

A Vision of a More Livable Los Angeles For Everyone:

Briefing Paper of the Alliance for a Livable Los Angeles, January 2003

As we move into the new millennium, Los Angeles faces a myriad of difficult land use challenges. We are suffering from a desperate housing shortage, a freeway system approaching gridlock, a transportation system at war with itself, and an imperative need for more neighborhood open space, schools and libraries. Simultaneously, we have a unique, time-limited opportunity to apply active community principles to numerous City planning efforts. The approval of state and local bonds ensures that substantial public investment in schools, parks and affordable housing are in our future. Public transportation projects are expanding, including the recently completed subway from downtown to the San Fernando Valley, the Gold Line light rail from downtown to Pasadena scheduled to open in July 2003 as well as the addition of "Rapid Bus" routes along major thoroughfares. Collaboration is now essential among the City's land use planners, the school district, the housing developers and the Metropolitan Transportation Agency to create more compact, livable neighborhoods in areas with good public transportation service.

In this briefing paper, the Alliance for a Livable Los Angeles¹ summarizes key planning problems and potential solutions. The Alliance is a diverse group of organizations with backgrounds in affordable housing, environmental justice, faith-based communities, transportation equity, economic and community development, and land use planning. The mission of the Alliance is to help make Los Angeles more livable for everyone, by creating more affordable housing, transportation options and neighborhood open space and ensuring that residents have a say in the decision-making

¹ Alliance for a Livable Los Angeles members include: ACORN, California Futures Network, California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund, Central City Neighborhood Partners, Environmental Defense, Livable Places, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, New Economics for Women, Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing, Pacoima Partners, United Food & Commercial Workers Local 770, and the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (Occidental College).

processes, especially low-income residents who are too often left behind. With this perspective in mind, we hope this paper will initiate a healthy dialogue about how we can help each other build a more livable Los Angeles for us all.

Why Sprawl Is NOT the Answer

The model of suburban development that has defined the Los Angeles metropolitan area is no longer sustainable. We've learned the hard way that building more freeways to reach more new housing tracts in the high desert, Riverside and San Bernardino Counties is causing our collective quality of life to suffer. Too many of us spend more time driving and sitting in frustrating traffic jams, further diminishing our already poor air quality. Meanwhile, the safety, comfort and efficiency of Angelenos who walk, bicycle and take public transportation too often take a back seat to moving and parking private cars. In addition, with our focus on the private space of suburban homes, we have failed to create the parks and public gathering places needed for our increasingly dense neighborhoods.

Relatively inexpensive land and political support for development propel suburban sprawl and make housing and retail construction on the urban fringe profitable. At the same time, the high cost of land in urban areas, neighborhood opposition to sometimes incompatible development, low-performing schools, toxic wastes, and general disinvestment in cities make urban infill development expensive, often prohibitively so. Additionally, our post-Proposition 13 tax structure leads local governments to pursue the sales-tax generating retail development that further increases sprawl. At the same time, housing construction is discouraged even though we have a severe housing shortage. We cannot continue to build out, creating a situation where people working in the Los Angeles area must commute from farther and farther away. Rather, we must find a way to make infill development easier and our urban core more livable for residents, thus reducing the growth pressure on everyone in our region and creating a viable regional future.

Designing Livable Communities

More creative and compact urban design is critical to creating pedestrian-friendly, economically viable, mixed-use communities. By allowing for higher residential densities within walking distance of shopping, public transit and other key community facilities, we can revitalize commercial districts, increase usage of public transportation and encourage more cohesive and secure neighborhoods.

Architects and urban designers are discovering and re-discovering ways of providing livable, aesthetically pleasing, more compact environments. By creatively utilizing scarce urban land for buildings and user-friendly public spaces, instead of roadways and parking lots, such communities look and feel intimate, safe and relaxed. The added density, transit accessibility and walkability provide the foot traffic necessary to the economic viability of existing or new commercial centers without contributing to increased traffic congestion and parking woes.

Communities around the country are discovering that building compact, mixed-use communities within a half-mile radius of public transit stations – transit-oriented development (TOD) – is important not only to reviving our older cities and suburbs, but also to reducing automobile-generated traffic congestion and air pollution. At the same time, we must not allow gentrification to push low-income residents out of revitalized communities. Low-income people should also have opportunities to live in vibrant, safe neighborhoods with a high quality of life.

