

Mid-city has growing pains: Critic particularly pained that development lacks planning

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Steve Temko was showing a guest around Normal Heights when he stopped his car in the middle of the street and pointed to condominiums under construction. The site was once meant for a park.

"Somebody wasn't taking care of business," he said.

Temko, a driving force behind the coalition of mid-city groups known as Save Our Neighborhoods, became increasingly animated as he repeated that line while passing overcrowded schools, poorly designed apartments and sagging commercial areas.

To Temko, the mid-city has suffered from too much growth and too little planning. With overburdened schools, streets and parks, the mid-city hangs in limbo between its suburban history and an uncertain urban identity.

Community leaders approach revitalization with a sense of outrage and optimism -- the outrage has helped prod the city to action, and the optimism springs from visions of what their neighborhoods can become.

"I want to stay here," Temko said. "I'm not saying we should look like La Jolla, but give us a break."

A new community plan that will cut some of the potential residential density allowed by current zoning is being reviewed and could be adopted by the City Council before mid-summer.

The key to the plan is an element detailing how to pay for needed facilities and improvements. That's encouraging for many, but only to a point. A mid-city plan approved in 1965 has done little more than collect dust.

Mid-City is generally located northeast of downtown, east of Balboa Park and south of Mission Valley. It comprises the communities of Normal Heights, City Heights, North Park, Kensington, Talmadge, Oak Park, Encanto and Rolando.

More than 100,000 residents live in nearly 50,000 dwelling units spread across 8,500 acres. It is a racially and economically diverse community -- including the upscale Kensington neighborhood, dense pockets of low-to moderate-income families, and the El Cajon Boulevard strip known recently for the civic campaign against streetwalkers.

The reasons for mid-city's woes are many.

Among them: A faster growth rate in the last five years than any area of the city, frequent changes in City Council representatives, government focus on downtown and north city, lack of a communitywide planning group, and a high birth rate.

The most significant factor causing mid-city problems has been, ironically, one of the city's bigger successes: The growth management plan adopted in 1979.

The plan was meant to halt leapfrog development in the northern city area and focus growth more toward the urban core where most infrastructure facilities -- streets, parks, sewers, etc. -- already exist.

The policy known as "infilling" had a flaw -- it was developed before Proposition 13, the 1978 property tax-cutting initiative. Those funds had been used for financing city services, and there was never an alternative financing mechanism for needed mid-city improvements.

"There was lots of infill on the assumption that the services were there," said Kim Kilkenney, San Diego legislative analyst for the Construction Industry Federation. "Well, the services weren't there."

The recession forced some developers to curtail new subdivisions on the city's fringe areas, but smaller projects -- replacing a single family home with four or more condos -- continued in the mid-city neighborhoods.

The resulting pressure is pushing the mid-city beyond the saturation point and the area's many diverse interests find themselves allied in their march on City Hall, screaming for help.

Though the mid-city business community largely opposed a proposed moratorium on new high-density residential housing, the proposal received such strong backing from residents that a largely pro-development City Council seriously considered it.

The move failed, but it caught City Hall's attention. Instead of the moratorium, the council boosted developer park fees for new construction from \$100 per single-family unit and \$75 per multifamily unit to \$880 and \$660 respectively.

"It's a shame it takes such a concerted effort to get things started," said Don Erwin, president of the United Federation of Small Businesses in San Diego and a member of the East San Diego Property Owners Association.

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A draft of the long-awaited community plan was presented to the city Planning Commission last week. A tug-of-war ensued over what kind of and how much residential and commercial development will be allowed.

The draft plan calls for down-zoning of current land densities (allowing less units per acres), while recommending continued intense development in the transit corridor of University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard. Growth management advocates such as Mayor Hedgecock have urged just that type of development.

Reaching a consensus among community interests is difficult because of the nature of mid-city diversity. Some officials have suggested it should be broken down into several planning areas.

"It really is a cross-section of economic and ethnic levels and family size," Deputy City Manager John Fowler said. "Therein lies the difficulty in finding a consensus."

Since 1980, draft updates of the 1965 plan have been rejected, in part because of disagreement within the community over proposed housing densities.

The plan's emergence is largely the work of Councilwoman Gloria McColl, who has represented the mid-city district for a year and last fall made adoption of the community plan one of her campaign promises.

McColl was spurred to stick to her promise when she was reminded that during the campaign she had committed herself to a moratorium if the community plan was not approved in six months.

Though her comments were in a taped interview conducted by Temko with the Adams Avenue Post newspaper, she was able to avoid the moratorium even after the six months had past by agreeing to boost park fees even higher than what city staff recommended.

McColl has strong backing from the development community and clearly was uncomfortable with the prospect of a moratorium.

"I don't think a moratorium in itself really achieves anything," she said. "But it does get attention. I like a more constructive way to solve things."

That the community plan has come forth is cause for celebration even among opposing interests in the mid-city.

The plan is flexible in some areas where it proposes giving density bonuses if developers make concessions by adding such things as parking and recreational facilities.

Otherwise, facilities will be paid for by developer fees, capital improvement funds and block grants, according to architects of the plan. Developers also would like to see existing residents pay through assessment districts to upgrade facilities they now use.

Optimism over progress of the plan, however, has been blunted by recent revelations that the San Diego school system is far behind the city in its planning for the mid-city. The concern among community activists is that planning statistics suggest that a recent mid-city baby boom is going to hit the already cramped schools in about four years.

"The tidal wave's coming," said Temko, a 33-year-old attorney who has a 2-year-old daughter and a son less than a month old. "I want to send my daughter to school and not have her sit in a bungalow."

Frank Maddox, assistant school superintendent for business services, said the school problem has to be addressed before the mid city plan is adopted. "It may cause some delay," he said.

McColl's school board-City Council task force is expected to meet in two weeks to discuss the matter.

Meanwhile, Normal Heights Community Association President Jim Villars appeared somewhat exasperated last week upon hearing the school district's report on its mid-city plans. He said the community has been urging the district for a plan for at least two years.

"It just means we've got to work a lot harder," he said.

Caption: 1 PIC

New development seems to be crowding out the old in the mid-city area. (B-2) The San Diego Union/Carol Woods

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