The Long View PLANNING FOR 2035
A Strategic Plan for Long Range Planning in Los Angeles
November 2014

With nearly four million people and 669 square miles, Los Angeles is a region unto itself. Due to its sheer size and diversity, the city has developed a unique approach to long range planning that involves a citywide general plan and a community plan for 35 separate areas. The city’s planning system also includes smaller, geographically specific plans as well as overlays for unique districts and corridors, all completed with a cumbersoning zoning code last comprehensively updated in 1946.

Over the past few years, the Planning Department has successfully completed a number of long range planning efforts. These include the Jordan Downs Transit Village; Cornfield Arroyo-Seco, Bunker Hill, and Warner Center 2035 planning efforts. These include the Jordan Downs Transit Village, Mobility Plan 2035 and the Plan for a Healthy Los Angeles, through the adoption process.

Community plans are the best way to translate citywide goals into reality and ensure that the aims and aspirations of our neighborhoods are achieved.

Given their importance, the Department launched a program in 2005 to create more robust community plans that would combine policies with zone changes and implementation programs. A total of 13 plan areas were included in this initial launch of what was called the New Community Plan (NCP) program – a work effort of unprecedented scale. Four years later, due to resource and staffing limitations caused by the Great Recession, the NCP program was dialed back and in 2010 six plans were put on hold.

Second, the toolkit to complete and implement the NCP program has been inadequate. The Department has been saddled with an outdated zoning code not up to the challenge of planning for a 21st century metropolis.

Third, the citywide plan is outdated, with many elements over 20 years old. As a result, the NCP program has not been equipped to resolve many issues more appropriately addressed at the citywide level.

Fourth, the NCP program’s California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) compliance strategy is outdated. The current process would lead to the preparation of 25 stand-alone EIRs, one for each of the city’s 35 plan areas – an expensive and litigious path.

Community planning has been a way of life in Los Angeles for the past half-century. In the 1970s, the city developed a series of brief community plans called “broadsides.” Each broadside was essentially a community vision and regulatory land use map, all compiled into a two-sided, foldable poster. The next effort to update community plans occurred in the 1990s and resulted in larger, 20 to 30 page documents.

Both sets of plans were criticized for not responding to long-standing community concerns and for lacking meaningful implementation. In response, the Department launched the ambitious NCP program, with community plans envisioned to cover not just land use but also circulation, noise, open space, communication, and safety, plus other topics relevant to the community, including urban design. Additionally, an innovative new implementation tool was devised, the Community Plan Implementation Overview, to provide more customized zoning and development standards.

Certainly the logic behind this approach was sound. Each community plan area is the size of a small or medium-sized city, with a population between 50,000 and 250,000. But the complexity of this approach, combined with limited staff resources and insufficient funding in the General Fund, virtually guarantees that such detailed plans cannot be completed on a regular and predictable schedule. The result is that our communities may not have in place the guidance, protections and incentives needed to respond to the sweeping changes that will occur between now and 2035, or for the city to capitalize on the historic build-out of the regional transit system made possible by Measure R.

To date the NCP program has yielded City Planning Commission approval of four updates: Grand Avenue-Hills-Knollwood; San Pedro; Sylmar, and West Adams-Baldwin Hills-Leimert. In addition, the Department has completed and released for public review draft plans and regulations for South and Southeast Los Angeles and restarted work on the Central City and Central City North updates. These downtown plans were put on hold when the NCP program was scaled back in 2010. Significant technical analysis and outreach has also been completed on the Boyle Heights update; we expect to roll out a draft plan and regulations for public review in 2015. With the Hollywood Community Plan back on the Department’s work plan we are currently juggling a total of ten community plans updates.

The importance of this work effort cannot be overstated. The proposed plans have garnered widespread community support and offer innovative planning solutions, including transit-oriented development incentives and key neighborhood protections. Added together these plans cover 27 percent of the city’s total land area and with 1.3 million residents they account for 35 percent of its total population. Given the significant investment of time and resources by both the public and city government in creating these plans the Department is committed to moving them across the finish line. As job number one, that means continuing to work with the City Attorney to shore up our environmental analysis so that Council can vote with confidence to approve all ten plan updates in the near future.

Managing and Growth Change
Planning in Los Angeles is at a crossroads. Over the last year as the economy has rebounded project filings have increased 26 percent. Over the next 20 years Los Angeles is forecast to grow by over 400,000 new residents, from 3.9 million today to 4.3 million by 2035, an increase of 11 percent. That’s a significant increase, the equivalent of adding a city almost the size of Long Beach.

During this same time horizon the six-county region (Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside & Imperial Counties) will grow at an even faster rate, adding 3.6 million new residents, from 18.5 million today to 22.1 million by 2035, an increase of 19 percent.

