents' responses to another key question, **Question 5**, about DSP height limits.

Residents, again by more than 3 to 1, overwhelming responded that they support the EXISTING HEIGHT LIMITS of 6 to 7 floors and also support requiring that any building between 4 to 6 or 7 stories must first provide significant community benefits—such as affordable housing—by 71%. This support is across all ages, genders, and ethnicity.² Most polled residents seem to support even lower limits, as discussed below, though they were not specifically asked about reducing the existing zoning heights. Residents definitely made clear that they do not support higher limits, which is what they were asked.

¹ There is some lack of clarity in how the final few results of Q18 are reported on the summary, p.60 (bottom). We added up the categories of responses from "Traffic Control" to "Post Office," which total 100%. Conservatively, we did not include the response below "Post Office" entitled "Nothing/None," though this response, if anything, is anti-development. Including this would only increase the more than 3 to 1 results. Likewise, we did not include the "Other mention" grouping, as we had no information as to what is included. The responses below "Post Office" cannot lessen the result, only intensify it.

² For example, these limits are supported by 89.9% of Latinos, 59.5% of African-Americans, 68.7% of Caucasians, 69.3% of 18-24 yo, 90.4% of 25-34 yo and 72.2% of 60-64 yo. The Report's 85-page summary fails to provide age, ethnicity or gender breakdowns for Q 18 or 5. These figures are found in the 600 plus page attachment.

The responses to Questions 18 and 5 were confirmed by residents' responses to **Questions 14 and 16**. When asked in **Q14** whether there are too many tall buildings in downtown's skyline, or, did they want "more tall, architecturally interesting buildings [that] would make it more distinctive," residents by **more than 2 to 1 rejected more tall buildings**, answering that the skyline of Santa Monica already had too many tall buildings.

Even when presented with the loaded choice of architecturally distinctive buildings with room for open space versus buildings as low as possible even if that would mean less room for open space, by over 10% Santa Monicans said **keep buildings "as low as possible."** --**Q16**.

In this survey, residents decisively rejected any buildings in downtown over 7 stories, even when the project provides a host of "community benefits."

Residents, not surprisingly, listed **traffic, congestion and parking as their major problems with downtown (over 70%--Q3)**. Residents want the Council to work towards relieving these problems through the DSP rather than exacerbating them.

Residents Have Spoken Clearly about Downtown Development Notwithstanding that Certain Information Presented in the Poll Was Biased towards Greater Development

Santa Monicans have spoken clearly in this poll, even though a number of its questions were biased and the facts presented often one-sided.

The poll posits the polar positions of development against no development, with development often tied to open space, architectural distinction and a long list of community benefits, including parks, transportation improvements, arts and cultural amenities, affordable housing and landmark preservation. The poll also posits that new development will bring in new restaurants and "economic vitality."

Absent are any mentions of, or questions based on, what will be the actual increase in daily car trips flowing from different levels of downtown development or what are the real heights being proposed for downtown. Thus, for example in **Question 6**, there is no mention of towers of over 20 stories. Rather, the much shorter sounding "exceed the 6 to 7- story limit" is used. Notwithstanding this artful wording, residents still rejected the towers on question after question.

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Bias can also be found in various poll attempts to—unsuccessfully—find some formula, even if based on skewed questions, that might get a result that the City could then claimed is a mandate for hotel towers and Opportunity Sites. For example, **Question 15** discusses “for sale” condos as part of the hotel projects, based on a false and biased narrative. Both of the two positions set out in the question include the proposition that the condos are necessary “to obtain financing,” as if hotels can’t be built profitably without them. The pro side then states that the condos will be good for Santa Monica because they will “bring permanent residents,” without disclosing that the experience elsewhere is that a number of buyers of very expensive hotel condos such as these are only part time inhabitants. The against side is that “luxury condos” aren’t good for Santa Monica, presumably only because they are “luxury,” ignoring the opposition raised by residents that they would increase the heights and densities of these buildings, especially on Ocean Avenue (which again isn’t mentioned in the poll.)

Moreover, no mention is made in the poll of, or query raised about the fact that existing zoning would already allow for very significant growth in downtown—including for a host of the types of public places, restaurants and businesses that provide a unique feel for our downtown, frequently within 3 stories.

An unbiased poll would have informed residents as to how much additional growth can occur downtown within current zoning, and indeed within 3 or 4 stories. Yet, this is never posited by the poll; nor are residents asked if they would want the existing 6 or 7-story limit reduced given these facts, a direct question studiously avoided in the poll.

Why the City’s poll avoids these basic facts and questions is as obvious as the answers these questions would elicit. But even with this pro-developer bias, residents have made unambiguously clear that they reject taller, denser development. According to the poll’s findings, and what residents have repeatedly told the Council in large numbers, residents want less traffic and any growth to come with significant community benefits and only then within existing zoning.

The Poll’s Sole Question on the Bergamot Area Plan is Seriously Flawed and Fails to Ask Key Follow-Up Questions.

At **Question 10**, the poll takes a sudden turn away from downtown and asks whether residents support the **Bergamot Area Plan** (“BAP”), describing it in glowing, idyllic terms. The poll fails to apply the usual, even-handed method for a support/no-support question, stating what both supporters and opponents say about the issue, and then asking which position the person being polled agrees with.

Instead, Q10 creates a one-sided vision of a neighborhood without traffic, without blocks of office space, or indeed any offices, and without more cars lined up on the I-10 freeway and further clogging Santa Monica streets.

