Recommendations for Uptown Whittier For the City of Whittier







A ULI Advisory Services Technical Assistance Panel Report

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Recommendations for Uptown Whittier



Whittier, California

May, 2006 A ULI Advisory Services Technical Assistance Panel

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and the Technical Assistance Panel Program

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Introduction

The City of Whittier is located in Los Angeles County, about 12 miles southeast of the City of Los Angeles. Established as a community by Quakers in 1887, Whittier was incorporated as a city in 1898. Today it encompasses 14.8 square miles and has an estimated population of 87,000 persons. Despite the tumultuous changes in the region over the last hundred-plus years, Whittier continues to be a tight-knit community, with many families having lived here for multiple generations.

Uptown Whittier, which encompasses many of the original homes of the City's first residents, historically has been the city's commercial center, and continues to maintain a traditional "Main Street" small town charm. However, after the 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake, many of the older commercial buildings had to be demolished; to date, these building sites have been replaced on a short-term basis by surface parking lots. A majority of these sites are owned by the City.

During the 1990s, the City adopted a Specific Plan for Uptown Whittier in hopes of revitalizing the area. Unfortunately, the maze of regulations and other locational factors may have inadvertently discouraged any significant new development in Uptown, with the result that businesses entering the community have opted to locate along the busy Whittier Boulevard corridor.

In recent months, the City of Whittier has begun a planning process intended to revitalize Uptown Whittier. To this end, the City engaged the Los Angeles District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI Los Angeles) to assemble a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) to study the issues surrounding Uptown and provide recommendations to the City that would lead to an upgrading and strengthening of the local base of residential units and community retail services. Specifically, the ULI Los Angeles TAP was charged with providing recommendations for revitalizing Uptown's base of commercial services, expanding Uptown's housing supply, and increasing Uptown's economic revenue stream to the City, while preserving Uptown's unique small town character and protecting the quality of life enjoyed by the immediately surrounding residential neighborhoods.



Background

Uptown Whittier is a pedestrian-scaled, mixed-use neighborhood that is laid out as a square, with sides one-quarter mile in length. With its center found at the intersection of Greenleaf and Philadelphia Streets, Uptown is bounded by Hadley Street to the north, Painter Avenue to the east. Penn Street to the south, and Pickering Avenue to the west. Uptown is comprised of relatively short blocks and tree-lined, two-lane streets that provide convenient curbside parking. Uptown is filled with small specialty retail shops and personal services owned by local residents: a number of local restaurants: an independently-operated movie theater; and a few national franchise operators such as the Radisson Hotel, RiteAid Pharmacy, Starbucks, and Coffee Bean/Tea Leaf. There are also a scattering of multifamily residences, including a number of affordable senior residential complexes such as the restored Hoover Hotel. A number of churches and other important civic institutions, including Whittier College, City Hall, County Courthouse, City Library, and historic Central Park are located within or immediately adjacent to Uptown.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Based on a review of existing City regulations for Uptown, discussions with City staff, and escorted walking tour of Uptown, the TAP members identified the following strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths:

1. Significant acreage in Uptown is currently utilized for surface parking lots. Much of this property is owned by the City of Whittier. Many of the lots are underutilized and can be redeveloped with new residential and commercial uses.

2. Uptown has "good bones". The overall block, street, and building types in Uptown continue to provide the critical elements for sustaining a pedestrian friendly, "Main Street" small town experience.

3. The separation of the community from regional freeways and other large scale development helps to preserve the village feel of the Uptown and adjacent residential neighborhoods.

4. Uptown's proximity to local job centers in nearby Santa Fe Springs, City of Commerce, and downtown Los Angeles makes it a desirable residential location for working commuters.

5. The expansion of Whittier Presbyterian Hospital is underway; current plans call for the addition of a new five-story medical facility. The 73-acre site that formerly served as the location for the Fred C. Nelles Youth Detention Center is proposed to be redeveloped with new retail and residential uses. Both projects are located at the primary gateway to Uptown. Employment at these two developments should be attracted to residential opportunities created on sites in the Uptown area.

6. Another significant source of residential demand in Uptown should come from the growing number of predominantly Latino young professionals who have grown up in and near Whittier and wish to remain in the community.

7. Whittier College is adjacent to Uptown and is home to 1,200 students and a Performing Arts Center. Given that the students are encouraged to live at the campus, there should be opportunities to develop commercial uses in Uptown that serve the College and help to more fully integrate the "town and gown."

