

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send comments to editor@smdp.com

Housing is key

RE: Response to Jon Mann's letter in the Monday, June 16, edition:

Jon Mann misreads much of what I wrote in my Santa Monica Daily Press column on homelessness when he recites the "teach a man to fish" bromide. I did not suggest and do not advocate simply providing homes to the homeless and leaving them to their own devices. Neither is his assertion that Santa Monica can easily afford the costs associated with homelessness particularly relevant; no matter how wealthy Santa Monica may be, pointless expenditures are still pointless expenditures.

A 2006 study on homelessness commissioned by the city made an attempt to identify the major costs of the problem. By far the largest single item of the roughly \$5 million allocated for homeless-related activities from the general fund in fiscal year 2006 was the \$2 million-plus spent by the police department on activities including patrols, ticketing, arrests and jail costs. In total, the city spent nearly \$25 million that year — a bit over \$1 million on agencies providing direct services, plus the \$2 million worth of police and jail time, nearly \$550,000 on homeless-related fire department and paramedic activities, nearly \$350,000 on park maintenance and repairs, nearly \$500,000 of public works maintenance and repair, and so on. The \$20 million in addition to Santa Monica's general fund contribution, which included expenditures on services such as the Samoshel shelter and Section 8 housing, came from county, state and federal budgets. Costs since then can be assumed to have risen.

Santa Monica's homeless are far more likely than the general homeless population in the country to suffer from substance abuse or mental health problems. Of the roughly 2,800 homeless people estimated to live in Santa Monica at the time, only 6 percent were not dealing with one or the other or both of those issues. My suggestion that Santa Monica's behavior toward the homeless might bankrupt the city was a facetious one meant to emphasize my main point, which is that placing homeless people in various forms of transitional or permanent housing not only gets us off the streets, but makes providing other services far easier and, in consequence, less expensive. Any social worker or medical professional will tell you that treating substance abuse and mental health problems is made much more simple when the recipient is in a stable situation and readily accessible than when they're on the street. House substance abusers are exposed to fewer temptations and can be more easily monitored once they enter treatment, and housed people undergoing psychiatric treatments are much less likely to lose their medications to theft or from carelessness, and are much more likely to stay on their medications, than are the homeless.

So whether or not Santa Monica can afford to continue its current, somewhat ineffective approach to the problem, is irrelevant to the question of whether everyone's quality of life, homeless people, respectable Santa Monicans and tourists alike, would be enhanced by getting the homeless off the streets and into situations that make keeping us off the streets and helping us develop or rediscover the skills that enable responsible living much more likely than is at present the case. The answer is clearly "yes." This is not to say that Santa Monica's government isn't making a serious attempt to deal with the problem — they clearly are — or that the "housing first" approach I advocate would eradicate it; just that focusing on housing would increase the effectiveness and lower the cost of the effort.

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My Write  
Bill Bauer

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Growth could end careers

IT APPEARS WE MAY FINALLY HAVE AN issue that could change the composition of our City Council and the future of Santa Monica.

Based on e-mails I received from neighborhood activists and conversations overheard at numerous community events, people are getting "pissed off." At issue are the Land Use and Circulation Element (LUCE) recommendations. As City Council reviews and praises LUCE, more and more Santa Monicans are saying, "They're not listening, again."

The LUCE draft "strategy framework" being reviewed is the blueprint for growth, land use and transportation here over the next 20 to 30 years. Council is giving staff direction that will help finalize the finished plan that'll be complete a year or more down the line. Few people are happy with LUCE and the council's vision of Santa Monica in 2030

What seems to be getting everyone's goat is LUCE's call for much more growth — primarily via thousands of new "workforce and affordable housing" rental units on the upper floors of new, multi-story, mixed-use commercial buildings along major boulevards. Nobody I know wants taller buildings and greater density let alone changes to streets that would exacerbate already horrendous traffic. But, our politicians flat out refuse to get the message.

Typical of the kind of fuzzy-think going on are comments made by Councilman Kevin McKeown at last Tuesday's council meeting. He noted that in Amsterdam, bicycles, private vehicles and pedestrians all share the streets and the "sharing" is accomplished by everyone traveling slowly — around 10 to 15 miles per hour.

Surely, McKeown isn't seriously suggesting a 10 MPH speed limit in Santa Monica? Rapid transit wouldn't be very rapid, if that were the case. Amsterdam is one of the densest cities in the world and much different from Santa Monica in virtually every respect, so why use Amsterdam as a model? Because it fits McKeown's and his compatriot's agenda even though it's what most residents don't want.

So, what do Santa Monicans want? Less development, less traffic congestion and less cut-through traffic on residential streets? How about more green space and playgrounds? More convenient parking? Although there's been minimal gang activity lately, most Santa Monicans want a permanent end to violence. How about less homeless on the streets, better schools, more affordable shopping and neighborhood serving businesses and filled potholes? In other words, city resources and city priorities directed to our needs, first.

With all these being "what the people want," what is the city's number one priority according to LUCE? More affordable and workplace housing. When was the last time you heard, "If we don't get more affordable and workforce housing, the city is going to hell in a hand basket?" Right. Never.

Clearly something is out of whack. The

last time I saw this big of a disconnect between City Council and the people was in 1973 when it voted to demolish the Santa Monica Pier and repeatedly voted against rescinding their demolition order.

As luck would have it, a municipal election was around the corner. Three anti-pier councilmen were running for reelection. The story goes that these three, stunned, soon to be "ex-city fathers" were watching election returns and grousing about not realizing how much Santa Monicans loved the pier. With three new members, the new council voted immediately to rescind the demolition order.

City politicians only hear us on subjects they agree with us on — subjects that match their own personal utopian vision of the

TYPICAL OF THE KIND OF FUZZY-THINK GOING ON ARE COMMENTS MADE BY COUNCILMAN KEVIN MCKEOWN AT LAST TUESDAY'S COUNCIL MEETING.

world to be — like shared thoroughfares or streets that are really "exercise tracks" where cars, trucks, busses, bicyclists and pedestrians can co-mingle safely in peace and harmony. Om.

LUCE does recommend preserving the character of single family and multifamily neighborhoods. It also encourages mid-priced hotels and mixed use projects on major streets with four to six floors right next to one and two floor, single family and multifamily homes on "residential" streets.

Despite all the new development, LUCE promises to hold car trips to present levels citywide by getting people to walk, bicycle and clamber on mass transit. Ignoring that alternate transportation won't work for most of us most of the time, wouldn't it be more voter friendly to restrict growth and development to achieve sustainability goals?

The growing anger about LUCE and our deaf City Council couldn't have come at a better time. Three incumbents say they're running for reelection. Mayor Herb Katz, who called LUCE "inspiring," and councilmen Ken Genser and Richard Bloom are big time LUCE supporters.

Development and growth will be the big issues in this fall's election. Are we going to have a repeat of 1973 where non-responsive council persons are shown the door? The right candidates with the right message could win and usher in a new era of common sense and a "residents first" city government. Huzzah!

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