Q10 describes the Bergamot area under BAP with loaded pro-BAP terms “walkable,” “neighborhood,” “mix of housing and creative uses,” “urban art,” and “neighborhood serving businesses.” Q 10 stays far away from even once mentioning any “offices,” though offices make up the bulk of the largest project so far approved for Bergamot, nor ever mentioning “traffic,” though that will increase significantly under the BAP, nor that the beloved Bergamot Arts Center faces potential fundamental change. (See Q 10 on p. 8 in the exhibit setting forth the actual wording of the questions asked.)

Once Bergamot is raised, the poll then fails to follow up with the obvious questions about whether the resident is familiar with the Hines Bergamot Transit Village project, the largest project in the Bergamot area, and whether the responder believes that Hines meets the glowing BAP description in Q10. This latter question should properly set forth both sides of the issue fairly, including that the Hines project is 766,000 square feet, including approximately half as office space, and which according to its Environmental Impact Report (“EIR”), would generate an additional 7,000 cars trips into the Bergamot area each day. The answers that these questions would receive are obvious.

Residents Will Not Stand for Wedge Issue Politics.

Any attempt to create wedge issues based on residents’ age and ethnicity in order to spin the results of this poll (as some have already suggested in the media) is unacceptable. It is beneath the standards we expect from a progressive city and is contrary to the facts. Any city official who would attempt to divide residents in this way will pay a high price in public confidence and support.

Conclusion.

This poll proves that residents do not want substantial changes to our downtown in heights or density. Our downtown, and our city, are our home. We live here. We like to shop, eat and go out here, though it is becoming increasingly difficult because of traffic and the lack of parking. Our children play, go to school and grow up here. We vote here and are active in our community. And, finally, we age here. We expect to be heard and further expect that our DSP and future planning will reflect what residents want.

Sincerely,

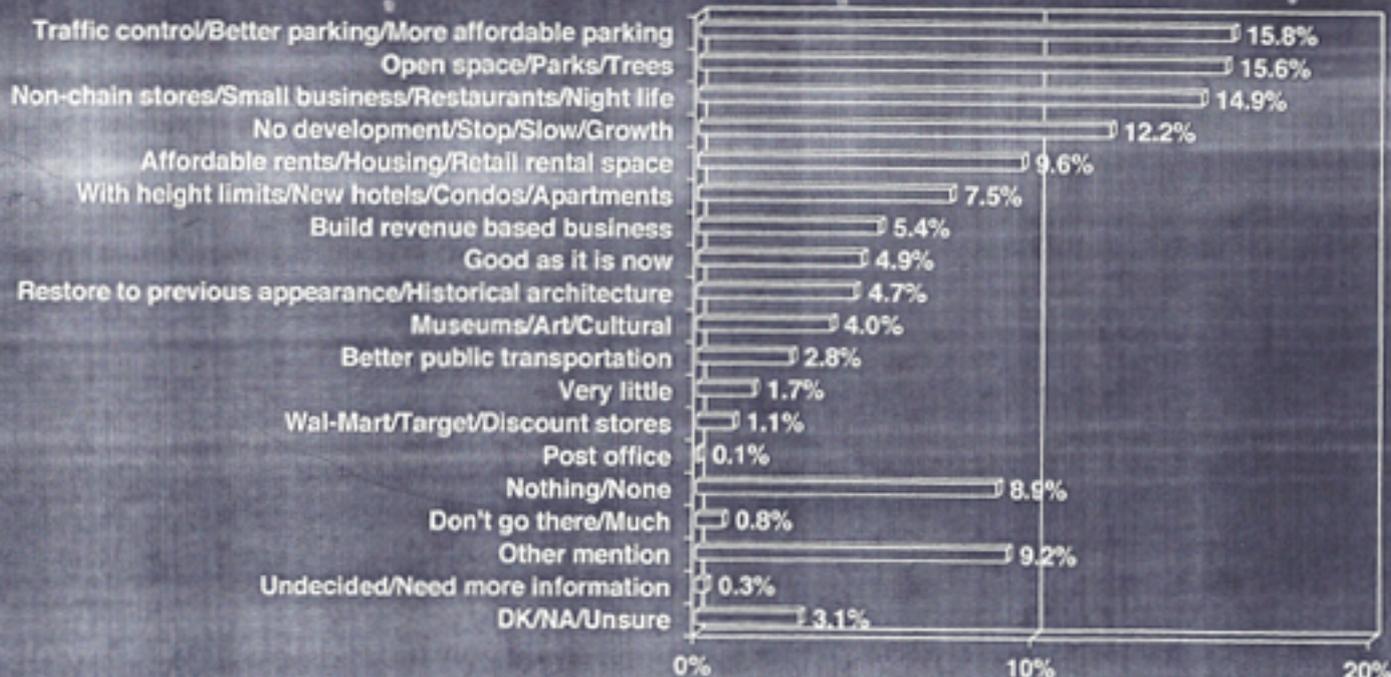
Diana Gordon
Co-Chair

Attachment (Poll Question 18 results)

cc: Rod Gould
David Martin
Planning Commission
Neighborhood Groups

Q18. Preferences for Types of Development (n=500)

Next, the survey respondents were asked in an open-end format what type of development they would prefer for downtown Santa Monica. The most frequent answers were "Traffic control/Better parking/More affordable parking," "Open space/Parks/Trees," "Non-chain stores/Small business/Restaurants/Night life," and "No development/Stop/Slow/Growth." All the remaining responses garnered less than ten percent mentions.



• = 72.6%

✓ = 23.6%