8. The former Alpha Beta Market site in Uptown is proposed to be redeveloped

with a new City Library. This use would provide an important community resource to the residents and visitors to the Uptown area.

9. Commercial uses in Uptown are presently exempt from providing off-street parking spaces. This exemption could encourage the development of restaurants and other entertainment uses that can benefit from the existing joint-andshared-parking facilities that exist in the Uptown.

10. According to City staff, there is a growing interest from the private sector real estate development community to invest in Uptown. Current housing values are capable of supporting the costs of new development, particularly in higher density and mixed-use configurations.

Weaknesses:

1. The existing City regulations for Uptown are often confusing, internally inconsistent, and difficult to implement, particularly for smaller-scale development projects. Moreover, the current development guidelines have not been successful in preventing inconsistencies of building scale, massing, and design that detract from Uptown's small town "Main Street" character.

2. A number of buildings are not being well-maintained; some even appear to be abandoned. Pride of ownership is difficult to cultivate when over 80 percent of the property owners in Uptown are absentee landlords. Retail rents of \$1.10 - \$1.25 per square foot make it financially infeasible for those property owners who would like to make substantial improvements to upgrade their buildings.

3. The revenue dues for the Uptown business improvement district are business-based, which makes revenue pro-



jections highly sensitive to vacancy rates.

4. Property vandalism in the form of graffiti and window etching is a growing problem. Uptown merchants do not have a uniform policy for operating hours and security lighting standards, and the City has few financial resources to commit to address vandalism in Uptown.

5. Clusters of historic buildings in Uptown have been compromised with stucco alterations. The City has not adopted a comprehensive historical designation policy for Uptown that sets forth development standards for properties according to their historical significance.

6. Parking is mismanaged. Multifamily residences appear to be underparked; yet at least one senior housing project is overparked. Public parking lots and curb-side street parking spaces are not locat-ed nor priced according to demand.

7. There is a lack of affordable, entrylevel housing for young families.

8. There is no major grocery store within walking distance of Uptown.

9. Availability of social services from local churches has attracted a regional homeless population to Uptown.

10. Public transportation alternatives are few. The frequency of the local shuttle that connects Uptown to other commercial centers in Whittier is currently at one-hour-intervals.

Summary

of Recommendations

Based upon Uptown's strengths and weaknesses, TAP prepared a number of recommendations to assist the City for revitalizing Uptown, expanding Uptown's housing supply, and increasing Uptown's economic revenue stream. These recommendations are summarized into four interrelated objectives:

Fix the Parking Build New Housing Anchor the Retail Keep the Rules Clear and Simple

Fix the Parking

As long as parking is free, there will never be enough parking (See Shoup, Donald. *The High Cost of Free Parking*. American Planning Association Planners Press, 2005). In order to properly manage the supply and demand of parking, the City must begin to charge for the use of the spaces; otherwise, both residents and visitors will continue to abuse the current system and not effectively ration their utilization of the prime spaces.

The best policy is to charge performancebased prices that yields an 85% occupancy rate in areas of high demand, which means that about 15% of the parking spaces on each block should be vacant to make spaces available at all times. If half the parking spaces on a block are vacant, the price is too high. If no spaces are vacant, the price is too low. State-of-theart, multi-space pay stations rather than conventional, single-space meters should be used to collect the revenue for curb parking. Most importantly, all of the revenues generated from the performancebased parking fees (after City operating costs are paid) should be accounted for separately from other City funds and used only within and for the benefit of Uptown.

The City of Redwood and City of Pasadena have successfully implemented similar parking management programs to revive their historic downtowns. In Pasadena, the parking meters and garage structures in the Old Pasadena parking district currently generates \$1.3 million annually. All of this revenue after payment of operating costs is reinvested in the Old Pasadena business improvement district to pay for extra services and amenities beyond basic Citywide levels. These services and amenities include extra security, additional street trees, historic lighting fixtures, steam cleaning of sidewalks, and seasonal marketing/promotional activities. The key to the success of these types of performancebased parking management programs is that the merchants through the business improvement district have direct control over how the money is spent.

Uptown should continue to exempt commercial uses from the requirement of physically providing parking spaces, and consider charging a parking in-lieu fee instead. These fees would go towards the construction and maintenance of three or four public parking structures located strategically throughout Uptown. These City-owned parking structures should be constructed as mixed-use projects with ground floor retail facing the street in order to encourage a "park once philosophy" and retail vitality on the street level. Future revenue streams from the City-owned parking structures may be bonded against to pay for the initial construction cost of the structures themselves and for other public improvements in Uptown.

