

In mid-March, 2012, about twenty community residents had a rather involved, informative informal discussion about Urban Planning in San Jose. This discussion took place on the WGBackfence "eList" -- our "electronic equivalent of talking to your friends and neighbors over the back fence" service (see <http://www.wgbackfence.net/how2elist.htm> for details).

The following is a compendium of that discussion.

From: Ralph
Sent: Monday, March 12, 2012 6:07 PM
To: elist@wgbackfence.net

Subject: [WGBackfence] MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

I've never seen so many residences being constructed all in one place. For those that haven't seen this monstrosity it's worth your while to see what is happening on the east side of Race Street starting immediately north of the light rail. Something like 684 residential units, condos and possibly rental apartments all in one huge structure on three acres.

Ralph on Tbrook

On Mon, Mar 12, 2012 at 6:55 PM, Jay & Suzanne wrote:

Me, too! I pass by there every now and then and wonder where all the people are coming from to live there! I think the San Jose Buildings and Grounds have really slipped up here – too much lenience in building and taking up of good property.

Sue on Dean

From: Mark
To: elist@wgbackfence.net
Sent: 3/12/2012 8:12:38 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

The Sobrato family owns this new complex and much of the rest of the land north of 280 and east of Race St. For example, they own all the land to the north of this development to San Carlos St. The new development land used to be one and two story office buildings, also owned by Sobrato, that housed Stratacom, an early Cisco competitor that was swallowed up by them.

The idea behind the density is to force people to use the light rail through the area. Not a bad idea, except everyone seems to have a car and drives to work anyway, and they park them all over the streets in the

area because parking within these complexes is inadequate. So much for glorious social engineering from our fearless leaders in central planning. I don't know why we want to Manhattanize San Jose. I have never heard anyone ask for it. My guess is that it will continue until conditions become so intolerable that the political fallout causes a halt to the high density with no corresponding services, like stores, restaurants, theaters, etc. Linear apartment ghettos along light rail aren't very interesting or attractive, because there are no destinations of interest along the corridors other than the massive apartment buildings themselves. Walk or bike the desolation of the light rail corridor starting south of Diridon Station and going all the way to at least Bascom and you will see what I mean. It is mostly high density and apartments, and there are virtually no visible businesses, services or public spaces of any type along the entire stretch.

Mark

From: Larry

Sent: 3/13/2012 12:08:58 A.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

In a message dated 3/12/2012 8:12:38 P.M. :

<< I don't know why we want to Manhattanize San Jose. I have never heard anyone ask for it. >>

The City of San Jose has just completed a 3-4 year long, very public process of trying to figure out what San Jose should look like in the coming years and decades. I have been posting notices of the Envision 2040 meetings here on the eList for years.

Did you go to any of the meetings to listen and learn, and to express your opinions?

I did.

I learned that, based on demographic projections (that is, estimates of future populations based on the current age distributions, life expectancies, birth rates, migrations, generational housing statistics (how many people per house), etc.), they estimate that roughly 400,000 additional residents will be in San Jose in 2040.

What are the choices?

* don't build housing to accommodate them. Housing becomes scarce, the prices goes up, your kids can't afford to live here, and the area becomes unsustainable.

* do build housing, following the 1950's style of 1/4 acre suburban tract housing: sprawl forever. Spill over the hills into the adjacent valleys. Build roads so everyone can drive in. Tear down the old houses in the way of the widened roads and parking lots. Smog and congestion, and, BTW, your house is torn down to make way for a new expressway or else it is surrounded by gridlock.

* build the housing that, based on the demographic projections, will be desired in the future. There was the post-WW-II baby boom: guess what, we're all getting older, and many of us won't want to mow the lawn on the 1/4 acre lot surrounding an isolated house miles away from stores, restaurants, and friends. The young people nowadays tend to like living in more hip and exciting urban environments. And, for those in the 30's - 40's who are raising families, there's more than enough suburban housing already built to meet the demand. So, bottom line: nearly all new housing should be high-density urban. And, by building dense and along transit, it's possible for a family to live without needing two or three cars; the city doesn't need to extend outward forever with streets and parking lots (and it doesn't drain the city financial resources providing sewer lines, libraries, and street-cleaning for those miles of suburban streets); and there remains an "escape" from the city living in the nearby countryside because it hasn't been all paved over.

I attended the public hearings.

I spoke during the public comment periods. I said that I was truly lucky and blessed: I live here in Willow Glen. I can -- and do -- regularly walk out to any of several great restaurants. I can -- and do -- walk out to do shopping, visit friends, go to the library, and enjoy living. My only wish was that everyone could have it as good, to live within easy walking distance of a great community.

And I think the City heard me. The plans for the City call for "Urban Villages" -- walkable, bikeable higher-density "nodes" with local services -- shops, transit, schools, libraries, and parks.

I grew up in the suburbs: I remember that everything was "get in the car and we'll drive out to get it". Guess what: I prefer my life here where I can walk out and get a good dinner and a great margarita.

They quoted a saying at the hearings: "Design a City for cars and you get more cars; design it for people and you get a great city."

So, did you attend the meetings? What would you have asked for -- for people to go away so San Jose could remain the small town you remember, or for the city to expand ever outwards ala Vegas or Houston TX, replacing the trees on the surrounding hills with little houses, lawns, and pink plastic flamingos?

Involvement is still important:

The new housing projects do have to be done well -- we don't want to create slums. There have to be services: parks, trails, open spaces, plazas; transportation; shops, grocery stores, schools, libraries, restaurants; and natural habitats have to be respected and preserved. These new developments will be adjacent to existing communities: they have to "interface" properly, so that one doesn't degrade the other.

There are a lot more opportunities to get involved in the shape of the future San Jose.

But it does involve more than simply complaining on the eList.

~Larry,

From: John

Sent: 3/13/2012 7:12:23 A.M.

Subject: RE: [WGBackfence] MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

Wow, 400,000 more people? Not only the housing, but where will we employ them?

I agree the ¼ acre lot houses are not sustainable if we all want the hills to be left untouched. It may be all well and good that we have housing along transit lines. However, it does not do much good if employment lines are not also built along those lines. Hopefully that is also considered?

I now live in Fremont, and we have the BART extension coming down to San Jose. We also have Amtrak and ACE rail. I personally commute to work using Amtrak. It is a very nice way to commute. However, I worry that 400K more people in SJ, and I am sure a bunch of people in Fremont and Milpitas, will add to the congestion. Fremont is also building high density housing. Some is very nice, others seem like they will become slums in the not too distant future. (bad construction, ect..)

A place to consider what the alternatives are to high density, is San Diego. That city goes on for miles, and has built every hilltop. There are some highrises in the down town, but the majority seems to be single family houses. And, we think we have bad traffic here? I don't think so! They have 5 lane freeways in each direction.

Cheers,

John in fremont

From: Mark
Sent: 3/13/2012 9:18:25 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] MASSIVE RESIDENTUAL DEVELOPEMENT

I think John has hit the nail on the head, and employment drives the whole planning problem. For years, the same people in Planning that are giving us Envision 2040 have complained about San Jose's bedroom community nature, in that the surrounding suburbs like Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, Mountain View, Palo Alto, and Cupertino have more jobs than people, and San Jose, by far the biggest city, has many more people than jobs. So in response, we grind up easy-commute-to office buildings used by Stratacom, which are inside the city limits and right next to Willow Glen, to build high density congestion linear ghettos along light rail lines leading to nowhere that nobody uses because it is actually faster to drive to work in the horrendous traffic jams. It leaves me wondering why we even have a Planning Department.

Willow Glen is a nice place and it is a somewhat viable model. But where are the jobs? Almost everybody in Willow Glen commutes long distances to high paying jobs elsewhere. Jobs in downtown Willow Glen wouldn't support a city of even 10,000 people, and it certainly wouldn't support them in the style to which they are used to living.

Building urban villages might be nice if it is not really an excuse for constructing linear high density housing-only ghettos. But what would make more sense is to build employment up closer to where people live, and all the rest will naturally follow. Unfortunately, we have already made a metro area where the jobs on the fringe of the Bay are as far as possible from where people live, and that reality is going to outlive all of us. If there were somewhere to work that was closer to the 1 million San Jose residents, there would be less traffic jams, better air quality, and probably a much better city financial condition. Instead we grind up the old Stratacom office buildings for more housing.

As to the addition of 400,000 new residents, I doubt it. All these projections were made on 1990's-style internet bubble statistics. The city couldn't even top 1,000,000 in the last census, despite annexing huge county pocket areas. The census figures actually suggest a net outflow of people from San Jose. This area is very high cost and these costs put a damper on expansion and allow other, cheaper alternatives grow faster. But the 400,000 new resident projection is a great way to justify the construction of the high density housing. This morning I was reading real estate analyst Diana Olick's column about the possibility that we are creating a rental housing bubble. That would be my prediction, too. And what are we going to do with all this rental housing in 20 years when it gets shabby and crime ridden? We'd be a lot better off with more employment centers closer to where people live, but how to accomplish that after what has already been built is probably the trillion dollar question.

