



COVENANT WITH COMMUNITIES: CHARTER REFORM BEFORE CITY OF VILLAGES

Dear Mayor and Members of the San Diego City Council:

Sometime next week, after listening to a line-up of expert testimony in numbers not seen since the OJ trial, you will put your seal of approval on the City's new strategic growth plan, or in sound bite vernacular, the mayoral vision of San Diego's future, City of Villages.

At the same time, you will be handing over unprecedented powers to an unelected bureaucracy to shape the lives of the people who elected you and generations of taxpayers to come.

And that is because without serious changes in the way our city's charter lets you set policy but keeps your noses out of the daily business of operating the city, after you pass this plan your constituents will have little recourse when city planners come a callin' with stacked housing and less parking, mini-marts and big box shops, and monolithic and polymorphic commercial buildings.

For the past three years, people who love to talk planning and public policy have spent a lot of time convincing each other that the best way to handle a projected population increase of over a million new people is to walk the next generation away from the California American dream: the car and a single family home.

Now, at the apex of a very skillful public relations effort, they will come before you with an unprecedented consensus from business groups, builders, environmentalists, and all manner of planning policy wonks supporting a vision of multi-family housing around transit, walkable retail, and employment centers, and with any luck, some public space and a park or two.

So, why not pass the City of Villages now while the getting is good and the idea is hot. After all, the only squawking you will hear is from real people who live in neighborhoods already under siege and those who fear losing their communities to a different kind of sprawl—the kind that heads upward instead of outward.

Like the new Torrey Highlands homeowners, who having just spent a life's fortune for a new master planned house, awoke the very next day to a Chevron gas station that sprung up over night right under their windows.

Or Torrey Hills residents, whose employment centers have doubled in size, and now watch in horror as a building across from an elementary school is morphing into a six story biotechnology laboratory, fume hoods and all.

Or folks from Rancho Penasquitos where an apartment complex will loom over single family homes across a busy street from another boring strip shopping mall.

All this under the eyes of you, their City Councilmember. Your answering machine might as well play the greeting: "Thanks for calling, but I can do nothing for you," as the city's Development Services Department approves one more un-village-like project under commercial zoning rules so inclusive that plans for a Starbucks can change to a gas station mini-mart with just a signature.

And this is because the city charter neuters your ability to interfere with the City Managers world when you want to help your constituents and gives you a reason to shrug you shoulders when you don't.

You could risk losing the fragile coalition of interests supporting City of Villages by withholding approval of this drastic plan for San Diego's future until you forge a Covenant with Communities that would guarantee:

1. Densification only when funding for services, recreational facilities, public space and public transportation is secure and financing is in place for commercially viable retail town centers.
 2. Design guidelines that enhance neighborhoods—no longer should a 7-11 with an apartment or two on top qualify for a "mixed use retail" project, or a big-box shopping mall count as a town center
 3. Speedy approvals for builders who run the gauntlet getting community input and produce first-class projects, and quick rejection of plans that clash with a community's character.
 4. Easily accessible and understandable disclosure to homebuyers from the City of all potential uses in retail and employment centers. Homebuyers must never hear again that they should have known that an office building could double in size or accommodate hazardous materials without public input.
 5. Carefully considered guidelines for prudent allowable uses within employment centers close to schools, parks and homes.
 6. An increased and better paid police force that will have to cope with the inevitable conflicts arising from life in an ant hill.
- Full disclosure of the public costs for new infrastructure and he means of securing the funds

But, even with these guarantees, the only way you can maintain any meaningful control over the future of your districts is to change San Diego's form of government so that city planners, park and recreation administrators, and public real estate asset managers are directly answerable to you.

Some of you talked a blue streak about Charter reform when you ran for office, only to let the idea drift into the vapors once elected. Many of us opposed the idea for fear a qualified professional staff would be replaced by political hacks.

But, City of Villages changes all that because we cannot afford to allow our neighborhoods to transform under our eyes without direct oversight by the people through you, our elected representatives.

Next week, anxious community voices will likely be drowned out by an irresistible line-up of expert witnesses with sterling business, planning and environmental credentials. Please take some time to consider the people who must live with the reality of City of Villages.

Thanks for listening, Lisa.