By consolidating off-street parking into strategic locations, underutilized Cityowned surface parking lots may be sold to private developers for new mixed-use projects. The property sale revenue including additional property tax increment funds generated by future mixed use-projects on these sites can provide additional funding sources for revitalizing Uptown.

Build New Housing

The expansion of the Whittier Presbyterian Hospital alone will attract hundreds of medical assistants, nurses, physicians, and other health care workers who will be looking for local housing ranging from entry level to executive homes. Given Uptown's proximity, new housing targeting these health care professionals is highly recommended. In keeping with the existing residential building types in Uptown, new housing should be provided as courtyard houses on side streets paralleling Greenleaf and as row houses on side streets paralleling Philadelphia. Contentious debate over unit per acre density should be replaced by participatory planning focused on defining building form and character.

The City should take the lead in providing suitable sites for residential development. The immediate source should be surplus City-owned surface parking lots. Additional land assemblage could be in the form of land swapping City-owned parcels with privately owned property. The City of Brea has successfully implemented land swapping as a means to assemble land for redevelopment purposes.

Another strategy for assembling privately owned land without having to resort to eminent domain is for the City to create a graduated density scale that allows for more intense development as sites get larger. The City of Simi Valley used this approach very successfully to create suitable sites for residential development. Conventional zoning allows for the same density calculation for similarly zoned parcels regardless of whether they measure 10,000 square feet or 100,000 square feet. A graduated density scale offers private property owners a significant financial incentive to negotiate with their neighbors to voluntarily assemble and put on

the market larger sites. As a potential development site gets larger, the City may grant building height bonuses, for example, which may directly increase the property's potential market value.

The City should also consider exempting developers from physically providing residential offsite parking for guests (parking for residents should still be required to be physically provided on site). Instead, residential developers should be required to pay a guest parking in-lieu fee which the City uses towards the operating costs of the parking structures in Uptown where guests may park.

Specific recommendations for housing the homeless are beyond the scope of this TAP's collective expertise. A Mayor's Task Force comprised of Uptown stakeholders and regional social service providers should be formed in order to address devising a comprehensive strategy for addressing the special needs of the homeless.

Anchor the Retail

"Retail follows rooftops"--this is a fundamental principle that the private real estate development community has successfully and repeatedly implemented in a great diversity of urban marketplaces. The introduction of new residents in Uptown will support existing businesses and attract new businesses to fill up vacant storefronts. These new businesses most likely will not be big-box retailers nor national chain restaurants. In fact, it would be a mistake for the City to subsidize such users to come to Uptown. Doing so would destroy the independent "mom-and-pop" specialty shops and restaurants that provide Uptown's unique small town charm.

Instead, the City should consider subsi-

dizing a boutique grocery store such as Trader Joe's or Bristol Farms or Sprouts/ Farmers Market as an anchor tenant for Uptown. This would serve as a needed amenity to preserve Uptown as a selfsustaining, walkable community. Currently, Uptown residents need to get in their cars anytime they need a bottle of wine or gallon of milk. The City should also consider solidifying its "town and gown" relationship with Whittier College by subsidizing the relocation of the college bookstore to Uptown. This would encourage students to venture off campus to interact with Uptown residents and frequent local shops as they purchase required textbooks.

More needs to be done to energize existing and future paseos. The City of Santa Monica and City of Santa Barbara have successfully implemented paseos that are inviting, attractive, and functional. Outdoor dining, merchant kiosks, and public art are several examples of what paseos can offer beyond functioning as a convenient passageway.

The existing business improvement district (BID) should consider converting from a business-based to property based BID. Doing so would provide a more stable source of revenue for the BID since dues are collected by the county tax collector as part of the landowner's annual property tax bill. This would provide landlords an incentive to attract higher quality tenants that can afford to pay the higher rents necessary to cover the increased property tax bill. With a more secure and stable revenue base, the Uptown BID can expand their marketing and promotional events as well as fund needed public improvements in Uptown.

Acts of vandalism should begin to decrease in proportion to the increase of more eyes on the street. More people frequenting shops and restaurants together with a uniform policy regarding merchant operating hours and security lighting should eliminate the need for the installation of expensive video security surveillance cameras and unattractive window filming.

