

It's hard to trust City Hall on development

IN ITS FEB. 28 EDITORIAL ("FINDING THE right way to limit development," page 4) the Daily Press opined that the pace of growth in Santa Monica has become too frenetic and suggested we need to "better regulate development and put a stop to the madness we've all experienced."

It's curious then why the Press opposes the Residents' Initiative to Fight Traffic ("RIFT"), which would cut by half the annual rate of Santa Monica's traffic-generating commercial development. Instead, the Press believes the ongoing update of the city's Land Use and Circulation Element (LUCE) — the blueprint for land use and transportation management for the next 20 years — will suffice to slow growth.

I disagree. The Residents' Initiative to Fight Traffic (www.smrift.com) is the only effective way to slow down the continuing over-development of our city. Here's why:

It's important to understand that the LUCE revisions are just a plan, as in "I planned to be at the Lakers game for the tip-off, but traffic heading out of Santa Monica was so bad I didn't even get to the 405 until late in the second quarter."

Plans change. And judging from past City Hall actions, plans change to allow more development.

This is exactly what happened to our city since the last update of LUCE in 1984. Back then, the city's projected amount of commercial development for the next 16 years was surpassed in only six years. And did our city stop growing after it reached the projections it had planned for? Hardly. City Hall just changed the plan. It kept on allowing more commercial growth until our streets became immobilized with traffic. And the planned redevelopment of downtown was supposed to be less dense and include paseos and other public spaces in new buildings. But City Hall changed those plans, too, and away went the paseos.

Another problem with putting all our faith in the LUCE revisions is that while its goals may be wonderful, there is no guarantee many of them will ever be enacted. Here are some examples of those goals; judge for yourself if we can count on them being put into effect:

1. A bicycle network throughout the city: Great idea. Problem is City Hall spent a lot of time and money drafting a Bike

Paths Master Plan more than 10 years ago and hasn't done much to implement it.

2. Transportation Demand Management: A fancy name for expanding City Hall's program to reduce the impacts of workers commuting to jobs in Santa Monica. Another splendid notion, but when I asked a city staffer why it hadn't been expanded years ago, I was told there wasn't enough staff or time to do so. How can we count on that to change?

3. Developer Impact Fees: LUCE proposes to levy fees on new projects and to use the funds to increase mobility around town. The catch? The City Council passed an ordinance in 1996 establishing just such a fee, but City Hall never spent \$30,000 to develop a funding formula. The City's consultant tells me the market would have borne a fee of \$20 per square foot, so in 12 years City Hall has missed out on almost \$40 million in funds for traffic mitigations from commercial projects alone. If City Hall can negligently forfeit that much revenue for traffic mitigations, how can we expect them to offset the impacts of development in the future?

4. Measuring Success: The LUCE revisions call for regularly quantifying their "no net new auto trips" goal. Yet City Hall's own 2005 report states, "current methods do not collect the types of information that could help to identify and evaluate strategies that could create the kind of Santa Monica its residents envision." Despite pleas from neighborhood organizations, the Santa Monica Coalition for a Livable City and the Planning Commission, three years later our City Council hasn't budged on implementing new tools to measure traffic, so we have no baseline of existing conditions on which to gauge the success or failure of LUCE.

If the only lesson of history is that history will repeat itself, we clearly cannot count on city officials to aggressively slow the pace of development and to lessen its traffic impacts, no matter how visionary the LUCE revisions may be.

If one is truly concerned about run-away development, the only way to slow it down is to actually slow it down. By putting an annual cap on commercial growth, that is exactly what RIFT will do.

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