Coordinating Land Use To Meet Community Needs

To make our neighborhoods more livable we must build more schools, libraries, affordable housing and parks. The voters have consistently voiced their agreement by passing state housing, parks and schools bonds as well as local library, schools and parks bonds.

Although building anything in an established neighborhood poses significant challenges because of the lack of available land, there are workable solutions. Too often different agencies and private developers compete for the same property, driving the price up. Too often public funding and archaic

building codes hamper creative mixed-use solutions such as building housing on top of schools or libraries and using the same land for public parks and schools' athletic fields. We all lose when our rent-controlled housing is torn down to build a school. Making sure that our neighborhoods get all the improvements they need requires pro-active strategies by the Council offices.

Meeting the City's Goals: the Housing Element and Inclusionary Zoning

Under state law, cities and counties must update their Housing Elements, or comprehensive plans for ensuring an adequate housing stock, every five years. The City's current Housing Element sets a goal of 30% of the housing stock at a level affordable to very low-income people, 17% for low income, 19% for moderate, and 34% for above moderate. The City's current housing element calls for construction of about 8000 units of housing each year through 2005.

While Los Angeles is clearly far behind in its efforts to meet its own housing goals, one area of housing is currently "hot" – luxury and high-end apartments. With the success of several recent downtown loft-conversion and new luxury projects, investors from around the country are lining up at the prospect of major profits through the growing market of professionals seeking to live in an urban setting. One way to ensure that this new development does not bring the City further out of compliance with the Housing Element goals is to adopt an **inclusionary zoning** policy. Such policies, already in place in over 120 California cities and counties, require that a percentage of each new market-rate housing project be set aside for lower income categories. It is clear that in Los Angeles – where the statewide housing crisis has reached dynamic proportions – an inclusionary zoning policy is long overdue.

Bridging the Gap – The Los Angeles Housing Trust Fund

The City confronts an acute shortage of safe, decent and affordable housing.² Housing construction dramatically lags behind population growth; too many of the existing units are overcrowded or

² "Affordable" housing is defined by the US Dept. of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as requiring no more than 30% of household income.

substandard; rents exceed the earning capacities of a large percentage of the City's population; and homeownership is out of reach for most middle and low-income households.

In an effort to address this crisis, the Housing Trust Fund was established in the fiscal year 2000-2001 budget, in 2002-03, \$42 million was provided as the first phase of a commitment to reach \$100 million/year by 2004-05. The Trust Fund receives appropriations from a number of sources. A key facet of a Trust Fund is that once money is deposited it is permanently earmarked for housing. Dedicating revenue sources outside of the annual budget process ensures the maintenance of a viable, dependable Trust Fund insulated from other fiscal demands.

Creating Parks and Neighborhood Open Space

Los Angeles residents desperately need more parks and green space. Of all major cities in the United States, Los Angeles ranks last in per capita open space. For low-income communities, this open space crisis is even more drastic. Los Angeles residents consistently *demand* more parks in their communities. City and County residents have overwhelmingly passed four parks bonds in the past five years and California residents also passed Proposition 12 and Proposition 40.

Although a few regional parks and recreational facilities are being maintained, many densely developed neighborhoods lack open spaces within walking or biking distance of residents' homes. In these areas, smaller parks and community gardens can be created on abandoned lots to fill that need for open space – lots too small to accommodate housing or schools. With a number of efforts moving forward at the same time (including new school and transit construction), the City must implement creative land-use planning to accommodate competing needs. By utilizing a community-based planning model to create local parks, the City can tap into the considerable local knowledge, energy and wisdom, which in turn can stimulate neighborhood revitalization.

You Can't Get There From Here – Increasing Transportation Options

Los Angeles is famous for its vast, car-dominated freeway network, yet almost half a million low-

income riders are dependent on bicycles, buses and trains as their main means of transportation. The need for affordable, responsive public transportation was dramatically highlighted during the MTA's transit operators' strike in late 2000. When the system ground to a halt, the working poor, elderly, disabled and students who make up the majority of transit riders were forced to beg rides, walk, or bike, to get to jobs, medical appointments and school obligations – or they simply stayed at home.