Customers need to have an alternative to the car if they wish to have lunch or do some specialty shopping in Uptown. Following the "park once philosophy", a customer should have the ability to leave their car parked and take a shuttle that connects such major commercial and employment centers such as Uptown, Whittier Presbyterian Hospital, Whittier College, The Quad, and Whitwood Mall. Like the DASH Shuttle in downtown Los Angeles, these shuttles should pass every 10 minutes.

Keep the Rules Clear and Simple

Time and certainty are critical factors in determining a project's risk. An easy-tounderstand and efficient development approval process could help reduce this risk dramatically and potentially create the biggest incentive the City could offer to entice developers to invest in Uptown.

"I'll build whatever you want; just tell me what it is!!!" The existing City regulations for Uptown are often confusing and difficult to implement, particularly for smallerscale development projects. Inadvertently, the existing approval process is functioning as a big stop sign to potential Uptown investors. The best policy is to throw all current Uptown regulations away and create a new formbased planning framework that is based on a clear vision for Uptown.

The following recommendations for making the rules clear and simple are based on case study examples of successful downtown revitalizing strategies implemented by cities nationwide. (See Suchman, Diane R. *Developing Successful Infill Housing*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 2002).

> 1. Effective change can be accomplished only through the vision and leadership of the City. Without a clear vision, if a good project walks in the door, you get a good project. If it is a bad project, you get a bad project. The City's proposed visioning charrette for Uptown is a critical step in creating this clear vision.

2. Impose tighter deadlines for departmental decisions. The City of Denver, for example, has imposed strict deadlines for staff reviews. If a project meets the city's design standards, approvals come quickly. However, if a developer wants to deviate from the standards, the project must go through a more extensive design review process.

3. Implement design guidelines that focus on form and character to ensure that new development is compatible with existing neighborhood structures. Properly structured, design guidelines can save developers time, money, and frustration by reassuring the community in advance that the proposed development will be attractive and compatible with the desired vision of Uptown.

4. Designate a project manager to be the developer's single point of contact for all public actions affecting projects in Uptown. This project manager would be responsible for initiating, coordinating, and monitoring all project reviews in a timely manner and for solving any interdepartmental disputes. This should eliminate the time-consuming and often frustrating current practice that forces developers to scamper from department to department trying to figure out the requirements and timing of the development approval process.



Conclusions

The ultimate success of Uptown will be based upon the City's use of its resources. These resources include leadership; the power to shape the public domain; planning and coordination; regulation of land use; site assembly, acquisition, and preparation; infrastructure and public services; and financial incentives for desired development. Just as important will be the inclusion of the community in decisions about the character of the physical development of Uptown. With a clear vision of Uptown, community stakeholders, developers, and City officials can focus their energies on implementing a fair and predictable guality of development. With clear goals and objectives, the community at large can feel confident that new development will contribute to revitalizing Uptown's traditional "Main Street" small town charm.



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Breiner was General Manager of the Northlake project for Genstar Land

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Desiring to return to homebuilding, Breiner joined John Laing Homes as Vice President of Land Development in May, 2001. His responsibilities included overseeing all site planning, architectural design, project entitlement and development for both single family and multifamily housing. He has been instrumental in implementing the company's transition from a predominantly suburban homebuilder to a company with a diverse mixture of urban and suburban projects. In 2005, Breiner took on the responsibility of the Vice President of Land Acquisition, where he now oversees all land acquisition activities for the company in Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties.

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Shoup has also worked on ways to finance neighborhood public investments. In research conducted at the World Bank, he proposed a new way to finance these investments: allow property owner to defer paying special assessments, with interest, until they sell their properties. This proposal led to passage of California's law that enables cities to use deferred special assessments to finance neighborhood public spending.

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Whitney's experiences in the real estate consulting practice include providing development advice and economic analysis to cities, counties, agencies, private developers, and investors around the world.

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Prior to joining Empire Companies, Curtis was the Practice Group Leader for the Real Estate. Land Use and Environmental Practice Group of the national law firm of Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton, LLP, where he specialized in real estate matters, including land use and development, acquisition and portfolio matters. Curtis represented commercial and residential developers, investors, corporations and lenders in all major facets of acquisition, development, construction and financing. Representative development projects include: master planned communities; mixed use, in-fill and coastal projects; infrastructure development; and other residential, commercial and industrial projects.

