



February 10, 2012

Mr. Aaron Kunz, Deputy Director
Department of Public Works
345 Foothill Road
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

Dear Aaron,

I attended the city's Planning Commission meeting yesterday. The Commissioners are working on an overlay zone for the western gateway, possibly to include parcels #1 and #3 in addition to parcel #2 (the 'Gateway' project). In this meeting, the Commissioners spent a considerable time discussing setbacks for including Santa Monica North (inclusive of all three parcels).

Commissioner Cole and Commissioner Rosenstein (respectively) expressed concern that overlay zone setbacks on the Santa Monica Boulevard North (T-1 land) allow for pedestrian connectivity and accommodate active mobility. An insufficient setback could preclude transportation or pedestrian uses (the latter are explicitly mentioned as a priority for this area in the General Plan). In trying to fix a uniform approach to setbacks for all three parcels, attention was focused on the future opportunities and how T-1 setbacks may or may not foreclose them.

I believe that the Commissioners don't have sufficient information necessary to make a factual decision on the necessary minimum setback on the T-1 land. When I spoke to highlight the community's interest in preserving active transportation opportunities for Santa Monica Boulevard North, I noted that 5' setbacks for the Hilton project, coupled with the city's disinclination to edge into Beverly Gardens Park, greatly limits our future options for on-boulevard bike lanes (that facility that would close our regional bike network gap).

Then I was asked by Commissioner Rosenstein what my "absolute minimum" recommended setback for the T-1 zone should be in order to preserve the bike lane option. But I could not answer as I don't have that engineering study. The Commission doesn't have those study findings either. The setback discussion proceeded without that necessary factual information.

The Commission also appeared uncertain as to City Council direction concerning future transportation uses (if any) as discussed in the liaison meetings. Was the Council's direction concerning the designation 'temporary' on the city's SM North parking structures a legal or rhetorical change? I don't know. I'm not sure the Commission knew.

When I look at my notes from that liaison committee on April 19th (2011) I see that there was indeed considerable discussion about our 'vision' for the corridor, including transportation opportunities and/or open space preservation:

Opportunities identified for an overlay zone included trading-off limited height for setbacks; a future widening of Santa Monica Boulevard; and a "greenbelt on Santa Monica."

There was support for the contribution that open space might make to the corridor as a whole, and the 'greenbelt' opportunity was again mentioned in the context of the hypothetical overlay zone.

The greenbelt concept surfaced again as an additional buffer between residential and commercial activities (on Santa Monica North, east of Wilshire). In this context, the discussion turned to policymakers' expectations for the 'temporary' parking garages in the context of the whole corridor.

Better Bike

Mark Elliot, Organizer
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Aaron Kunz, Deputy Director for Transportation

The greenbelt concept was also mentioned by Lilli Bosse when she asked about the “vision” behind the Gateway area. *“It is a gateway and it should have a greenbelt.”*

Parcel owners/representatives agreed that an overlay zone offers flexibility and conceded the possibility of “a required dedication on the north side of our property” including *“setbacks and open space”* in trade for a higher-FAR greater height.

We need to know more about City Council direction and the minimum setbacks that would accommodate future active transportation uses before setback minimums or averages are written into a resolution. Though yesterday’s hearing concluded with setback recommendations ranging from 17 ft. min/20 ft avg. down to 10 ft. min/20 ft. avg. (I believe that the Commissioners agreed on the latter), before fixing them we should know if they preclude bi-directional bike lanes. I hope that the Transportation Division will provide the Planning Commission (and the public) with the material necessary for the Commissioners to make an informed decision about an overlay zone for the T-1 land.

My larger concern, though, is that transportation in general has been outside of the overlay zone discussion. Beyond land dedication and mitigations, Commissioners deliberations have not touched on plans for Santa Monica North reconstruction. Yet in our January 18th Bike Plan Update meeting you mentioned that the Transportation division will keep a bi-directional bike lanes within the project’s parameters when specifying an RFP. The commission should be made aware.

Second, Planning Commissioners should know that our parallel Pilot bike route network discussions (four meetings to date) have identified Charleville as a candidate Pilot bike route. That is a local street that feeds directly into this project area, and we don’t want to foreclose opportunities for those who walk and bike. The Commissioners have highlighted this area’s unique, low-rise small-retailer environment. When we look to successful redevelopment in other cities of these kinds of districts, pedestrian and bicycle uses are key to realizing their economic potential.

The overlay zone and the Gateway parcels under discussion are integral pieces in our land use/transportation policymaking process. Yet our traffic studies and EIRs include nothing about how our neighborhoods and roadways might well be used in the coming years. Looking ahead, active transportation (defined broadly as non-motor transportation options) will become a much more important consideration in both economic development and transportation policy processes. These pieces have to fit together.

The City Council liaison committee suggested as much: it’s about the vision. Commissioners agree. I would argue that that vision means not looking only backwards to see automobility as our only option, but ahead to new modes of mobility.

Sincerely,



cc: Dan Yukelson, Chair, Planning Commission & Planning Commissioners

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