December 19, 2011

Mr. Daniel Yukelson, Chair
City of Beverly Hills Planning Commission
455 North Rexford Dr.
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

Dear Chair Yukelson (and Commissioners):

The Planning Commission today will discuss the creation of a zoning overlay that would facilitate development on land along Santa Monica Boulevard at our city’s western gateway. I urge the Commission to proceed with caution. Approving an overlay zone today without sufficient regard for future active transportation opportunity on this key historic corridor could create an insurmountable impediment to achieving comprehensive, sustainable transportation solutions for Beverly Hills tomorrow.

Because development on any part of the T-zoned corridor raises significant environmental and historic issues, it is important that we consider carefully whether any development at all should be permitted. To date our city has not entertained that discussion.

From an environmental perspective, our problems are clear: Santa Monica Boulevard North is choked with approximately 40,000 vehicles per day; the nearby intersection at Wilshire garners an ‘F’ level-of-service – the standard for throughput; and the junction presents a hazard for people who choose to walk or bike.

In fact, this intersection is so poorly engineered that a traffic engineer from the Netherlands has rendered alternatives that would separate motor traffic from non-motor modes, including a proposal to grade-separate active transportation use from motor transport entirely. This is the kind of creativity we need to address our problems at this site.

More broadly, our city must embrace planning for personal mobility. Look no further than our city’s sustainability plan: it identifies mobility policy goals that are laudable, and they also reflect state and federal policy transportation and environmental guidance. We can avoid committing to a future of clogged roads and compromised safety by not rezoning the right-of-way, one of our most valuable resources, for office development.

From an historical perspective, this land at our western gateway is of historic significance. It was part of the Pacific Electric Western Division’s mainline railroad that connected our growing city to the region beyond. As such, it was key to the early development of Beverly Hills, where two Pacific Electric lines converged at Santa Monica & Canon Drive.
Let’s leverage the transportation zone for future active transportation opportunities. For example, redeveloping the T-zoned strip from gateway to gateway through a Rails-to-Trails program could create significant interest and bring economic benefits to Beverly Hills (as other communities have found). Indeed it only requires some imagination to view this corridor as mobility connective tissue graced by native plants where bike lanes, and paths would allow people to walk, run and ride. And there is funding available for it!

But a zoning overlay, however, would likely preclude active transportation on Santa Monica Boulevard. The staff report notes setbacks (minimum 15 feet) that appear insufficient to make this corridor truly hospitable to active transportation uses, for example. Not to mention that we would foreclose other future opportunities whatever they may be. The former right-of-way through West Los Angeles and Santa Monica, I want to remind the Commission, has been put to productive use for the Expo Line, which will expand non-auto transportation options for other Westsiders. We’re contemplating commercial development on our valuable land.

As a resident, cyclist, and organizer of Better Bike Beverly Hills, I urge the Commission to take no action today on the zoning overlay. Let’s refer the matter back to Planning staff with appropriate guidance so that we don’t foreclose these opportunities.

Lastly, I want to remind the Commission that maintaining the current T-zone would in no way limit opportunities for our western gateway. Existing adjacent development between Santa Monica boulevards north & south still offers opportunities to realize a higher and better use for the area. Though I understand that parking in this part of the city is a concern for the Commission, the city could encourage or incentivize subterranean parking under the T-zoned land, perhaps in conjunction with commercial development that may yet come to Santa Monica Boulevard South.

Sincerely,

Mark Elliot

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