From: Larry
Sent: 3/13/2012 10:46:41 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Jobs and the MASSIVE RESIDENTUAL DEVELOPEMENT

In a message dated 3/13/2012 9:18:25 A.M. :
<< employment drives the whole planning problem. >>

This is well recognized. There were many discussions at the Envision 2040 General Plan Update meetings as to the ideal ratio between "number of jobs" and "employable residents".

San Jose is a "bedroom community" with a ratio of ~0.8:1 -- people live here, but work in Sunnyvale, Mt. View, Palo Alto, ...

The City pays for libraries, fire departments, road repairs, etc., but the revenue to the City is based on Sales Tax and Jobs: the property taxes all get sent to Sacramento for distribution to schools, etc. Palo Alto and the others are well off, with 2 or 3 jobs per resident: they can afford the enhanced services for their residents, but we can't.

So, San Jose plans to change that. What should be the goal? 1:1? -- everyone has a job? How about 1.3:1 -- more jobs than there are people? That means that workers commute into San Jose from elsewhere. But from where? -- not Sunnyvale or Palo Alto -- they're already short of residents for the jobs they have. A ratio of larger than 1:1 means folks will be commuting in from Morgan Hill and Gilroy (can you say "grid lock on 101"?), and Livermore, Tracy, Modesto, ... (580/680 and the Altamont Pass). People will complain about the long commutes and will clamor for more affordable nearby housing, which will drop the ratio again.

San Jose chose to aim for 1.3:1, realizing that it'll take some time before they get there from 0.8:1.

The type of jobs is also important. Service jobs are needed -- we need grocery clerks, hair stylists, warehouse workers, etc. -- but it is the higher-end jobs that provide more revenue and higher standards of living: let's aim for them.

How to attract them? Areas with appropriate zoning. Provide infrastructure: transportation, water, sewer, etc.; provide amenities: nearby shops for employees to lunch; provide trails for jogging; ...

And where to put them? If they're all up north, then we perpetuate the morning-north/evening-south commute patterns.

Don't want to take the land that currently is for employment and lose it to housing, so the City passed rules limiting the conversion. Still, projects that have been approved in the past are allowed to continue, including the project on Race St. that started this discussion. (There's also the Ohlone project on San Carlos at Sunol; another project is approved for Meridian at San Carlos; and Reed & Graham has approval from I think a decade ago -- who knows when that'll go...)

At some of the meetings, the public was invited to participate and comment. We, along with the committeemembers and staff, were all given Lego blocks and a large map, and told to work in groups, develop consensus, and then place brown, red, blue and green blocks on the map for industrial, commercial, residential, recreational, etc. It was an interesting exercise: we couldn't just put it someone else's back yard; we didn't want to spread it all over the place, or up the hills and into the bay: we all gave it thought and that was the basis for a number of the plan details. (I personally kept stacking the blocks: ground-level retail, housing above. I've seen it work quite well in Madison WI where I went to school, Oslo where my father-in-law lived, and even on Lincoln Ave. which once had 2nd-story residential.)

Note that, just as housing has become denser, so has jobs. Back when the area was agricultural, it took several acres per person; when warehousing or doing factory work, it might be one person per room; when working on computers, we get squeezed into 6x6' cubes, stacked several stories high.

The Envision 2040 plan has "phasing" and "triggers". Just as a kid might try to eat all the deserts at the table and leave the veggies for someone else, so too developers seem to prefer to build housing and to leave building offices and retail for others. So, to prevent that from happening, there are limits on how many housing units can be built before a given number of jobs are created: eat your veggies first and then you can have desert.

Like I said, it has been a long and thoughtful process.

If you'd like to see the comments I presented at these meetings, I invite you to view them on the WGBackfence website: go to http://www.wgbackfence.net/support_2040-updated.htm for June 2010 comments, and <http://www.wgbackfence.net/Envision2040comments.pdf> for July 2011 comments.

~Larry,

From: Mark

Sent: 3/14/2012 12:21:42 A.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Jobs and the MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

Larry, I want you to know that I am not criticizing your efforts with the Envision 2040, which are excellent. Most of what I say here is to get information out to elist readers about how the process actually works via the Planning department. I think that Envision 2040 will not be followed, just like all the General Plans that preceded it. Every major and even a lot of minor developments here are euphemistically called Planned Developments, or PDs, which means they are exceptions to the current General Plan, and the variances from it must be approved by the City Council. The PDs are abetted by Planning, who usually recommend approval because these folks are paid the big planning fees by the big developers and they are in some very real sense their paying clients. It is a insidious conflict of interest. The even more conflicted City Council then also approves the PD and you get things like the 15 story Ohlone Towers being pushed for even higher density by the Planning Department than the developer originally proposed. The terrible result is spearheaded by Planning Director Horwedel as the only possible solution for a site that really isn't that close to any light rail station. You could walk out the door and onto the tracks and get hit by a train, but you'd have to walk about 3/4 of a mile to the nearest station.

The planning department does not obey its own plans, allowing every major development to be an exception via the PD process. In an environment like this, what use is it to make a plan, if it is never followed? Scott Herhold wrote a column about this sometime in the last 6 months. All we can do is fight the individual projects, and we are up against the colluding developers, Planning Department, and City Council. It is very hard to win anything against these colluding titans but some minor concessions. In the case of Ohlone Towers, the no-concession, take-no-prisoners result was shoved down the throat of the citizens of District 6 like some third-world Planning Department dictatorship. In the last 20 years, I can think of only one very badly conceived development that was stopped by action by the Shasta Hanchett Park Neighborhood Association that cleverly used planning department rules designed to favor the developers against them. That means we are battling about 1 for 100, which is not very good odds. I think our citizens have earned the right to be very suspicious of the entire planning process.

Mark

From: Larry

Sent: 3/14/2012 8:23:05 A.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Jobs and the MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

In a message dated 3/14/2012 12:21:42 A.M. :

<< Every major and even a lot of minor developments here are euphemistically called Planned Developments, or PDs, which means they are exceptions to the current General Plan, and the variances from it must be approved by the City Council. The PDs are abetted by Planning, who usually recommend approval because these folks are paid the big planning fees by the big developers ... >>

<sigh!>

I am trying to see the glass as half-full, and you are insisting on seeing it as half-empty.

Sure, there have been a number of frustrations and losses over the years. A couple months ago, the city council overruled the planning dept. and commission to permit development way too close to the creek in a wildlife corridor (on the Guadalupe at the southern edge of town). And, despite efforts to

preserve it, what had once been the centerpiece of one of San Jose's signature parks was demolished by decades of neglect and then finally destroyed by fire.

Still, "you can't win if you don't participate", so it's important to remain involved.

And there have been successes over the years. Working with various groups, committees, commissions, and associations, I can point to:

- * the Los Gatos Creek Trail, built piece-by-piece over the decades and now nearly reaching the HP Pavilion
- * the 10-acre park we built in Willow Glen along the Los Gatos (see <http://www.wgbackfence.net/arcata.htm>)
- * the ~10 acre park just now acquired in Willow Glen -- the 3-Creeks Trail
- * we protected the "Buffington House" on Lincoln from being torn down and replaced by a square cinderblock bank (years ago)
- * the Long's Drug (now CVS) was originally designed as a boring square box rather than the more interesting building that was built
- * the city now has rules on where 24-hour drive-thrus can be built
- * the city now has rules on how big a monster house can be built
- * there is nature and a trail along the Coyote at Capitol, where once was planned a golf course on, rather than beside, the Coyote Creek
- * the Monte Vista development (KB Homes, at the DelMonte cannery) does preserve and restore much of the riparian (streamside) corridor and extend the Los Gatos Crk Trail up to San Carlos
- * there's a connecting trail along 17 at Lexington Reservoir to Bear Crk Rd.
- * the Ohlone Towers (Sunol at San Carlos) is planned to have interesting architecture, rather than the "row of dominoes" as originally conceived.
- * the HP Pavilion is configured so that traffic is directed towards the freeways, rather than thru the neighborhoods as originally conceived.
- * the plans for the High Speed Rail follow the freeway right-of-way thru Willow Glen, rather than cutting thru the neighborhoods as originally conceived.

The list goes on, but I need to get to work on time so that I can leave afterwards for the monthly Neighborhoods Commission meeting, where we work on additional projects. The next day, I have another meeting in support of the 3 Creeks Trail. After that, ...

So stop wasting my time with the negativity. There is much that can be done! It is work. But the more people working to make things better, the better things will be!

