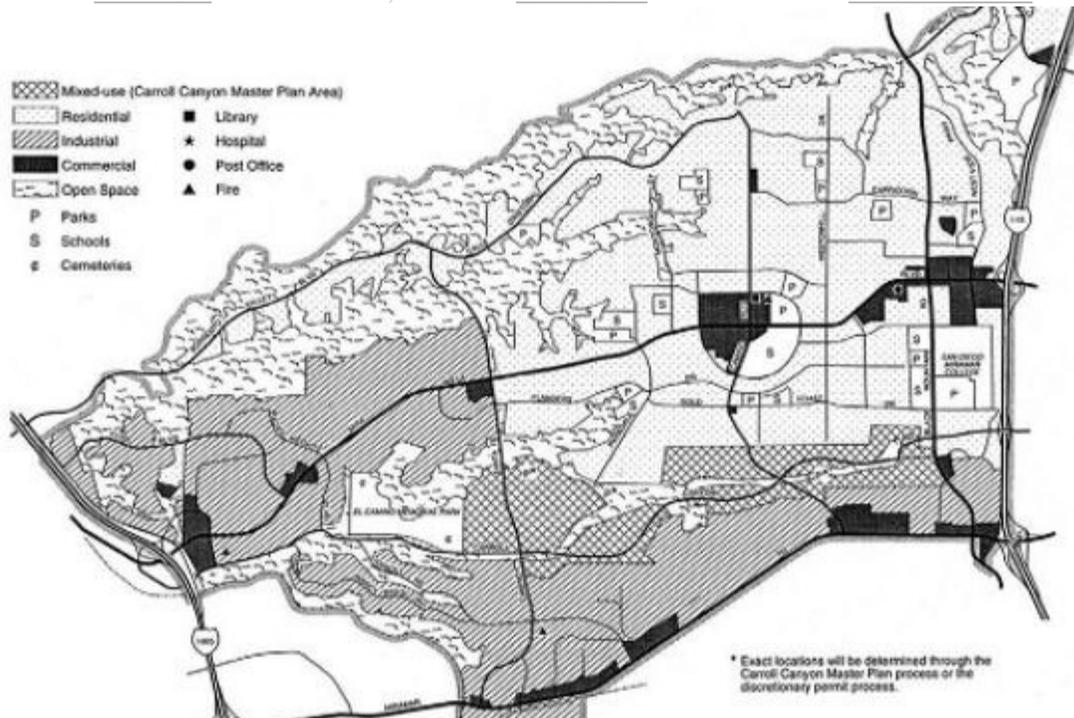


After One Paseo, It's Back to Basics in Community Planning

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The Mira Mesa Community Plan.

By John H. Horst

In 2009, I attended a meeting of the [Mira Mesa Community Planning Group](#) to advocate for a stop sign at an intersection near a school in our neighborhood. I remember laughing to myself, wondering who all these old people were making decisions for everyone else. In the years since, I have become friends with one of the members who tells exactly the same story when he first attended – back in the day when he was young. He is now one of those old people ...

A typical community planning group meeting is usually very lightly attended. This has, of course, not been the case recently with the controversy over [One Paseo](#) in Carmel Valley. One of the biggest complaints from ordinary people, when they do attend, is the “planning-speak” that only planning group members and the parties presenting to them understand. In an effort to encourage greater participation in local planning groups, I’ll outline some of the basics here.



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San Diego City vs. San Diego County

Both the city and county have recognized planning groups. They are governed by different laws and policies, but the fundamentals are the same. Both have to follow California’s ‘open meeting’ law known as the [Brown Act](#). This forbids members from forming a consensus on an issue before them outside of properly noticed public meetings. It also means the meeting will seem a little formal, and maybe a bit “official.” This is an unfortunate necessity in order to ensure compliance with the law and a fair hearing for everyone. If you live in the city of San Diego, your neighborhood is probably covered by a community planning group. In the unincorporated areas of the county, your neighborhood is likely covered by a [county planning group](#). This is part of the landscape of decision-making in the community, and those decisions will be made by those who show up. So show up!

