

BROWNFIELD NEWS

Your Natural Resource

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Affordable Housing and Smart Growth: Brownfields at Work In San Diego

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A few months ago, the City of San Diego adopted several strategies to address the City's lack of affordable housing. One highly controversial strategy is the inclusionary housing ordinance requiring developers of new projects to set aside 10 percent of all new units to low- and moderate- income units. An "in-lieu" fee will be enforced for developers unwilling to set aside 10 percent of their stock for lower-income residents.

In addition, City Council approved the concept of fast-tracking plans for affordable housing and City in-fill projects. The Council also cleared the way for the City of San Diego Housing Commission and various City redevelopment agencies to sell up to \$55 million in bonds to fund condominiums and other units that will be sold at below-market values.

Under an outdated 1950s law, no more than 5,500 affordable housing units could be built in San Diego with public funds as part of the financing process. On July 22, 2002, City Council voted to place a measure on the November ballot that would increase the number of affordable housing units to 10,500, and raise the capacity for building units that public agencies could help construct.

When it comes to redevelopment, both the community and developers are often faced with many challenges regarding the location of the property. While suburban or rural development may result in less expensive homes, the tendency of developers to build these areas is clearly leading to other quality-of-life issues such as greater distance to work, severe traffic congestion, and loss of open-space land. The open spaces that are often developed, called greenfields, typically surround and expand beyond already-existing towns or cities. In a recent article by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), an estimated 4.5 acres of greenfields are saved for every one acre of Brownfields redeveloped. Brownfields are defined by the EPA as "real properties, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant." The implications of greenfield development are enormous: increased sprawl, traffic, resource

strain, and declining quality of life. Clearly something is needed to help close the gap in affordable housing, and also maintain quality of life.

"Smart Growth"

"Smart growth" is development that serves the environment, community, and economy. It provides a framework for communities to make informed decisions about how and where they want to grow. Smart growth makes it possible for communities to grow in ways that support economic development and jobs; create strong neighborhoods with a range of housing, commercial, and transportation options; and achieve healthy communities that provide families with a clean environment.

City in-fill projects, an example of a "smart growth" strategy, have as their main focus creating healthy, vibrant, livable communities and addressing quality-of-life issues important to all communities.

With the current housing crisis facing San Diego, it is important to acknowledge the concerns of the community, the environment, policy makers, developers, and planners to ensure the most sustainable use of each property. This can be achieved through the Smart Growth principles being used by a growing number of cities across the nation. These principles are outlined as follows:

- Provide mixed land uses
- Take advantage of compact building design
- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
- Create walkable neighborhoods
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
- Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities
- Provide a variety of transportation choices
- Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective.
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

"City of Villages"

The future of San Diego's housing and transportation is linked to the City of Villages plan, which would encourage the redevelopment of San Diego's 26 older and neglected neighborhoods. The City of Villages concept is based on New Urbanism, a design philosophy that promotes the creation and restoration of diverse, walkable, compact, vibrant, mixed-use communities. These new urban villages ideally are comprised of housing, work space, shops, entertainment, schools, parks, and civic facilities essential to the daily lives of the residents -- all within easy walking distance of each other.

The intention of the City of Villages strategy is to steer San Diego's growth over the next 20 years. According to a recent article released on behalf of the City, carrying out this strategy will involve: 1) tailoring a development plan to fit each of San Diego's unique neighborhoods; 2) identifying financing sources for needed public improvements; 3) improving cooperation between developers, communities and public agencies; and 4) beginning the selection process and construction of "pilot" urban villages.

A 40-member public committee has worked with City planners to address the concerns of higher densities and have envisioned the plan for three pilot villages to be implemented within the next three years, followed by dozens more in the metro area.

Land Recycling: The Key to Smart Growth

The difficulties associated with brownfield redevelopment are often overlooked in smart growth strategies. Yet, they may also be exactly the solution for which developers have been searching. Brownfields are likely to be central to any successful infill strategy or smart growth plan. Brownfields are sites that have been abandoned and/or rundown, creating an eyesore in the community and leading to a decline in community vitality.

Brownfield redevelopment and the companion strategy of "land recycling" take advantage of already-existing parcels of land within the city. The objective of land recycling is to help ensure that land development required to meet our society's housing and economic needs will concurrently clean up contaminated properties, while stimulating reinvestment in disadvantaged communities, particularly within the urban core.

The redevelopment of brownfield sites is complicated by real or perceived environmental contamination. Such sites might include an old service station or auto shop, a metal plating shop, a dry cleaner, paint and body shop, railroad yard, or a site contaminated with lead from "burn ash," caused by burning trash before refuse collection services.


Cleaning up these brownfield sites before developing is a necessary yet often unpleasant task for many developers. More often than not, site investigations and remediation activities exhaust an exorbitant amount of time, expense, and hassle. Leaving these brownfields abandoned and contaminated, however, will bring down a community's economy, environment, and livelihood.

Often these brownfield sites may be cleaned up to a level suitable for commercial and industrial uses and are already served by needed infrastructure such as water and sewer. However, developers and businesses may choose to locate on greenfields without needed infrastructures such as roads and utilities. This contributes to the loss of open spaces, increases the amount of taxpayer dollars spent on funding a new infrastructure, and impedes neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Redeveloping brownfield sites undoubtedly will contribute to smart growth. Therefore, "smart strategies" for cleaning up contaminated sites will be critical. One example of a "smart strategy" is California's Polanco Redevelopment Act, which allows a redevelopment agency to order parties responsible for contaminating property in the redevelopment project area to perform the necessary cleanup. If the responsible party does not cooperate, the redevelopment agency can perform the cleanup itself or arrange for a third party to clean up the property.

It's important to note that the law does not make state funds available for redevelopment agencies to use for the cleanup. Rather, it provides for cost recovery provisions that the redevelopment agency can use to recover its cleanup costs from the party or parties responsible for the contamination.

The success of the site remediation for the new Padres ballpark in East Village was due in large part to the unprecedented application of the Polanco Act by Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC). The Polanco Act created tremendous leverage, when used in combination with eminent powers, for property owners to either clean up decades-old contamination. Or, the Act empowered the agency conduct the cleanup on behalf of the property owner. The Polanco Act relies on the value of each property to pay for cleanup and does not rely on public funds. East Village and the ballpark have won accolades for the creative use of "smart" brownfields strategies, including an Alonzo Award from the San Diego Downtown Partnership and "Brownfields Project of the Year" from the California Redevelopment Agency. A new, vibrant East Village would not be possible without these efforts.

Growth is inevitable, but the strategies used to monitor this growth are negotiable. Using smart growth and smart brownfields strategies, we will not only create a sustainable community for ourselves and the future, we will also be helping our environment and our communities flourish. 

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