~Larry,

From: Mark

Sent: 3/14/2012 11:21:20 A.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Jobs and the MASSIVE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPEMENT

We are very lucky to have positive forces like Larry working for the good of the community on various planning projects. But we also need some negative forces (yin and yang, you know) to point the elephant gun and get to the root cause of our problems. That rather unpleasant task falls on people like me. I have a thick skin.

Suppose city charters were changed so that all development had to conform to the General Plan in force at the time of the development. That would put an end to PD process and neuter insidious conflict of interest the giant Planning Department development fees cause. Or another possibility would be to put any deviations from the plan to a vote of the citizens within a radius, council district, or even the entire city if the proposed development was large enough. If we did something like this, city planning power would shift back to the citizens. Right now all the power is with the developers, City Council and Planning Department. They do not have your best interests at heart. We are still trying to figure out how something like the above may be accomplished, but there are thousands of us across California that are working to reform the land use system. It took about 15 years, but we succeeded in killing the Redevelopment Authorities and Planning reform is next on the agenda.

So I am contributing, in my own "negative" way. Personally, I don't think of my effort as negative, but instead, simply necessary. Hopefully someone out there loves me for my efforts :-) I know my mom does :-)

Mark

From: Carol-1
Sent: 3/15/2012 9:20:43 P.M.
Subj: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

I drove by the development east of Race St and north of light rail other day. I was shocked at the density and massive building on only 3 acres. I know the elist posters have discussed jobs, traffic, upgraded parks, etc. What concerns me most is the density. Everyone assumes that the new residents of this complex will be taking the light rail, bus or biking to their jobs or shopping/eating in Willow Glen. Where will everyone park? Most of these new residents will have cars. Very few people take the light rail. Is there underground parking? There is very little parking on surrounding streets.

Completely absent from the discussion are schools. There are no neighborhood schools in the immediate area and none within walking distance. The closest school is Trace Elementary and it is at or above capacity. Where will the children who live in this complex go to school? The City of San Jose has always ignored schools when approving new developments.

Finally, there is no open space or even pocket parks. Residents will have to look to our existing parks which are overused and crowded on weekends.

Most of us on the elist live in homes and are not subject to such density. I think this development and others like it are going to create many problems that will need immediate solutions.

Carol
Kiner Ave.

From: Randi
Sent: 3/15/2012 10:21:20 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

Hi all;

I'll take a stab at this since I was one of the people along with Larry who attended all of the meetings.

First of all, this isn't considered high density, it's considered medium density. High density on that site would have meant a much higher building. While you see a massing on the outside, internally there are features that you don't see.

Parking is also pretty much hidden and it has a higher parking ratio (more spaces) than the city calls for; the neighborhood won that one. Parking is under the building. Sobrato knows it's market and builds accordingly. If you look at the existing completed Elements building, there is no parking on the street or at the adjacent medical building. So, that part seems to be spot on with the estimates. Even if we assume nobody is riding light rail, they aren't parking on the streets.

The schools were consulted on this. They have to fill out documents for the EIR. There was no indication that the schools would be negatively impacted and all developers pay fees.

The developer paid a lot of money that is now sitting in the fund for the Del Monte site. They did offer to do a small plaza/dog park alongside the tracks on the Lincoln side as a bonus but that got shot down. They are required to place open space and features on site..we just can't see them.

Hope this helps to fill in the gaps.

Randi

From: Mark

Sent: 3/15/2012 10:48:35 P.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

[Responding to Carol, not Randi]

That Race Street building is small compared to the 15 story Ohlone Towers. Like I have said earlier, who among us has asked for the Manhattanization of San Jose? No one that I know, and yet Planning, the City Council, and the big developers are going to give it to us to solve a non-existent housing shortage for 400,000 new residents that will never materialize. As real estate analyst Diana Olick has said, the next real estate bubble is in the rental housing market, and when it goes bust, guess who is left holding the bag--the taxpayers of San Jose. I think the Sobrato developments will be OK so long as they are under their ownership, but their Prometheus company has a long history of selling properties that get older and less desirable. If the southwestern light rail corridor were more attractive, with businesses, parks and destinations, I think the outlook would be better. But as we have it from planning, it is nothing but high density and older apartments, and there isn't a lot of incentive for it to be kept nice as the years roll by. It is a dense linear ghetto.

Our city planning is not good and the planning process is almost totally outside the control of the residents who live here. It is driven by shorter term profit motives of the developers and the politically well-connected, which very much includes both the city council and the public workers unions. The developments themselves are done by people that have very little actual stake in our community because they don't live here and they do not suffer the consequences of the developments, whether it be schools, traffic, police, fire, or forcing us to take on massive public debt (\$5.4 billion and counting) to finance these projects. If you are a billionaire developer living in Los Altos Hills, Atherton or Palo Alto, really how do any of the consequences of these developments affect you? They don't, except to make you rich beyond all measure.

Stopping this pernicious system is no longer even a choice. It is going to be a matter of survival for those of us who live here. As the developers and a complicit city council and planning department bankrupt our city, it can no longer provide basic services. As this slide continues, our city could become a real hellhole.

If you had told me 30 years ago that this is what would happen, I wouldn't have believed you. But here we are, and if the system doesn't get drastic corrective surgery, the patient will be dead.

Mark

From: Randy
Sent: 3/16/2012 7:14:36 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

I'll go on record as supporting "Manhattanization". Most people I know do not enjoy driving; they do it out of necessity. The highest demand area for housing right now is Santana Row. The reason is simple; it is, in your words, "Manhattanized". Folks can easily go to many restaurants or shops and not drive.

As for the 400,000 new residents that will never materialize, you are sorely mistaken. Simply look at where jobs are being created. Even California's state government would have a hard time killing the jobs here.

Your source for a potential "rental bubble" has been widely disputed. Even if there were a rental bubble elsewhere, it is doubtful this area would be impacted, simply because of the job demand.

From: Mark
Sent: 3/16/2012 8:16:46 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

A few weeks ago I watched a Bill Moyers interview with Jonathan Haidt, the famous social psychologist from the University of Virginia. The interview explains how we have slid into such a dysfunctional government at all levels, starting from about 1960 forward. He offers some good advice on how we can fix the problem, and I think you all may find it as enlightening as I did:

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/jonathan-haidt-explains-our-contentious-culture/>

Mark

From: Mark
Sent: 3/16/2012 8:41:24 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

The population of San Jose went up by only 50,000 people from 2000 to 2010. Census figures show that the entire increase in population and more was due to the annexation of former county areas, which tend to be very dilapidated and low income. If we were to remove the annexations, the population of San Jose would have actually declined during the past 10 years. There is population growth around here but it is not occurring within our city limits. We have had long discussions here about why, if one had a choice,

one might move to other nearby cities. This is exactly what has happened and you'd think there might be more introspection and action as to how we might rectify the list of problems that are making our city less desirable.

I hope we can come to grips with our problems and solve them. Watch the Bill Moyers interview of Jonathan Haidt. I think it offers some ways out of our problems, starting with our own mindsets.

Mark

(who wonders why he can see through the downtown rental highrises/formerly condos that couldn't sell, if there isn't rental bubble here)

From: Jean

Sent: 3/16/2012 1:43:00 P.M.

Subj: [WGBackfence] High density, growth

Regarding Population Forecasts

The population forecasts for the new General Plan were prepared prior to the economic downturn. The consultant Stephen Levy has acknowledged in the press that the forecasts are now higher than what is likely after this economic burp. Partially as a result of the acknowledgment the General Plan task force agreed to use the numbers and "stage" development, so that new urbanized areas would match growth numbers in the next 30 years. As an aside, there has been an outflow, as Mark --- alluded to in his prior post. Interestingly, a high proportion of the outflow has been lower income and less educated people. Of course, there are exceptions--all kinds of people have left.

Around the country, real estate pundits are forecasting that the single family home with a big yard will not be as desirable as it was in prior decades. They forecast there will be a glut of single family homes as the baby boomers die. Developers--who are putting real money behind their opinions--believe that there is a niche market for single family homes and a larger market for more urban homes. Some in high rises, some in dense compounds. Developer and real estate researchers do extensive evaluation of who might be attracted to their properties and the likelihood that they will be able to sell them. They believe (and are betting with millions and millions of dollars) that the young highly educated persons who are attracted to high tech will want more urban housing. These tech professionals work hard and long hours and don't want yards, just some private outdoor space, a patio perhaps.

As for schools---the school district signed off on the Race Street development stating that it had the capacity. The developer also paid school impact fees. The school system currently offers only three regular schools in the area: Trace, Willow Glen, and Gardner. However, there are three campuses available to the school district if the school age population grows sufficiently. The Downtown College Prep High School can be moved to anywhere within San Jose Unified district; it is the former Hester Elementary school. Similarly, the magnet at River Glen (formerly Broadway elementary school) can be moved anywhere within San Jose Unified. As a magnet program, it is not specifically bound to a single location. It has already moved twice previously--from Washington Elementary to the site of the present Galarza Elementary to the current site. Cory Elementary school could be reclaimed from the County office of education and used to relieve enrollment pressure from Trace. The school district has many properties and many options. They no longer sell properties because they were previously burned as school age numbers ebb and flow.