Entitlements & Zoning

A landowner wishing to develop a piece of property will seek what are called “entitlements” from the city. These are essentially allowances for numbers of units, square footage, etc. Communities will be interested in ensuring that these entitlements are consistent with “zoning,” the ordinances which limit things like the number of units allowed within a certain acreage. These entitlements will then obligate the developer to provide for things like parking, with the number of spaces depending on what is being entitled.

Community Plan & General Plan

The city of San Diego has a [General Plan](#) to guide development over the course of many years. The General Plan is composed of individual Community Plans. These plans incorporate things like population estimates, which in turn (based on the General Plan) then determine things like total park acreage. A community plan will have a map which will show where residential, commercial, industrial, parks and open space will be located within the boundaries of the community plan. These subareas will then be zoned to identify what kinds of residential, commercial and industrial uses can be made of the land.

Community Parks & Neighborhood Parks

Park acreage deficits are often a sticking point when considering amendments to community plans. It is important to understand that park acreage is mixed mainly between community and neighborhood parks. A community park is a larger park which will be built to support “active use,” or various organized youth and adult sports like baseball or softball. A neighborhood park is usually smaller and designed to support “passive use” — a “lay a blanket, have a picnic and fly a kite” park. The distinction is important because passive users want to be able to safely enjoy a park without running the risk of being struck by a stray foul ball. When a

community has a deficit of either, active use will usually encroach on passive use and cause controversy in the community.

Community Plan Amendments and Updates

An “amendment” is usually a relatively minor revision to a community plan. When a large project is proposed, a plan amendment is often required and becomes part of the project when it is submitted to the city. With One Paseo, the controversy stemmed largely from the community plan amendment which entitled [Kilroy Realty](#) to develop a very high number of square feet of mixed-use (e.g. commercial and residential together) on a relatively small parcel of land. The community plan required an amendment to allow this, and initial negotiations broke down on this point, with the planning group willing to allow greater density than the original community plan allowed, but not as much as Kilroy wanted. An “update” is a more substantive revision to the plan, and often requires extensive traffic and environmental studies. If a community plan is updated in a timely fashion, developers have reliable guidelines when preparing a project. The lack of these timely updates is at the heart of the One Paseo controversy.

Facilities Benefit Assessments (FBA) and Public Facilities Financing Plans (PFFP)

As a community is built out, developers pay into a fund called the “Facilities Benefit Assessment” (FBA). The amount paid is usually by unit, and payments are made when the permits are issued for the construction of the units. The Mira Mesa Community Plan has a “Public Facilities Financing Plan” (PFFP) which is developed by city staff with input from the planning group. This plan identifies the public facilities for which FBA money will be spent. The facilities can include things like parks, street widening, traffic signals, etc. In Mira Mesa we are looking at innovative ways to arrest storm water runoff from the mesa into the ocean. We

may be able to present innovative storm water management ideas to the city by adding these to our PFFP, funding them through our FBA account, and studying their effectiveness.

Property Rights vs. Zoning

Valuing freedom as we do, it is often asked why a landowner cannot just use their land as they wish. There are a number of reasons:

- We cannot easily make more land to meet the demand. So there has to be some sense to how the land we have will be used. This becomes more important as a city approaches the time when all available acreage has been developed
- While we can debate the size and scope of government, police and fire departments still need to be staffed and equipped, parks need to be built and maintained, and other basics of civic life have to be provided for. Planning and zoning allows for land to be designated in support of a tax base. The mix and rates of these taxes is always a matter of debate, but a budget cannot be made unless there is a way to predict revenue. Stable zoning allow this.
- Public safety requires potentially hazardous uses (e.g. heavy industrial) be segregated from residences and schools. The proximity of these things to each other is the source of controversy in Barrio Logan where residences are literally next door to business using hazardous materials.

There is an awful lot more to community planning. In Mira Mesa I enjoy working with people who have forgotten more about this than I'll ever learn. Having this kind of community memory is critical to the health of a community. Each of our communities has older volunteers with this kind of memory and experience. But our planning groups always need younger blood to soak in these lessons so our communities will have a voice as the need for community leadership is passed on to the next generation. If you're a younger person, you'll probably laugh too at all

of these officious old people making these decisions. Just don't laugh too hard; you might wake up one morning and realize you have become one!

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