Curtis has lectured on real estate, land use and environmental law at the University of Southern California, International Association of Attorneys and Executives in Corporate Real Estate (AECRE), Appraisal Institute, Urban Land Institute, Building Industry Legal Defense Foundation, California State Bar Real Property Section, Los Angeles County Bar Association, and at a number of other seminars and conferences.

Curtis is a member of the St. Thomas More Law Honor Society, the Urban Land Institute, where he has served on a council, and is on the Executive Committee for the ULI LA District Council, where he serves as chair for the Technical Assistance Panel committee.

Curtis has received the AV® rating by Martindale-Hubbell®. This is the highest rating an attorney can receive for quality and ethics. Curtis has also been given the honor of being named as a "Super Lawyer" for 2004 and again for 2005. He received his Juris Doctorate from Loyola Law School, cum laude, and his Bachelor of Arts degree from University of California, Los Angeles.

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Susan H. Kamei oversees the policy and practice initiatives and membership support for over 2,000 members in ULI Los Angeles, a district council of the Urban Land Institute, in Los Angeles, Ventura, Kern, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara counties. During Kamei's tenure with ULI, the Los Angeles District Council has been recognized for its work in sharing best practices and leadership in issues such as regional growth, housing, and inner city revitalization, and for its leadership in the development of the ULI District Council program.

Prior to joining ULI in 1999, Kamei was the Executive Officer of the University of Southern California Lusk Center for Real Estate and Associate Director of the USC Master of Real Estate Development (MRED) Program, where she had primary responsibilities for the research, policy, educational, and professional programs linking the university and real estate communities. Kamei also was an adjunct associate professor in the USC MRED program, and created and directed the international development curriculum.

Previously, Kamei was regional counsel for Mobil Land Development Corporation, where she developed substantial experience with entitlements and land use issues, and practiced corporate law with the international law firm of Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP.

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In September 2000, she received the "Woman of Courage Award" from the Friends of the Los Angeles City Commission on the Status of Women for leadership and service in business, academia, and the community. She serves on the Advisory Board of the University of Southern California Center for Sustainable Cities. She is a published author and a frequent conference speaker.

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Over the last 10 years, Durán has worked with several Los Angeles area not-for-profits, developing and implementing community based plans for economic and community development. He currently serves on California State Assembly Member Rudy Bermudez's Economic Development Community Advisory Council.

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Javier Mariscal is a founding member and Principal of Urban Living Concepts, LLC. The primary mission of Urban Living Concepts, LLC is to identify and bring together public and private stakeholders, build community consensus, and create "win-win" solutions for resolving complex land use entitlement issues.

Mariscal has over 17 years of real estate development experience including 10 years in the public sector as redevelopment agency staff for the City of Huntington Park, City of West Covina, City of Ontario, and City of Cypress. During his public sector tenure, he was directly involved in negotiating and implementing first time homebuyer programs, multi-family rehabilitation projects, and public-private development agreements for new construction housing. He also worked more than 6 years in the private homebuilding industry where he was primarily responsible for acquiring and entitling urban infill housing sites that created over 750 new homes in diverse communities including Santa Ana, Claremont, Inglewood, Sylmar, and Pasadena.

Mariscal is an Executive Board member of the Urban Land Institute Los Angeles District Council and serves as Co-Chair of the Housing Solutions Committee. He is a nationally accredited urban planner and is a member in good standing with the American Institute of Certified Planners. He received his MA in Urban Planning from UCLA and his BA in Architecture from Yale University. A native Angelino, Mariscal was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles.

About ULI

the Urban Land Institute

ULI - the Urban Land Institute is a nonprofit research and education organization that promotes responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.

The Institute maintains a membership representing a broad spectrum of interests and sponsors a wide variety of educational programs and forums to encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing of experience. ULI initiates research that anticipates emerging land use trends and issues and proposes creative solutions based on that research; provides advisory services; and publishes a wide variety of materials to disseminate information on land use and development.

Established in 1936, the Institute today has more than 30,000 members globally, representing the entire spectrum of the land use and development disciplines. Professionals represented include developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, public officials, planners, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academicians, students, and librarians. ULI relies heavily on the experience of its members. It is through member involvement and information resources that ULI has been able to set standards of excellence in development practice. The Institute has long been recognized as one of America's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

This ULI Advisory Services Technical Assistance Report, produced by ULI Los Angeles, a district council of the Urban Land Institute, is intended to further the objectives of the Institute and to make authoritative information generally available to those seeking knowledge in the field of urban land use.

Richard M. Rosan President

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