Clearly, we need better planning and more funding for non-automobile related transportation services, from bicycle and pedestrian safety measures, to better and safer bus service, to more and better transit services linked to affordable housing throughout the City. Without these key improvements, we will never be able to move beyond our overcrowded freeway system and air-clogging dependence on cars.

The Working Poor and the Health Care Crisis

In the late 1990s, over one in four workers in Los Angeles County were poor -- four million people living in poverty. Stereotypes of the poor as being unemployed could not be farther from the truth. In fact, the majority of the working poor (83%) in the late 1990s were employed with full-time jobs.³ The working poor are also mostly people of color (78%).⁴ Latinos alone represented 73% of the working poor in the late 1990s even though they only made up 40% of the entire Los Angeles workforce.⁵

³ Paul More, Jessica Goodheart et al., *The Other Los Angeles: The Working Poor in the City of the 21st Century*, (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, August 2000) 9-11. The working poor are defined as individuals in families with at least one member who reported employment income in the past year. The poverty level was set at \$33,300 for a family of four in 1998.

⁴ Robert Pollin, Mark Brenner et al., *Economic Analysis of the Santa Monica Living Wage Proposal*, (Amherst, MA: Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, August 2000) 146-149. The analysis was derived from March 1999 Current Population Survey data. Median family income for low-wage workers range between \$26,000 and \$35, 000, with the average number of dependents for low-wage workers being two.

⁵ More, Goodheart, et al., 17-19.

Working poverty in Los Angeles unfortunately is also closely linked to the region's crisis in health care. A full 2.8 million people do not have health insurance in Los Angeles County. Over half of the working poor (59%) are not covered by health insurance. The closures of eleven public health clinics mainly serving working families in 2002 by the County Board further exacerbates this situation.

Despite the challenges facing these families in Los Angeles, thousands of workers and community groups throughout the region have reinvigorated a justice movement for workers and their families. Labor unions and worker's rights organizations have continued to work for decent workplace conditions, health care and improved standards of living.

Action Items

As a council member, what can *you* do, specifically, to begin addressing these issues? The following is a list of possible actions that we think would be effective and go a long way to initiating change.

Public Participation

- Ensure that low-income residents and diverse community perspectives are included as part of land use and other decision-making in all levels of government. Grassroots leaders should be engaged to develop long-term solutions for their own communities.
- Positive City involvement in the Southern California Association of Government's 20-Year Visioning Effort is also essential to helping solve our region's unhealthy sprawl.

Permanent Source for Housing Trust Fund

- Given the long-term nature of Los Angeles' housing crisis, and the concerted, multi-year efforts necessary to alleviate it, the City Council needs to adopt appropriate ordinances to establish dedicated, permanent and local revenue sources for the Housing Trust Fund.
- In addition, The City should spend the \$42 million in current funds for the many projects in the pipeline as soon as possible to leverage funding from the recently passed Proposition 46 and other private and public resources.

- Draft, support and adopt an inclusionary zoning policy to address the desperate housing shortage.

Parks and Open Space

- To address our lack of neighborhood open space, we strongly support the creation of the Neighborhood Land Trust, and ask the City Council to request appropriate City agencies provide support and advice as needed for the creation of small, green and neighborhood open spaces.

Coordinated Land Use & Transportation

- City Council offices must initiate and support the continued review and revision of building, housing and other City codes to encourage the creation of pedestrian friendly, transit oriented and mixed use development.
- Engagement of City officials and residents is necessary for the land use decision-making surrounding (1) the placement and construction of Los Angeles Unified School District sites and (2) the expenditure of various state bonds approved by voters.
- Support for improving and expanding transit and bus service throughout Los Angeles is key to improving our communities and providing more choices.
- Bicycle paths and lanes and bicycle-friendly facilities must be made available throughout the Los Angeles transit system.
- Funds for pedestrian safety measures should be at least doubled in both the Los Angeles City and MTA budgets, including Safe Routes to Schools for children walking to and from school.

Jobs & Health Care

- Elected officials should advocate for responsible economic development that gives priority to living wage jobs, not poverty, minimum-wage jobs.
- Workplace protections in the workplace must be strengthened to protect workers from harassment because of worker organizing or immigrant status.
- Access to employer-provided health care insurance should be expanded.
- City workers much work closely with health care workers to create long-term solutions to L.A.'s health care crisis.