I study a lot of history. Willow Glen is not at all like it was in 1880, or 1900, or 1925 or 1950 or 1970 or now. When I first arrived, there were still a lot of old folks who had bought their first homes in the 1920s and 1930s. Some bemoaned the loss of the orchards and the never-ending sprawl and the loss of Sears on West San Carlos and the changes on the Avenue. Some of them saw the changes as an adventure--wondering what was next, how would it change, what would San Jose become. It was fun to hear their guesses and to see whether they were right as these last 30 years unfolded.

But the most important thing I learned---things change. Some people adapt. Some people break.

--Jean

From: nathan
CC: elist@wgbackfence.net
Sent: 3/16/2012 2:22:01 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.
[reply to Randy Wigginton's post]

Good points.

Frankly, one of the reasons I moved to willow glen several years ago is the same reason people want to live at Santana Row: all the creature comforts of urban living within walking distance (stores, restaurants, groceries, dry cleaners, restaurants, coffee shops, a post office, restaurants, etc). I find there are a lot of people like me, but who are less fortunate and cannot afford a single family home (sometimes I wonder whether I can) in a place like this. For them, apartments are a great, economically viable solution.

(That said, walking from Race street to "the Avenue" is not 100% convenient, so hopefully the zoning north of 280 encourages mixed-use neighborhoods.)

I still have figured out how to make light rail work for my commute, but I would love to have it be viable. Few people I know who have the option (station near work and home) choose to drive these days -- especially since many employers subsidize the cost, or pay for it completely (like mine).

From: krw
Sent: 3/17/2012 10:23:19 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.
Mark -
Where are the figures showing growth via annexation?

There have been successful developments within the city of san jose over the last 10 years; Santana Row is but one example. Skyline at Tamien also appears well populated. The developments in downtown san jose have not been as successful; if one looks to Mountain View or Sunnyvale, there have been extremely successful medium density housing developments. Hopefully we can learn something from them.

In order for there to be a rental bubble, several ingredients are needed:

1. Rental vs buy prices out of line
2. Shortage of rental units
3. Large number of new people looking for rentals.

According to your own statements, no one is moving to San Jose, so #3 cannot be true. As for rentals, there are over 300 units available for rent in downtown san jose alone; over 1000 in the whole of san jo-

se. And performing very simple analysis of rent vs buy one can see those prices are in line as well. The clear sign of the housing bubble was when the rent/buy pricing ratio was out of control.

From: Mark

Sent: 3/17/2012 11:38:45 A.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

Hi Randy,

Regarding annexation, here is one doc: <http://www.sanjoseca.gov/planning/data/population/>

There are lots more docs at the city, county and Census Bureau. What has happened here is similar to the rest of the state, which has seen population growth slow dramatically. There has been a large exodus of both low income and middle class people to other parts of the country and even out of the country. The unemployment rate in Santa Clara county is still 8.8% and a lot of people think the real rate is higher. The good news is that there has been a small boomlet in real estate home sales in our county, but overall prices in the county are still lower, year over year. This peculiar situation is what leads many to wonder if there is a coming rental bust. Here is the shortest explanation I can find:

From Diana Olick: "Typically when rents go up, more renters turn to home buying. When home prices go up, more turn to renting, but today's housing market is anything but typical. Rents were up 3% nationally in January, year-over-year, according to a soon-to-be released new rental index from Zillow.com. Home prices, however, were down 4.6% annually. When you look locally, the numbers are more dramatic. In some markets, rents rose almost as much as home values fell. Take Chicago, for example, where rents were up just over 9% annually while home values were down just over 10%. The same is true for Minneapolis, where the divide is nearly the same. In San Francisco and Detroit, rents are up around 5% while home prices are down the same. It begs the question, as the rent vs. own divide grows, will the rental bubble suddenly burst? Right now investors are rushing to get in on cheap foreclosures, hoping to turn them around for quick rental income. The regulator of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the FHFA, is in the midst of a pilot program to sell 2500 foreclosed properties to investors as rentals. The bulk of these properties are already rented, which means buyers get a turn-key investment with instant returns. In the meantime, multi-family housing starts were up over 14% in January from December and have been rising steadily as developers look to cash in on high rental demand and relatively low supply. Multi-family REITs are seeing big returns.

So what exactly is the tipping point, given that mortgage availability is still tough, consumer confidence in housing is still weak, and employment, while improving, is still not where it needs to be to spur strong buyer demand? 'Rents are rising at the expense of home values. Normally, thriving rental market will stimulate home sales, as investors snap up low-priced inventory to convert to rentals. That, in turn, lowers the number of homes on the market, which will eventually help put a floor under the value of all homes,' says Zillow chief economist Stan Humphries. More supply of rental homes, especially single family, could slow the upward trajectory of rent rates, which in turn would make renting more attractive and buying less so. It raises a red flag to see home affordability at a record high, investors rushing in, and rents so strongly outpacing home values, which continue to drop.

The market dynamics are signaling the possibility of a crash in rents, caused by oversupply."

A lot of the approved rental housing in San Jose hasn't even been built, like Tamien Tower 2, giant hole in ground at Stockton and Cinnabar, Ohlone Towers, Graham and Reed, the other half of Del Monte Cannery, the Rush Roofing plot at Park and the UP tracks, flattening the entire middle of the block at Race St. Poultry, the corner of Meridian and San Carlos at Meyer Electric, the interrupted Fruitdale Station on the former K-Mart at Fruitdale and Southwest Expressway, etc. My guess is that none of this is getting built

because of lack of demand and nervous banks. Yet rents keep rising. It is an odd market situation that could crash, and if it did, it would tend to force home values lower still. Kinda scary.

But, hey, let's approve even more high density and make sure the above scenario happens. I can only wonder how much it is going to cost each of us in the end. It would make much more sense to use this land for commercial, retail, and industrial use for jobs. Almost every one of the properties listed above are places that employed people before they were flattened for more rentals. And we want more?

Mark

From: nathan
Sent: 3/17/2012 2:31:46 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

About a rental bubble: There is some correlation between rental prices for apartments and single family homes, but they don't move in lock step. The key driver of the rent/buy calculator is for "like residences". So when rents on single family homes rise above the cost of a mortgage on the same kind of homes, or vice versa, that has historically been when house prices move, and vice versa. A rental bubble in apartments has much less influence on single family home prices than one might surmise by talking about "rising rents" in general.

I'm not suggesting that there is no impact from overbuilding of apartments, nor that we aren't headed for more woe in the single family housing market, of course, but that they are not the primary causal relationship one might surmise.

We definitely need to see more mixed use zoning with these developments. That's part of what makes Santana Row and some of the new places out by the bay, like RiverMark Plaza, successful -- mixed use, and relatively short commutes to the tech hubs closer to the bay.

The businesses that these apartment complexes around north Willow Glen are replacing aren't what a residential neighborhood needs. And for those that were still open / functioning before selling their land and moving, it definitely pains me to see the employees there sometimes let go if the business doesn't relocate locally. Any loss of jobs is important! But they aren't the kinds of industries that are driving the awesome tax base in Sunnyvale, Santa Clara, Cupertino, or Mountain View. Nor are they the kinds of businesses a mixed use community needs.

**** I'd really like to hear from some people on the list who have been involved in the planning process: Why are so few of these new complexes not mixed use? *****

From: Randi
To: elist@wgbackfence.net
Sent: 3/17/2012 3:05:20 P.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.*Medium Density

In the past it was an either/or situation. Develop housing/or commercial. We are just turning the corner on infill, mixed use and transit oriented development and the city's long term vision stresses that. What we are seeing under construction right now are projects that have been in the pipeline for a number of years. The Sobrato development spans the land between Race and Lincoln. The Lincoln side will have commercial/retail frontage when done and the medical center still stays in place.

The old K-Mart site is another example of how long things take to get from drawing board to the "done" stage. They are only just now beginning phase 2 of a 3 phase project. Right now we only see residential, but eventually it will include office and retail. We are 10 years down the road and it simply takes longer than expected. Other projects have been delayed because of the banking fallout; my conversations with developers is that it's been a frustrating couple of years from the financial end and loans aren't being generated.

From: Ken
Sent: 3/17/2012 6:11:56 P.M.
Subj: RE: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

Workin' in the industry, I've also seen group behavior rising independently all over the place...

