Midcity set to come out of shadows; New rezoning law is area's big hope for rejuvenation

San Diego Union - Sunday, January 12, 1986
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For more than three miles in either direction, business signs and urban decline bombard the senses.

El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue become parallel concrete ribbons of fast-food outlets and slow-motion auto traffic.

There are new immigrant enterprises and aging car-parts shops, amid ragged rows of fading storefronts and apartments shoulder-to-shoulder with established homes. A few display windows proclaim "Going Out of Business" -- but don't. Others did years ago.

This broad waistband of central San Diego, sometimes wearied from rampant growth and criss-crossed with bloated congestion, will be trying to shape up into a showpiece of the city in an ambitious rejuvenation effort.

The drawing board is the Midcity Community Plan and its regulatory teeth, a recently passed rezoning ordinance designed to peel away decades of apparent decline.

"We are going after a lot of different things at once," explained city planner John Wilhoit. "We are trying to save the older neighborhoods and houses, have a commercial revitalization program and add many public improvements."

Plans call for creation of condensed cores of business and residences along already developed traffic arteries. Coupled with this concentrated activity will be zoning safeguards to stop established neighborhoods from crumbling under higher-density construction.

The target of the measures is a huge one. The midcity district covers nearly 14 square miles from its Interstate 805 boundary on the west, with I-8 to the north, State 94 on the south and the La Mesa city line on the east.

A two-decade community plan became a blueprint for action last year after a series of meetings and hearings with midcity leaders. Changes are being overseen by Gloria McColl, the City Council representative for the area, who believes it could become a master design for future renovation of other urban areas here.

"It is a very innovative plan," the councilwoman said. "We have zoning designations that the city has never even used before. I look at it as an incubator, or a petri dish. We are going to see all these new ideas grow out of there."
"The rest of the city is certainly going to be watching. If it is as successful as I think it is going to be, then you are going to see a lot of similar land-use designation in a lot of other urbanized areas in San Diego."

Midcity is home to 100,000 people, 10 percent more than a decade ago. While debate raged on growth policies in outlying areas of the San Diego, the arguing was over in midcity. It accepted new immigrants and squeezed neighborhood expansion in what planners call "in-fill development."

Several established communities, some of them popular residential areas, can be found in the district. The neighborhoods include all or portions of City Heights, Normal Heights, Kensington, Talmadge, Oak Park, Encanto and College Heights. Yet much of the district suffers from an identity crisis of sorts.

"The midcity is fairly homogeneous right now -- there is no strong identification with any area," said planner Andy Spurlock. "El Cajon and University have almost the same land uses throughout the district."

Spurlock's Land Studio consulting firm contracted with the city to devise plans to attract "focal point" cores of intensive activity at regular intervals along El Cajon Boulevard and University Avenue in midcity.

These points, one of the prime features of the new growth plan, are to serve as cornerstones for new, condensed commercial zones. Spurlock likens it somewhat to the way that Hillcrest's central shopping and entertainment district is a magnet to that community and its development.

Ground-floor shops or eateries would give way to higher floors for living space, increasing the sense of activity and intensity in these urban centers. Placing buildings next to the street will add to the pedestrian nature of these hubs.

"The idea of creating these centers is to help establish an identity," Spurlock explained. "Each one could have a different character, both architecturally and in kinds of uses -- from restaurants and entertainment, to civic or community, or family-oriented in areas where there are neighborhoods of that nature."

Combining commercial and residential property uses to maximize land potential was a mainstay of city development until it was driven away from practicality by burgeoning reliance on the automobile, Spurlock said.

People could live above shops and stores and rely on public transportation or a single car for a family, minimizing parking needs. That changed as parking problems grew more severe, both for residents and customers at the shops.

"This is a very old concept. Europeans used it a lot," McColl said. "We've gotten away from that in the United States, but I think we are going back to it."
The rebound was helped by designs that segregate residential parking from commercial spaces to overcome auto and access difficulties. In general, the new measures will increase required parking. The commercial centers will be pinpointed on major intersections to add to available space for cars.

