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Planning panel rejects status quo

The L.A. panel puts together a wish list that includes fighting 'mansionization.'

By Steve Hymon
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Unwilling to tolerate shoddy development any longer, the Los Angeles Planning Commission is floating a list of 14 bold principles under the telling title "Do Real Planning."

Some of the principles the commission released last week had a familiar ring — putting more housing and jobs near mass transit and combating "mansionization" of neighborhoods, for example.

Others, aimed at creating a better-looking metropolis, call for burying overhead wires, vastly increasing landscaping and arresting "visual blight."

The plan overall is a ringing endorsement of the city's new planning chief, Gail Goldberg, who has been critical of the city's lax community plans and whose "do real planning" mantra became the commission's document title.

In embracing Goldberg's ideas, the commission signaled its intent to do far more than vet project plans and debate zoning matters.

The nine-member commission was appointed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa after he took office in mid-2005 and approved by the City Council. Among the prominent members are Jane Usher, an attorney and former counsel to Mayor Tom Bradley, and Mike Woo, a former councilman who teaches planning at USC.

"We are passionate about the city," Usher said at the commission's meeting at City Hall last week. "If I was to criticize all of our predecessors, I would criticize them for their indifference."

Over the last 1½ years, the commission has raised eyebrows with its willingness to step beyond its traditional role. It is increasingly requiring developers to include more affordable units in their residential projects, for example.

Usher, in an interview, said the set of principles was in part a response to repeated statements from bureaucrats that city law was either nonexistent or murky on planning issues. In addition, Villaraigosa had asked commissioners to be "change agents." The commission decided to take him up on that request, Usher said.

Usher and others hope the City Council will use the principles as a basis for new city ordinances. Goldberg has been trying to install similar guidelines in community plans that the city's planning agency is working on.

Many of the principles represent bold steps into territory largely untrod by previous planning commissions.

Principle No. 2, for example, "Offer basic design standards," aims for better aesthetics.

"Our goal should be to eliminate the sea of stucco boxes, blank walls, street-front parking lots and other inhospitable streetscapes," it reads.

No. 13 is another departure, this one from the common city practice of widening streets to accommodate new projects.

"This rarely solves, and often invites, more passenger car congestion, and typically undermines our walkability goals. We must categorically reject nonsensical road widenings," the document says.

But will political leaders embrace the guidelines? The City Council has usually adopted the Planning Commission's findings over the last year, but there have been exceptions.

Political roadblocks do not appear to have deterred the commission. Usher told the audience at last week's meeting about an episode during her 2005 confirmation hearings.

"One of the council members told me it was our responsibility to decide cases before us and nothing more," Usher said. "Without embarrassment, I'm here to tell you that we didn't follow those instructions."

Initial response was mostly favorable.

Kate Bartolo, senior vice president of the Kor Group, a development firm, praised most of the guidelines as "fantastic and long overdue" and said smart developers will welcome a clear set of rules.

The sticking point, she predicted, would come over a proposal to ask developers of residential projects to contribute units or money for affordable housing. She said all developers should contribute.

Councilman Jack Weiss liked the principles.

"I look at this, and these are exactly the sort of things I'm trying to accomplish in Century City," said Weiss, a member of the council's three-person Planning Committee.

Not everyone was applauding, however. Councilwoman Jan Perry said that, though she may agree with at least some of the principles, the Planning Commission might be overstepping its authority.

"The council is the policymaking body for the city, and I think there may be some level of disrespect" in a commission drawing up such principles on its own, Perry said.

Time and again, commission members said they want a clear set of guidelines for approving development.

"Once we have a general plan and strategy," Commissioner Sabrina Kay said, "let's stick with the rules."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

Highlights

Some of the Los Angeles Planning Commission's 14-point "Do Real Planning" blueprint:

Demand a walkable city. "We must prioritize the human scale of our built structures and street environments. We must insist that each new project visibly knit people together."

Produce green buildings. "We are late to the party. The city's codes must be overhauled to require, or at the very least incentivize, building materials, systems and methods that are health-conscious and environmentally friendly."

Arrest visual blight. "We must seek phased elimination of above-ground wires, controlled limitation of signage to appropriate districts, numbers and sizes, and preservation of our historic resources."

Identify smart parking requirements. "We must revisit our 'one size fits all' suburban parking standards, and replace them with project and location-specific tools such as parking maximums, pooled parking, automated stacked parking and other emerging techniques."

Require density around transit. "Congregate additional density at train and Rapid bus stops and discourage new density where we anticipate no mass transit relief valve."

Advance homes for every income. "We own a prized commodity: the power to increase the value of land by making its zoning more lucrative.... Every up-zoning should carry with it an obligation to provide, preferably through on-site units but at least via monetary contribution, housing for the poor and middle class. We can all win."

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Source: Los Angeles Planning Commission

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