Like a rash of restaurants or enhancements to churches or we need hotels, etc. But, it seems to be uncoordinated, different cities and different construction/design teams... If there's a general lack of this or that, there's a move by someone to fill the void. And sometimes it seems like everyone has the same idea at the same time..., but generally, not in the same town...

Right now, I've got a high-rise that was 7-story proposed in '01 (shot down by that recession), came back in pre-'08 (shot down by this recession) arise now as a 5-story as we begin to pull out... That'll boost local construction employment soon as it looks to be a commitment to really do it this time...

And it seems - as the bldg by the convention center got a commitment to be filled... (or rather, as vacancies finally dropped enough to warrant the investment).

I do have a huge multi-occupancy type project that's going up in Foster City right now...

It's a huge investment by the funders to get those projects going..., and multi0-occupancy type projects increase the complexity...

Ken

WG Way

From: Brian
Sent: 3/17/2012 6:19:27 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

I havent seen the new development but theres already a massive one over near the safeway that must be at least 600 units. I dont really think of that as Willow Glen its more like its own neighborhood of large apartment complexes.

From: Larry
Sent: 3/17/2012 9:32:09 P.M. Pacific Daylight
Time Subj: [WGBackfence] Long Range Planning

It's challenging to do long-range planning for a city.

Go ahead, try to predict what will be happening 30 - 40 years in the future!

As practice, place yourself back in 1975 and try to predict today. Computers back then were room-sized machines owned by governments, large businesses, and universities: do you think you would have envisioned them becoming nearly ubiquitous and small enough to carry in your pocket? Would you have envisioned whole industries evolving around virtual worlds enabled by their interconnectedness, one that would rise to become the major employer in San Jose and which would subsequently crash to cause the current economic malaise?

The city has to do long-range planning: it takes years -- decades! -- to construct major transportation systems (airports, Freeways 85 and 87, BART, High-Speed Rail).

If they're not planned, they won't happen.

And if developers are not guided by plans, they would just build wherever is convenient and profitable for them, without regard to the concerns of individual residents like you, and quite likely creating gridlock here in the central established communities as the new residents drive in from the outlying areas. (Remember how there were once plans to transform Cherry into a 6-lane expressway for the suburbs that were going to expand unconstrained southwardly?)

So, long-range planning is necessary and also very challenging.

The best hope is to have a flexible plan.

The plans for San Jose do not unquestioningly call for housing for 400,000 new residents to be built immediately. Instead, the plans say that, if/when there is the need for housing, these are the locations where it is to be built. It also says that the supporting commercial facilities, parks, schools, and employment centers have to be funded or built as well: they are "phased" -- developers can't just build housing because it is the most profitable, they are to be "bundled" in walkable, bikable "urban villages" along the various transportation systems, rather than being allowed to just sprawl forever outward with the existing residents stuck paying the bill for providing sewer lines and widened roadways to serve them.

I don't know if San Jose's population will reach 1.4 million in 2040.

I do know that the population of the country has doubled in my lifetime.

People are free to move about the country -- we are not in a feudal society where you have to live where you were born.

So, we can either make San Jose undesirable to new residents by pricing them out of moving here (and your kids can't live here either) or by making San Jose ugly and congested (which is not good for us who do live here), or else we can accommodate them.

If we accommodate the new residents, it can either be planned or unplanned.

If unplanned, they may sprawl outward, and your home may be condemned to widen the roads to accommodate them, and you will be taxed to provide services for them.

If planned, then we can design a city where the new residents add to the vitality of the community and are welcomed additions. We can have a city with more restaurants and a wider variety of shops, a more balance tax base, and many new friends. Designed right, the city can provide parks, trails, preserved and enhanced natural habitats within the city, and protected natural open-spaces beyond an urban growth boundary.

Sticking your head in the sand and saying "I don't like it" or "it'll never happen" won't make the changes go away.

The question has been asked, who "has asked for the Manhattanization of San Jose?" I would flip the question and asked "who has asked that San Jose continue to sprawl ever outward over hill and dale?" or "who has asked that San Jose become such a degraded city that no one would ever want to live here?"

BTW: to answer the question: thousands of us were asked: we participate in the four-year-long process for updating the General Plan. Additional hundreds (thousands?) were professionally surveyed, and others completed on-line survey forms. We asked for the "Manhattanization" option. Sorry if you missed the memo.

This discussion on the eList has generally been enlightening and informative, and not too repetitive or insulting. (Please be careful to maintain the civility.) Nonetheless, I sense that there are several individuals who feel that they each must have "the last word" -- this doesn't work when more than one feels that way!

;-}

Also, I'd like to point out a newspaper article my mother saved for me: "what life [in California] will be like by year 2000", written in 1975: see <http://wgbackfence.net/2000-article.jpg>. They were wrong about the "versatile household robots" and the 30-hour workweek with 6 weeks of vacation, but they did predict email, telecommuting, electric cars, and the "re-creation of such things as the village, the sidewalk and bikeways." Not bad!

~Larry,

From: John
Sent: 3/18/2012 12:19:20 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.
[response to Brian]

Hello all,

First of all, there is no "good" or "bad" here, as rental apartments are not implicitly inferior to rental townhouses, or they to owner-occupied townhouses, or all those to single family homes.

The problem for me is that, when I moved to Willow Glen, I moved to a neighborhood in a city that, like it or not, was predominantly single family homes, aka "the American Dream." That's what I wanted. Willow Glen seemed like the best of everything. I could have my little piece of paradise without being separated via gates or large plots from my neighbors. I could have my privacy without having to drive 20 minutes to buy a bagel, bar of soap, or newspaper.

It seems like people move to cities that have the qualities that they desire. I know many who live or have lived in Manhattan, or San Francisco, or LA. They wanted high density and so moved to it. Why is my city being transformed without my permission, or the permission of the entire public? Why is so much density being promoted by developers and the city council?

Is it purely money? Do developers have such sway that more profitable high-density housing will be built, encircling Willow Glen, and threaten it's 1920's charm? Or are those who push this density motivated by some desire to save the planet with lower impact housing modalities? One thing I do know is that San Jose was always described as a "bedroom community" and had too few tax paying businesses paying for too many service-demanding housing units, and yet here we are building, and building, and building...

Whatever the reason, I see too little public input into a transformation of a city I enjoy very much. I now things change, and have changed, and will change, but I think choices should be made by, not conclusions forced upon, the public.

Full disclosure: I grew up just (and I mean just) outside NY city limits in Yonkers, a city of 250,000. In that city I lived in a neighborhood of tightly packed single family homes. My wife laughs when I refer to where I grew up as an "urb", not nice enough to be a true suburb. I have lived in NY city, Boston, upstate NY and now Silicon Valley. I hoped to stay here for good, but who knows? If 100,000 rental units surround Willow Glen, crowding its parks, stores, and streets, I may have to move.

Like I said at the start, there is no good or bad here, but I see the change as without the public's permission, or even awareness, and that bothers me.

John on Michigan Avenue

From: Jean
Sent: 3/18/2012 12:54:30 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

<Whatever the reason, I see too little public input into a transformation of a city I enjoy very much. I know things change, and have changed, and will change, but I think choices should be made by, not conclusions forced upon, the public.>

Oh my gosh....

The General Plan Task Force meetings were announced on this elist, in the Willow Glen Resident, in the SJ Mercury News, and KLIV. I personally posted a couple of times. The agendas were on the city's website. There were display ads in the Mercury for the Saturday workshops. Announcements were made at the Willow Glen neighborhood association meetings. There was a presentation about it at the WG Neighborhood association. Councilmember Oliverio mentioned it at various gathering he attended. Larry Ames posted multiple times. I posted a couple of times. It was announced and discussed at various community organizations: League of Women Voters, Greenbelt Alliance, Sierra Club, Housing Advocates. SJ Business Journal and Metro both had articles.

The process went on for four years! Meetings were once or twice per month. Every aspect was discussed. Population growth. Job growth. Whether to have a "no-growth" or "high growth" strategy. Whether to ignore the housing numbers allocated by MTC or to reject the population growth numbers. Whether to maintain the current parkland to people ratios or to lower them. And so forth.

At the workshops, we --the community--were allowed to allocate housing units to various parts of the city. Our results were reported out to the task force. We were allowed to make suggestions about good and bad areas for increased density. We made suggestions for best areas to handle the growth first--because the infrastructure could handle it, ie best transit.

Then there were outreach meetings all over the city. Various non-profits put on meetings. Then there was a planning commission hearing and a council hearing. There was an EIR to read and make comments upon.

There was an online survey and the link was posted to the elist, too.

There was and still is a facebook page.

The planning department emailed info to anyone who ever expressed interest. They kept people on the list and kept sending info once or twice a month.

Letters/emails that the public wrote were printed and distributed to the task force members and the public attending.