Downtown revitalization has spurred plans for such developments there, and two more are being proposed for Hillcrest. Much of the financial community -- accustomed to safe projections on returns from more predictable single-use developments -- remains unconvinced at this point, Spurlock said.

Harbor Pointe Center, a small, $1.6 million apartment and shopping complex recently built in Barrio Logan, had to obtain construction funding from a bank in Michigan, for example.

"I see that these projects will happen sooner or later in midcity. It is hard to tell exactly if it will be sooner," Spurlock said. "If either one of those Hillcrest projects gets built and becomes successful, (these developments) will be much more viable throughout the city."

The plan's lure to mixed-use developers is a basic one: the prospects of vastly increased profits, compared to more limited projects on the same amount of land outside these zones.

In these planned commercial-residential focal points, up to 108 residential units may be built per acre, more than three times the base allowed in the general area.

Contrasting with these activity hubs are new regulations for building on the major thoroughfares leading into them. Commercial outlets -- which now dominate these strips -- are more restricted, limiting businesses to lighter convenience uses and encourage development of relatively dense residential concentrations.

Structures can be no higher than 75 feet, and those on El Cajon would be set back at least 20 feet from the street. This adds to the sense of gateways toward the larger commercial focal points.

In the midcity, concentrating development along these arteries accomplishes several design goals.

Most importantly, it shifts construction of new housing units away from established mostly single-family residential areas that are least able to handle such pell-mell growth. Blocking the conversion of such neighborhoods will strengthen their identity as desirable single-family communities, area leaders say.

It also is designed to stimulate commercial growth by increasing demand for business properties. Now boarded-up stores and vacant shops are a relatively common sight.
along larger streets.

"An excessive amount of under-utilized commercially zoned property was a deterrent to revitalization -- a reduction in commercial zoning was considered essential to improving commercial vitality," the Planning Department explained to council members.

Other changes are more subtle but could be influential.

Construction standards have been upgraded to conform with citywide regulations, while design is becoming more flexible to encourage diversity.

In higher-density residential zones, the city has taken steps to bring streets back into the center stage of developments, to make units more attractive and private to the resident.

Houses and their front lawns were sometimes replaced by apartments or townhouses that converted front yards into nothing more than a row of parking spaces and an ugly, blank wall. Doors and windows of the structure opened to the sides, at times staring out no more than a few feet into the windows of the next building or down into the once-private yard of the house next door.

Under certain conditions of the new codes, these buildings can extend all the way to the side edge of the property, if they compensate by including front yard areas, balconies or patios. The result is expected to be more attractive residential streets, less visual blight and more privacy for newcomers and longtime residents.

More than a year of public hearings and planning sessions for the measures aired some concern from property owners in residential areas. They believed the value of their land could decline if it was limited to less-dense development.

Ted Pendleton, president of the Mid-City Chamber of Commerce, said he understood the concerns, but that the plan appeared to be a balanced blend of safeguards for residents and stimulus for economic improvements. Overall, he hailed the proposals.

"We must stay on top of trying to bring in new business and development," Pendleton said. "Otherwise, it could just be a good written plan that never turns into reality."

He and McColl are heartened by the outlook thus far. Adams Avenue and the Kensington area have had renewed activity in recent years. New shopping districts have been completed in the area to the far east portion of the district, while more improvements and remodeling projects have been edging closer from the west, along El Cajon and University.

"All while I was growing up in San Diego, this area was a nice, respected middle-class community of good homes and viable business opportunities," Pendleton recalled. "This will make it happen."
McColl remembers when the midcity was the destination of residents for most of their shopping needs.

"At one time it was a very bustling, vibrant area," she said. "People are beginning to return. It is already starting."

Caption: 1 PIC 2 MAPS
1. El Cajon Boulevard, a busy commercial strip, has long been suffering from decline and congestion. It could become a showpiece of the midcity, say those who are promoting an ambitious rejuvenation effort. (B-8) 2. The Mid-City community plan, shaded areas reflect where higher-density growth will be concentrated. (B-8) 3. area shown above (B-8) 1. The San Diego Union