All of this growth, both within the city and regionally, sets up change. If properly managed, this growth has the potential to help shape Los Angeles toward a more sustainable and economically prosperous future, with more affordable housing, complete streets, and a more equitable distribution of resources. But growth without the guidance provided by thoughtful planning can have unintended consequences. As a largely built-out city, Los Angeles in particular faces the challenge of accommodating future growth through infill development, an often contentious process where vacant or underdeveloped parcels are recycled for new uses, typically at higher densities.
To protect quality of life, ensure that infill development is compatible and complementary, and important citywide goals are achieved, all 35 community plans must be updated, and on a faster schedule than the current approach allows. That means we must pivot the New Community Plan program in a fresh new direction — the purpose of the nine strategic objectives discussed below.

1. **Use re:codeLA for three plan updates**
   The code evaluation report completed this year calls for a new approach to zoning. The current approach relies on a confusing mishmash of base zones, designations, qualifiers and overlays. The new approach builds a comprehensive set of base zones, a more accessible and understandable system because all regulations are housed in one location. Boyle Heights, Central City and Central City North are too far enough down the line that they can benefit from this new approach, and the Department is committed to road testing re:codeLA new base zones for these three updates.

2. **Write a CEQA compliance manual**
   As part of an agreement with the City Attorney’s office the Department will pay the cost of a full-time CEQA lawyer to work on the NCP program. This lawyer has been hired and has already started work. The Department is committed to working with this lawyer and the City Attorney’s office on a CEQA compliance manual that will provide a more uniform and legally defensible approach to preparing community plan EIRs. Once completed, this compliance manual will be distributed to Department staff and EIR consultants.

3. **Appoint a full-time manager**
   The NCP program does not have a full-time manager. As part of the City’s early-retirement program five of the Department’s seven Principal City Planners retired in 2010. One of the remaining Principal City Planners, responsible for managing the Office of Historic Resources, was also made responsible for managing the Policy Planning Division created when the Department reorganized in 2011. A full-time manager is essential to carrying out this nine-point plan. This objective requires new resources next fiscal year and so a request has been included in our FY 2015-16 budget submittal.

4. **Creatively use resource teams**
   Community planning is a complex endeavor. It requires sophisticated technical analysis, diplomatic public engagement, and stamina for the long haul. The Department is committed to enhancing its program management strategy by breaking down the silos among the different disciplines. In particular, we are committed to integrating technical analysis, public outreach specialists, and Systems, GIS, and graphics staff into agile resource teams that will maximize the use of the Department’s limited resources.

5. **Make better use of technology**
   New technology that expands staff’s capabilities beyond the traditional office will bolster the Department’s objective to create more agile planning resource teams. A “paper light” mode of working not only saves time and money it better serves creativity and collaboration that can be a model for the rest of the city government. This objective requires new resources next fiscal year and a full-time manager. So a request has been included in our FY 2015-16 budget submittal.

6. **Update the citywide General Plan**
   The foundation of our planning system is the General Plan Framework, which sets forth a directed growth strategy to channel most new development along transit corridors and into regional centers, connected by transit. Adopted in 1996, the Framework is now almost two decades old. Many other citywide elements, including open space, noise, safety, conservation, air quality, infrastructure systems and public services, are similarly out of date, with some also nearing the 20 year mark. While the policies contained in the Framework and the other citywide elements are still largely relevant, they should be updated to reflect changes in state law and local circumstances. Under this approach many of the topics the NCP program now addresses would most likely be addressed at the citywide level, thus freeing up community plans to focus on land use and zoning. This objective requires new resources next fiscal year and so a request has been included in our FY 2015-16 budget submittal.

7. **Implement a regional approach**
   The City’s ultimate long-range planning goal is this: all 25 community plans updated and the entire city rezoned. That’s an ambitious goal, but doable if we recognize the NCP program into a more manageable number of 11 regions. While the 35 plan areas will be retained, each with its own separate planning document, the work program itself will be organized geographically. This new organizational structure will allow the Department to take advantage of economies of scale, concentrate public outreach efforts in contiguous areas simultaneously, and allow for larger and more collaborative work teams that together will help complete each region’s plans.

8. **Reduce the number of EIRs**
   Completing 35 separate EIRs is a daunting prospect. But that’s what the current NCP program could require. There’s a better way: update the General Plan Framework’s EIR. The existing Framework EIR analyzed growth from 1990 through 2030. An updated citywide EIR, one that analyzes long-range growth through 2035, is the cornerstone of the Department’s objective to streamline its CEQA compliance strategy. Such an EIR has two benefits. One, it allows us to offload much of the analysis currently bogging down individual plan EIRs onto a single citywide document. And two, it allows us to prepare only one environmental document for each of the 11 regions shown above, either a focused EIR, or even possibly a Mitigated Negative Declaration. Developed in concert with the City Attorney and some of the best outside CEQA lawyers, this CEQA strategy should result in more defensible environmental documents and thus less legal exposure.

9. **Focus on implementation**
   The Department is committed to maintaining metrics-driven, action-oriented resource teams that will follow-up on community priorities. That will allow us to more consistently keep the focus on implementation, whether it’s updating a specific plan, establishing a new historic district, or designing a residential neighborhood. Our community plans with their long-range visions, goals and policies are important documents. But it is only by implementing these plans that they can truly make a difference.

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