I went to about 3/4 of the meetings. There were over 50. Sometimes 30 community people attended; sometimes I was one among five people who were not city employees. I worked with some neighborhoods who wanted to have more input about their piece of the pie. They developed a position and lobbied it. They didn't get all that they wanted, but they got improvements. I worked with a group that protected the park ratios.

Among other things that the public suggested and won---new infill must match current prevailing conditions. We won't see anymore of those developments where 4 homes are stuffed on a lot that used to have one big home. Those projects caused a lot of consternation in Willow Glen and elsewhere.

What more outreach should the city have done? They notified you in the garbage bill!

The community was asked. Some people took the opportunity to throw in their 2 cents. I threw in at least a buck and a half.

--Jean
Blewett

From: Randi
Sent: 3/18/2012 2:09:42 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

[response to John 401]

I truly do not believe it is about changing any of the neighborhoods we live in currently (if we live in a single family home in what look like the suburbs) or Manhattanization or forcing density. It's about the realistic planning process to accommodate future residents and stimulate the tax base. We want our neighborhoods protected; we must accommodate new residents...whether they move here, are dropped from space ships or they are our children and grand children. We can actually have the best of both world by protecting our neighborhoods while creating the newer, more urban and denser neighborhoods that people are asking for.

From: John
Sent: 3/18/2012 2:33:11 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

Hi Jean,

My comments weren't meant to be absolute, as in "there never was community input into the process." The tone I meant to convey was that change in the character of our city is assumed; why is that? Who is that good for? Why is higher density housing necessary? When does this city say, "San Jose is currently full - without an expansion of our borders, we will build no more homes"? This is not impossible, immoral or unprecedented, as other communities have done this successfully.

I don't know the answers to these questions. You have obviously invested an enormous amount of time in watching this process move forward. Doesn't the average Joe San Josean, someone who cannot (or is unwilling) to invest the time you invested, deserve to be asked what he wants? I mean, you state that some of these meetings had 50 people in attendance. This city has nearly 1 million people in it, and if a gathering that portents to direct the development of the city's future involves less than one tenth of one percent of the population, then something else needs to be done.

Also, do you believe that someone who wanted to stop higher density development could have done so? It seems that your efforts, while worthwhile and appreciated, simply modified the path of this "higher-density" train that may roll over the character of this neighborhood.

Like I said in my first email, I don't think there is a right answer, and I certainly don't have any. I have worked on several volunteer projects and governance projects in my profession, and I know getting the "majority" involved and invested is tough at times, but it is necessary. I don't think I am the only one with the vague feeling that our choices are limited to one type of high-density or another. So I realize my first email may not have been factually correct, that there were meetings, but I doubt if our community is happy with the outcome. Perhaps other people on this list can convince me I'm wrong, that the majority are comfortable with the ring of apartments to the north, east and west of our beloved Willow Glen. I am certainly open to hearing from those with differing opinions.

John on Michigan

From: Randi
Sent: 3/18/2012 5:17:42 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

I would be curious...what cities have refused to accept new residents? What do we tell our kids? How about their kids?

There are some "prime directives" that are inherent in these processes...build for our future and protect our neighborhoods. In this case, the community got a lot out of the process that they wanted. The developers got to turn unused land that was bringing in no revenue into something that will generate long term cash for their portfolio. The city got new infill housing adjacent to transit, a boatload of money for affordable housing and a big chunk of change for parkland. Nobody walks out happy, but the thousands of people who attended nearly 2 years of meetings at least walked away knowing their voices counted. This is one case where the developer and the community went to bat against the city on several levels and while we lost two arguments, we won one. As my mother would say..who'd've thunk it?

I remember the outcry on the elist about the horrible and intrusive and massive structure that was being proposed that would just ruin the flavor of the Avenue. Now, just about everybody wants those fences on Willow and Lincoln to come down.

The "ring of apartments", even if true could be looked at another way...as a buffer protecting the village. As long as we build those structures, the pressure on neighborhoods lessens, and frankly, as our property becomes scarcer, our values go up. San Jose will grow. That can't be changed unless you convince everyone who gives birth to leave with their extra residents. The great thing is we have a lot of active people who will make sure that people are aware meetings are taking place.

From: Mark
Sent: 3/18/2012 5:48:20 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

I agree with you, John. While I applaud the efforts of the 50 folks that went to the meetings, those folks actually represent less than one-ten-thousandth of a percent of the people who live here. Any statistician will tell you that that sample size of participants is statistically insignificant. Before the meeting goes get all riled up, please remember that I have said repeatedly that applaud your efforts, but they are not representative of the desires of the population by statistical measure.

The mailed surveys were similarly rigged to get the right answer on high density. I do not know how many were returned, but I be willing to venture that again, the number was so small that it was statistically insignificant.

This is the danger in trying to shove the money-driven desires of a very corruptible process like planning down the throats of the general population. Almost by definition, the general population moved here because they liked the character of the place as it was when they moved-in. The change to the radical high density is quite a departure from the norm, which is where the statistical middle ground lies. This kind of extreme government justified using statistically insignificant input rigged to get the desired outcome is a prescription for disaster on many levels. A more moderate approach would make everyone happier and might even extend the career of some of the politicians and patronage workers that may otherwise find themselves facing the wrath of the public at election time and beyond. I think wrath is going to be the theme of the next several elections, and a more moderate and sensible path in planning, pensions, and city finances would put a out a lot of the heat surrounding these issues. But will any of the people running for office listen, or are they just going to continue the extreme agenda? It would be good to hear any of

the candidates with a message calling for moderation, and reining in the high density juggernaut in District 6 would be a good place to start. We don't want it.

Why is moderation so hard to find in our city government? If you haven't yet, you should watch the [Bill Moyers interview with social psychologist Jonathan Haidt](#). It explains why our government has become more politically extreme in the last 40 years and what can be done to move it back to the more sensible, moderate middle. It will be particularly hard to do it here in California, which is under a public workers union stranglehold along with the oligarchy of complicit billionaire developers, but that grouping has driven things to the breaking point during the last 40 years and now we no choice but to try to correct the situation.

And thanks to the several dozen people who have written me privately with messages of support for a less corrupt planning process that represents the desires of the majority if the people who live here.

Mark

From: Peggy
Sent: 3/19/2012 10:56:35 A.M.
Subj: RE: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

Mark: Perhaps you could put some effort and time into participating in the planning process in a positive and constructive way. Using half-baked facts and assumptions surrounded by negative, inflammatory, and threatening language within the confines of this neighborhood e-list is simply not going to change anything, IMO. Those who agree with your opinions may be sending you love notes, but you won't be getting any from me! Change in our neighborhood is inevitable, often very difficult, usually involves some compromise, and its going to happen with or without your participation. Get involved and try to figure out how to communicate calmly and in a more respectful manner.

Please! This is a discussion list, not a platform for repeating the same diatribe over and over again.

Peggy (with apologies to the Moderator if I'm overstepping my bounds)

From: Taisia
Sent: 3/19/2012 11:45:27 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.

Mark, I just don't believe your rhetoric nor do I believe that "a few dozen people" emailed you in support. I know you thrive on the attention so I hesitate to send this but how about attempting to restrain yourself.
Taisia

From: Larry
Sent: 3/19/2012 12:36:21 P.M.
Subj: [WGBackfence] civil discussion on the eList

The eList is a great forum for a civil and informed discussion of local issues, but civil discussion includes being civil, not repeating the same point over and over, letting others have their say as well, and respecting the various points of view.

As Moderator, I occasionally have to send "gentle reminders" on civility, both publicly and off-list. I don't want to limit a good discussion, but sometimes some folks can get over agitated and may need to calm down a little. As Moderator, I can switch individual accounts over to a "pre-reviewed, time-delayed" mode. I don't like doing it (it's work!) and I don't do it without prior warnings, but I don't want the eList to become an uncivil free-for-all.

The eList is more than just a listing of lost dogs and great restaurants. These discussions on the future direction of Willow Glen and San Jose have been lively and informative. But people posting messages need to be polite and respectful.

Thanks.

~Larry, eList Moderator

From: Jean
Sent: 3/19/2012 2:13:24 P.M.
Subj: time for moderator

Hi Larry,

It's appears to be time to step in and shut down the high density conversation.

Two people have told Mark to shut-up (using more polite language). One worried that she may have overstepped her bounds and it should have been taken care of by the moderator.

Mark's doing the same thing on the SHPNA list...

--Jean

From: Elisabeth
Sent: 3/19/2012 3:39:34 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

In response to John M.'s post, in which he states that he originally moved to Willow Glen because he wanted to live in a lower-density community with single-family, detached homes, I do sympathize. As John M. points out, owning a home with a yard has always been "The American Dream." Also, for those us who grew up in nice, residential, single-home communities, these higher-density apartment complexes do look like hulking, alienating monstrosities.

