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Commentary: It's time for Costa Mesa to employ a 'Smart Growth' approach

By Cynthia McDonald

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Earlier this year, after years of voicing opposition to the City Council majority's continual deviation from the city's General Plan and the Westside urban plans, a group of residents came together to write an initiative to give the people of Costa Mesa control of their future by allowing the electorate to vote on certain large projects, aka the "Smart Growth Initiative."

I participated in that process because I felt it is time to put the quality of life of residents of Costa Mesa first and to stop developers and the City Council majority from ignoring residents' vision for our city.

The values of the residents expressed to the city during the General Plan update outreach during 2013 and 2014 were for open space, maintaining neighborhood character, bikeability and walkability of public streets, safe and efficient traffic circulation, and more home ownership.

These values and ideas are closely aligned with the 10 Principles of Smart Growth laid out by the Smart Growth America. The topic of growth in our aging suburban city is problematic and controversial but Costa Mesa is not unique in its residents' attempt to have some control over their quality of life.

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I reviewed 40 projects approved by the City Council or Planning Commission over the past eight years. The approval of those projects required the granting of four general plan amendments, 86 deviations, 16 variances, 15 administrative adjustments and seven minor modifications.

While one may wonder why we have a General Plan if we can't follow it, the better question to ask is, "Why can't the City Council follow the vision the residents laid out?"

The City Council has made many of these changes permanent with the small-lot ordinance and changes to the overlay zones. Now the City Council majority has laid plans to create new overlays of high-density housing to be built along Harbor and Newport boulevards.

They have designated 95 acres of property to be rezoned high-density residential at up to 40 or more dwelling units per acre. That means as many as 3,300 units of housing. At 2.5 people per household, that is 8,250 more residents and a greater demand for water, emergency services, schools, parks and roadways.

However, the city has proposed not one park, not one plaza creating a sense of place, and no additional bicycle lanes or walking paths.

What do I propose should be done?

- Submit a General Plan update with a clear vision of the city's future to the voters for their approval.
- Revisit the Westside overlay zones, in particular the conversion of the low-density residential areas to high-density, now that we can see the new buildings and their incompatibility with existing neighborhoods.
- Apply Smart Growth Principles to planning, rather than the developer-driven spot zoning that creates lucrative high-density projects.
- Pass the Smart Growth Initiative to allow voters to decide whether future high-density developments are right for Costa Mesa.

Please go to CostaMesa1st.com and read about the initiative. If you haven't signed the petition to qualify the initiative for the ballot, I urge to you to contact us at costamesa1st@gmail.com.

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