

6 May 2021

Planning Commission
City of West Hollywood
8300 Santa Monica Boulevard
West Hollywood, California 90069

LEVIN~MORRIS

re: 6 May 2021, Item 13.A – Housing Element Discussion

Honorable Chair and Members of the Planning Commission:

The City of West Hollywood prides itself on the level of community engagement in planning and land-use issues – not least those involving housing. But meaningful community engagement requires that the City be prepared to deliver on its promises. And among other things, this means the City should not express aspirations in the General Plan that it's not prepared to keep, or that it understands are impossible for anyone to keep.

Otherwise the City is simply ensuring that the community will develop expectations that the City will routinely disappoint. So it's particularly important that the Housing Element of the General Plan doesn't promise something the City isn't prepared to deliver, or that otherwise doesn't reflect reality. And it's therefore particularly important that the City speaks plainly and honestly about its intentions and the constraints on its ability to deliver on them.

There are three types of problems in the proposed Housing Element draft: a promise the City cannot deliver; a promise the City does not now deliver; and a promise that the City is making without any genuine understanding of what it is promising. This can only lead to community expectations that can't be fulfilled.

Goal H-1 - Intent

Again, the City should not make promises to its residents that it's not prepared to keep, or that are impossible for anyone to take literally. And that's the problem here. Goal H-1 falsely encourages the perception that the words of the Intent can be taken literally, when the City knows they can't be.

Goal H-1 states its Intent as: "To protect the existing supply of affordable rental housing and avoid displacement" – specifically adding the phrase "and avoid displacement." The City knows this to be impossible when read literally.

This added phrase "and avoid displacement" should be changed to read "and minimize displacement." Because the City itself acknowledges that "avoid displacement" is impossible to take literally. Goal H-1.3 uses the phrase "prevent or minimize displacement," which discourages displacement but implicitly acknowledges that it cannot be completely avoided. Using the phrase "avoid displacement" will only foster unreasonable expectations that will in turn create unnecessary conflicts when the City does follow state law and allows displacement subject to replacement requirements.

The City should level with the community by being as clear and transparent as possible about its actual intentions. The phrase "and ~~avoid~~ displacement" should be changed to read "and minimize displacement."

Goal H-5.4 “Continue to provide for timely and coordinated processing,...”

We should strike the words “Continue to” from “Continue to provide for timely and coordinated processing,...” The words do not reflect reality.

Providing for timely processing is a proper and necessary goal. But the use of “Continue to” implies that we currently *do* “provide for timely and coordinated processing,” and can remain on the same path. In fact we don’t provide for timely and coordinated processing. Residential development permit processing time has substantially increased over the past few years.

So the City must aspire to timely permit processing, but it must also be honest with the community. The phrase “~~Continue to~~ provide for timely and coordinated processing,...” should be changed to read “Provide for timely and coordinated processing,...”

Goal H-4.2 “Provide adequate sites to meet the City’s housing needs,...”

This Goal is one that the City itself does not understand. For purposes of the General Plan it is a meaningless platitude. “The City’s housing needs” means its RHNA commitments. And neither the City nor the community has even as much as a vague idea of the urban design implications of providing adequate sites to meet our current RHNA allocations.

There are essentially no vacant residentially-zoned sites remaining in the city. The City itself holds developable properties, some of which are currently vacant, but which are not residentially zoned. This means that “development” on residentially-zoned properties really means “redevelopment of existing residential buildings,” which in turn means displacement.

One of the principle purposes of the General Plan is to inform the zoning map – both base zoning and overlay zones. Meaningless platitudes inform no one. And it’s very clear that neither the community nor the City understands the implications of the phrase “Provide adequate sites to meet the City’s housing needs...”, or the physical urban design implications of achieving a substantial percentage of our RHNA numbers using commercial properties along the boulevards.

Indeed, increasing our reliance on building residential units on commercial properties is what Goal H-4.4 suggests as a viable alternative – namely incentivize mixed-use or residential development on commercially-zoned properties. Some of us have been suggesting this for years. And we were disappointed when, at the last minute, the previous General Plan removed a proposed Mixed-Use Incentive Overlay Zone from many properties along Santa Monica Boulevard.

No one understands what it will take to absorb a substantial percentage of our RHNA numbers on our commercial boulevards. Neither the City nor the community understands how many stories we would need to add, and on what areas of which commercial streets. In order to help understand this, the City should take it upon itself to ‘model’ the physical, urban design impact of distributing an appropriate number of residential units on the boulevards.

The City created an Urban Design and Architecture Studio precisely for this purpose: to help the City understand the urban design implications of proposed land-use policies. That’s never more essential than when discussing the goals enshrined in the City’s Housing Element.

Because the lack of genuine understanding behind Goal H-4.2 illustrates the serious shortcoming of the Housing Element – too much of it is meaningless platitude. The Housing Element as proposed is woefully short on strategies for implementing its goals. Aspirations are essential, but aspirations remain empty without strategies for translating the abstract language of the General Plan into corresponding specific requirements in the city’s zoning ordinance and map.

The City needs to honestly engage the community in a discussion of the physical, urban design of the city that reflect the realities of RHNA and state law. That means the City must speak plainly in its official documents and it must ensure that the community, the Planning Commission, and the City Council have sufficient understanding of the parameters that both make possible and constrain our collective aspirations. Without that, the City and the community will merely be talking past each other. Genuine outreach to the community requires that both the City and the community share some mutual understanding of the physical implications of any discussions about the form of the city and its future development.

So I ask that you make the language changes to Goal H-1 Intent, and Goal H-5.4, as outlined above. And I especially recommend you ask the City’s Urban Design and Architecture Studio to provide you, the City Council, and not least the community with the tools that are required for us all to have an honest, informed discussion of the housing goals of this city.

As always, I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Edward S. Levin