While growing up in a leafy suburb with lots of undeveloped space back in the 70's, my friends and I lost one magical, wooded play area after another to development. I strongly identified with the sentiments ex-

pressed in Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi." Now, as a grown-up, I beg you and others in your position to please understand how desperately families like mine NEED these multi-unit dwellings. I know it's not what you had hoped for. Alas, most people aren't getting what they hope for these days.

The reason urban developers favor these larger, multi-unit developments is because land near any viable job base is prohibitively expensive, and also because so many single-family-home developments in outlying areas have gone belly-up due -- in great part -- to lack of employment opportunities for buyers.

The "American Dream" has become unreachable for most young families and others who didn't buy 15-20 years ago -- even educated professionals like my husband and me. Renting or buying a detached home often requires commuting 60+ minutes each way these days, due to lack of jobs in the more affordable housing markets (as my husband and I learned from bitter experience). For the sake of the environment, labor productivity, and people's sanity, we need to build housing where the jobs are.

After 10 years of "home-moaner-ship" in outlying areas (first in West Berkeley, then in rural Sonoma County), during which I freelanced and stayed home with my daughter as a commuter widow while my husband commuted 1-3 hours each way to jobs on the Peninsula and Silicon Valley, we finally walked away and moved to our current rental in a complex here in Willow Glen. After years of enduring commuter stress and living in dysfunctional, far-flung, impoverished communities with slim job bases, and serious illegal drug activity and social problems -- in pursuit of what became an American Nightmare -- we feel incredibly grateful to live close to my husband's job, and in a wonderful community like Willow Glen with great neighbors, good schools, and fabulous amenities.

This would NOT be possible for our family -- or many other local residents -- without multi-unit housing. Also, despite stereotypes of fly-by-night, white-trash renters, and the fact that our 60's architecture apartment complex may -- at first glance -- appear less personal, appealing, and neighborly than your charming, tree-lined cul-de-sac, that isn't how it feels for us. We have a nice, friendly neighborhood within a neighborhood in which the kids safely run around and play together after school; families socialize and cool off by the pool on hot summer evenings; and our apartment manager encourages a feeling of community, and promptly and competently handles any issues that arise.

With hard work and a bit of luck, some of us renters may eventually buy that detached home-with-a-yard we still dream about. But those of us who continue renting are also likely to stay here and become as deeply vested, involved, and entrenched in this community as the home owners.

When done right -- and many folks seem to be devoting considerable time and resources to ensure that things are done right -- medium-to-high density apartment and condo development increases the tax revenues, amenities, transportation options, school quality, resources, diversity, and real estate values for their communities. Detached homes with yards will become even more valuable.

Thank you for your consideration.

-- Elisabeth on Willow

From: Connie

Sent: 3/19/2012 4:44:40 P.M.

Subject: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

Well written Elisabeth! The American Dream is Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. Not particularly home ownership, let alone a single family house on a large lot, quiet street, etc. This may be shooting myself in the foot as a Realtor, but I wish for my grown children to be able to stay in San Jose where generations of our family have lived. That would be unrealistic without entry level condo/townhome complexes close to transportation. Many of these people don't want the big yard and the need for cars just to get groceries. They have new needs and wants. I personally love seeing a growing and vibrant downtown

instead of the pawn shop, adult store period of the 70's when I couldn't walk to my night classes alone. Yes, I would have loved my kids to have had the orchards we played in when we were young, but those were my good memories and they have their own. We need to embrace change and make sure it is planned well with communities in mind.

Connie on Madrona

From: Katie
Sent: 3/19/2012 5:18:25 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.
Beautifully said, Connie. Thank you.
Katie P.

From: Doug
Sent: 3/19/2012 5:55:01 P.M.
Subj: RE: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.
The American Dream still exists, just not here. It moved...to places like Boise, Denver & Austin. Great tech jobs, low taxes, less government debt, even less government intervention.
If you want to eat the buffalo, you have to follow the herd!! J
Doug on HamWay

From: Larry
Sent (off-list): 3/19/2012 9:03:30 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] High density development - Race St.
In a message dated 3/19/2012 10:56:35 A.M, Peggy writes:
<< (with apologies to the Moderator if I'm overstepping my bounds) >>
;-}

this has been one hectic tirade! I was hesitant to stop it, lest it seem that I was doing an "agree with me or I will ban you from the list" trick.

Still, he had clearly gotten out-of-hand, and I'd sent him a warning notice off-list. (It was entirely inappropriate to talk about taking the county planners crowd hunting, and then speculating on how many would return.)

I was going to write an admonishment to the morning post during my lunch break. Your posting served the same purpose -- "peer pressure".

Still, as Moderator, it is my task to do that, and so now I have done so -- I've placed him on "Moderated Status" -- something I've only done twice before.

(Moderating the eList is sometimes a full-time job -- too bad it interferes with my day-job!)

~Larry

From: John

Sent: 3/19/2012 11:44:33 P.M.

Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

Hi Elisabeth,

I am breaking my vow to have given my last opinion on this topic, but your letter moved me to write. I am not against all apartments, or all high density housing, or all anything. I am from very near NY city, so am aware that the single family home neighborhood is not the only good one.

It just seems to me that we have one large project after another going up, with many standing nearly empty for quite some time. The Tamien tower that was built on the old Alma Bowl was supposed to be one of two, and the first one sits half empty. The large condo towers downtown were meant to be "city living" ownership towers, and have converted to rentals since they weren't selling. I wonder what is the occupancy percentage of the Del Monte project. If that isn't full, and Tamien isn't full, why are we seemingly going full speed building more of these large projects. I don't know the answer - but if these new projects fill with new residents that need a place to live, that might be a good thing. On the other hand, if filling these projects empties out the low rise apartments that used to be the alternates to the single family home, then we haven't helped anyone, we just moved them, and then their low-rises might be torn down to build more big projects.

That is the real objection I have to the entire affair. First, the assumption that San Jose's population MUST grow. Who says? Maybe at 950,000 this city is the right size for its job base and land and parks and firefighters, and to add 200,000 people over the next 30 years will screw the whole city up. I don't know this to be true, but assuming population growth has to happen here and that it won't have negative effects are big assumptions.

Second, why these big projects. Why not a series of garden apartments, two story structures, 4 to 8 units per structure, with courtyards or pools separating them? I know developers want more units per acre - more \$\$\$\$ for them. But what price to the community? Doesn't our city have the right to say only this or that type of project? It used to, but now we seem to debate what size the big project will be.

Of course I am being simplistic, but I feel many just assume that we must accept a large population increase in San Jose over the next few decades, and we must accept these 100, 200, or 300 unit projects, when in fact we do not. I wish you well, I remember apartment living with some fondness (no repairs, nice neighbors) and realize there is more than one way to be happy. My entire point all along was to say it seemed as if we were allowing major changes to our neighborhood without open public discussion. Others have told me there was debate, but I counter that it seemed much was under the threshold of the consciousness of the large majority of the public.

Now, really, I am done with this. No one is wrong here, and no one is "trailer-trash" (unless they are on reality TV), so we are just chatting about how to maintain our great place to live.

John on Michigan

From: Larry
Sent: 3/20/2012 8:39:23 A.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

In a message dated 3/19/2012 11:44:33 P.M. :

<< It just seems to me that we have one large project after another going up, with many standing nearly empty for quite some time. >>

A couple quick comments:

* developers don't have to build these units, and they don't have to do it when it's not profitable. The units on Race Street were designed and approved quite a few years ago, but then the market went soft and they delayed construction until they saw the demand return. Two towers are planned at Tamien, but only one is built so far because there isn't yet the demand for the second. Other projects are in the pipeline. In a sense, that's not ideal, because they were approved under previous guidelines: we might have gotten more concessions (e.g., ground-level retail, parkways, design details, etc.) under the rules established by the recent public update to the General Plan. (At least all these new residents in the surrounding developments won't just be driving thru our area from home to work, but instead will be more customers for a more vibrant downtown Willow Glen.)

* why not disperse the units, rather than grouping them? Answer: then they would impact larger regions. Already, there are a number of streets that once were filled with Victorians or 1920's bungalows, but now have a random mix of square, boxy 4-plexes intermixed with the old. Those of us who responded to the City's independent random phone survey, as well as those who participated in the on-line survey or public meetings, expressed a desire to preserve the existing housing areas, and to channel development into specific regions (nodes) rather than be uniformly scattered everywhere. There was considerable discussion about historic preservation, recognizing "neighborhoods of distinction", etc. I don't think that there is sufficient protection for historic neighborhoods, but at least there is some recognition of the importance of preserving the roots of the community, the underpinning of the diversity and variety, the charm that makes Willow Glen different from downtown or Almaden Valley.

I invite you to go to the City's webpage, www.SanJoseCA.gov, and look up Envision 2040 (or click on http://www.sanjoseca.gov/planning/gp_update/default.asp): you'll be able to find lots of details, and the vision for the future of San Jose. It's actually quite interesting!

