



City of Villages Gets Dumb and Dumber

Once upon a time, somewhere over the rainbow in a San Diego not long ago, single-family homes, safe cul de sacs, wide boulevards and car friendly neighborhood shopping centers were the stuff of dreams for city planners.

This was Carmel Valley, Otay Mesa and Rancho Penasquitos, among dozens of other master planned new communities built over the last two decades in San Diego's suburban Oz.

But, 80 percent through writing the book, regional planners figured out that developable land in the Emerald City of San Diego was in increasingly short supply, and in fact, amounted to a mere 331 square miles after a hefty hunk was cut out for habitat preservation.

With a projected regional population growth of over a million people, either open space or single family home Fantasyland or the next generation had to go.

And so, the city set about rewriting the fairy tale in order to change the hearts and minds of people who had decided, often by experience, to detest density, which was synonymous with overcrowded recreation facilities and schools, crime and traffic jams.

The City of Villages, authored by San Diego's new Mayor Murphy, driven by citizen policy dilettantes and professional planners, seeks to redirect growth from the county's rural outskirts to newly planned and established neighborhoods in the city by focusing development on underused commercial centers and around established gathering places.

The plan is filled with swell ideas like increasing or creating "retail street level activity," "significant public plazas and greens" and "public transportation nodes." It is on sale on every corner of the city, from Community forums and Planning Board meetings to the editorial pages of our newspapers.

As a result, today the rules of engagement in the city's Planning Department are to densify, densify, densify—anyhow, anyway, any chance.

But, with the ink on the plan so wet it hasn't begun drying, evidence is mounting in the real world of development, in places like Carmel Valley, Sorrento Hills and Torrey Highlands, that the City of Villages is an emperor whose clothes exist only in the wonkish minds of city officials, planners and environmental activists.

In fact, while all three of these communities are targeted on the list for transformation into "walkable village centers," developers are telling the local planning groups that such notions are not commercially viable.

And, if these developers are right, the City of Villages will simply regress to six story apartment complexes around strip or

big box shopping centers so that residents can drive across the street instead of over several blocks to shop.

In Carmel Valley, three dumb, dumber and dumbest plans for sixteen promising acres across from the euphemistically named Highlands Town Center are driving a simmering community war pitting property owner Pardee Homes and a citizen group that barred the Planning Board chair from an organizing meeting, against a school district.

With the dumb idea, the Solana Beach School District, exercising its right of eminent domain over a squealing and very unwilling seller, would build an elementary school on ten acres because its original site is unsafe and the district says alternatives offered so far are unfeasible.

Not only will the costs of the land, with its underlying development rights, likely make this the most expensive public school in memory and locate it across from what Torrey Pines students call The Highlands because of the scoring possibilities, but the plan shuts down the City of Villages concept here, including eliminating potential millions from the community's FBA funds needed to build public space.

That dumb idea is only exceeded by the property owner's plan, already approved by the housing unit hungry city, to build a six-story 800 unit building, literally burying the only architectural landmark in the community, a library which ironically Pardee Homes built.

In a nod to some community activists and the City Councilman, this plan offers the community a chance to buy some acreage to build a vaguely defined "community concourse," which realistically translates into another underused public space attractive mostly to drug dealers and free overnight visitors.

And, the dumbest idea of all, a six story apartment complex along side a police station and maintenance facility, is not unlikely given the obligations and rights of the property owner.

The City of Villages does in fact provide the framework for what ought to happen in the Town Center: a mixed use retail complex with public space and retail on the ground floor and apartments and lofts above. The North Coast Repertory Theater has already expressed interest in participating in such a project.

But, without the real participation of lenders and commercial developers in the City of Villages planning process, Community Planning Boards around the city will be forced to do what the Carmel Valley Planning Board likely will have to do: support a dumb planning idea because the alternatives are so much worse.

Very soon the cloth will get pulled off the City of Villages wizard in Carmel Valley, and yes Dorothy, he is just a helpless fool.