~Larry,

From: Elisabeth
Sent: 3/20/2012 12:34:44 P.M.
Subj: Re: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

Hi everyone.

Thank you for your kind and thoughtful replies -- especially John M. Jean, Larry, Doug, and Connie. I'll definitely check out the City Web site, too.

Obviously, I have a LOT to learn about planning, zoning, & development issues here in San Jose, and am grateful for the crash course offered on this list! My husband and I were highly involved in the community redevelopment process during our seven years of living on the Russian River, in Sonoma County. Although that's DEFINITELY like comparing apples to oranges, I've noticed a few common themes:

Population growth: Like some of you, many folks in our former community questioned whether more housing was advisable, given the area's environmental and infrastructural limitations. The problem is, populations in many areas of the country WILL keep growing no matter what. As Randi so pithily pointed out earlier -- "That can't be changed unless you convince everyone who gives birth to leave with their extra residents." (hee hee hee). Affordable housing supporters argued that the infrastructure would need to expand, because there wasn't enough housing even for the existing population. The Russian River has a lot of "doubled-up" households with multiple generations or families, plus others car-camping or living illegally in seasonal trailer parks, due to limited housing and the poor economy. I've seen some of that happening here in the Glen as well. Jean wrote me with recent statistics pointing out that our housing vacancy rate is a very healthy 5% ... but I do wonder if these figures account for pent-up demand due to economy-related delayed household formation and housing insecurity issues.

Vacant units: People often point out currently vacant units as an indicator of demand (or lack thereof). But I think people would buy or rent these vacant units IF their financial circumstances and crappy credit ratings permitted them to do so, and IF these units have reasonable locations and amenities (I need to research the complexes several of you have mentioned). Unfortunately, too many developers everywhere saw dollar signs, built for the luxury/DINK (double-income-no-kids) market, and then ... CRASH! ... the high-end market vanished in the rubble. On top of that, people in different stages of life (such as families with kids, child-free urbanites, and older folks) often have (or perceive themselves as having) very different needs, and it must be challenging for developers to build something that appeals to multiple "market segments." Even the supposedly "affordable" units aren't really "affordable" because of the ...

High cost of land acquisition, building, etc.: Will Rogers, the American humorist, once said, "Buy land. They ain't making any more of the stuff." Despite the recession, the cost of purchasing land in Northern California for development remains high, and drives up housing costs. And THEN the developers have zoning, permit, taxes, construction, management, and other expenses. I laugh my a\$\$ off every time I see those billboards advertising "affordable" condo living starting from the "mid-300's" (presumably for a 1BR). Even at low interest rates, the monthly payment, insurance, and property taxes for a \$360K home ALONE cost over \$2000 per month. Add in the condo fees and lack of resale value, and, gee ... I wonder why nobody's buying them? I totally agree with John M. about needing more humane non-high-rise options (I grew up near NYC too, and we both know how that 60's monstrosity "Coop City" turned out). When someone figures out how to build affordable, high-quality, and livable middle-to-high density housing that's ACTUALLY affordable, they'll be both rich AND well-loved.

Those danged Boomers (& Silents) :^) Gen-Xers with kids (like me) have trouble finding affordable homes in the sort of family-friendly apartment complexes and leafy cul-de-sacs we grew up in because our parents are still living in them! (Jean's population stats confirm this trend.) Only now they don't have kids any more (except for the boomerang-kind, since the Millennials face a rough job market). Oh WHY do these Boomers and Silent generations have to be so danged healthy, vibrant, and attached to their communities, unlike their retirement community-bound elders? :^) All kidding aside, I do think City Planners need to consider our rapidly changing demographics (including positive changes in how people are aging), and how they effect communities and housing markets. I often wonder if we operate on faulty assumptions due to the fast rate of change. On the one hand, today's retirees/semi-retirees seem way more active in their communities for way longer than their predecessors -- which is wonderful. On the other hand, lack of housing turn-over makes it harder for younger, working people to afford living near their jobs.

Revising the American Dream? Both Connie and Doug suggested the possibility of revising my expectations of the "American Dream." Connie points out that although I can't provide my daughter with wonderful childhood memories of romping about in miles of orchards, she'll grow up with equally fond childhood memories of her own (spark-scootering around Willow Glen & trips

to Powell's? Not bad!). Doug mentioned that many folks still enjoy the stereotypical middle class lifestyle in low-cost, high-employment areas like Boise, Denver, and Austin, and smilingly advises, "If you want to eat the buffalo, you have to follow the herd!" Believe me, my husband and I have very seriously considered this option many times ... Alas, following Doug's herd could also involve walking through a lotta manure! ;^)

ANYway, thank you, everyone!

-- Elisabeth on Willow

From: Curt

Sent (sent off-list): 3/21/2012 1:30:53 A.M.

Subj: Matches what you've been saying about San Jose plan for high-density pockets

<http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/how-housing-prices-burden-the-economy/?ref=business>

From: Carol-2

Sent: 3/21/2012 4:38:10 P.M. Subj: RE: [WGBackfence] Medium density development - Race St.

<< why not disperse the units, rather than grouping them? Answer: then they would impact larger regions. Already, there are a number of streets that once were filled with Victorians or 1920's bungalows, but now have a random mix of square, boxy 4-plexes intermixed with the old. Those of us who responded to the City's independent random phone survey, as well as those who participated in the on-line survey or public meetings, expressed a desire to preserve the existing housing areas, and to channel development into specific regions (nodes) rather than be uniformly scattered everywhere. There was considerable discussion about historic preservation, recognizing "neighborhoods of distinction", etc. I don't think that there is sufficient protection for historic neighborhoods, but at least there is some recognition of the importance of preserving the roots of the community, the underpinning of the diversity and variety, the charm that makes Willow Glen different from downtown or Almaden Valley. >>

I have a question about this.

Is there any control, at all, to stop developers from tearing down a historic home (not a landmark) and putting up something modern? I'm glad that there is some tasteful new construction occurring in Willow Glen, but if there is a legal requirement supporting it, I'm not aware of it.

I live in one of those streets with some nice old homes, some new ones (tasteful and not so tasteful), and some square boxy apartment buildings. The apartment buildings are a source of difficul-

ty here. There is no place for kids to play outside, and so they play on the narrow sidewalks--it's dangerous and kind of stunting compared with having parklands or at least a bit of a yard to use. There has been some significant lack of responsible upkeep by some owners--colonies of stray cats, lots of garbage piled near dumpsters fairly regularly, sometimes insufficient screening of tenants, general visibly run down, undesirable living conditions in these older, never renovated buildings. Generally, too, it's crowded. There is far more traffic and a little more tension because of this.

Our newer projects in San Jose along the light rail corridor have not gone particularly well, either. The ones downtown have not sold at anywhere close to a reasonable rate of actual residents (as opposed to landlords). The ones south of Willow Glen that were supposed to be a model for building affordable housing near public transportation corridors have been described as drug-infested--and ended up that way pretty quickly.

We are just not very good at this high density housing thing.

It is impossible for me to imagine the newer, dense apartment complexes ending up any better than this, and that is precisely why they concern me--from experience. They are just plain too crowded and unpleasant for any other result. **There is no mechanism to encourage or enforce a different result.** Unless an apartment building is infested or non-securable, or lacking basic utilities, there is no significant legal recourse to make an owner make or keep it 'pleasant.' Furthermore, there is a significant lack of law enforcement in our city right now. We don't have the most basic of police services to fall back on, as the police are short staffed and don't even address the small property crimes that keep people afraid--and who can blame them when there are such bad gang problems and injuries to focus on? The combo of fear and being stuck in a small space is exactly the dynamic that can make small, crowded complexes challenging places to live in and to live around.

Most of us live in Willow Glen, I think, at least partly so that we can feel like we are in a nice little town in the middle of the big city--not a snobby town that is only upscale, but one with some diversity and no walls with guards at the gates. I fear, though, that if we continue to build large apartment living quarters on our outskirts, we will lose our 'town'. I have volunteered on Habitat homes, I currently volunteer weekly at a school in the Triangle, I support neighborhood accessibility programs at the local middle school and high school (which serve a large proportion of non-Willow Glen residents), I serve on the board of a human care non-profit and volunteer there regularly, and I favor affordable housing. I am not a NIMBY kind of person, at all. But, I think that we are allowing too many, too large, too close projects too quickly to adjust well to them, and that this will not end well. These should not all be in San Jose, and within San Jose they should not be so close together. We are going to be stuck with the fallout from this short-sighted overbuilding for a very long time. It's not good.

Regards, Carol

At this point, no one felt like starting another round of comments, and the conversation drifted over to "what exactly are the boundaries of Willow Glen?"

~Larry Ames, eList moderator. 3/23/12