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COMMENTARY

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How to Make the Valley's Streets Great

By **ROBERT L. SCOTT**

The calling card of any community is its main street – the area travelers see as they pass through the center of each town. With his “Great Streets” initiative, L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti wants to redefine what it means to live in a megalopolis with 3.8 million inhabitants – a city of nearly 200 named communities and districts. Most residents would be hard-pressed to tell you where each begins and ends – and where the centers or “downtowns” of each might be.

As of the mid-1990s civic leaders were still attempting to map the communities of the San Fernando Valley. Unfortunately, things that defined the Valley geographically or economically were seen as political “hot potatoes.” It took the Northridge Earthquake in 1994 to trigger a change in thinking at City Hall. A new breed of leaders began to take office – leaders who were more open and inclusive.

The official genesis of decentralized planning for the City was the January 1970 Centers Concept for the Los Angeles General Plan. The Concept called for a “physical structure consistent with the goals and objectives of the City’s citizens,” characterized by “high intensity activity centers...and the preservation of low density Suburban areas... tied together by a comprehensive transportation system.”

The vitalization of town centers is not a new idea. Within the City of Los Angeles our main streets and strip centers tend to look and feel rather anonymous. With notable exceptions, they lack the charm and personality of neighboring communities, such as Old Town Pasadena, Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, or even Maclay Avenue in the less-affluent City of San Fernando. What makes these centers special is their cultural and aesthetic connections to their communities. Most centers evolve over time based on

some unique feature, anchor, or business cluster.

Targeting “50 Great Streets” is an excellent way to start – but realization of the dream will rely on a visionary “concept plan” with community support. The logical extension of transit-rich *regional* centers is the cultivation of community-level *town* centers that reduce the need for travel – and feature reliable connections to the regional transit grid.

Enter the urban planners. The idea of a “pedestrian-oriented district” is to allow “trip chaining,” combining multiple destinations. “Transit-oriented districts” are more in focus these days – not only catering to a number of mixed pedestrian uses in a compact area, but providing immediate access to higher-end public transit, such as rail or subway.

Mayor Garcetti chose downtown Northridge to discuss the Valley launch of his initiative. The assembly was set just a few blocks from two huge assets that are barely noticed by main-street passers-by – the Valley Performing Arts Center and Cal State University Northridge. In what is being called “University Village,” the City and the Northridge community developed a concept plan over several years that was adopted as a guide by the City Council, and is now being included in the first phase of Great Streets.

There is a huge abyss between good intentions and meaningful results. According to the Mayor, the initial funding of \$800,000 spread over 15 project areas will “ensure administrative costs are covered.” Although this does not sound like much, it is a start. The rest will come from “leveraging existing resources,” according to the Mayor. And there are numerous tools that can be used to amplify the promised investment.

Creative entitlement strategies would provide certainty as to what could be built, and variances could trade height for such concessions as building setbacks. Add these to public

space improvements: curb extensions, planters, shade trees and street furniture, for an entirely different pedestrian experience. Community Design Overlay districts can provide another tool to smooth out the aesthetics of the business district.

Town centers need to be appealing and functional. Streetscapes and storefronts provide the aesthetic cues that tell visitors they have arrived – that this is a “special place.” From a practical perspective, it is essential that the center develop a unique identity within the regional market, generating interest and pedestrian activity.

We have learned through past efforts in Los Angeles that one-size *does not* fit all? that undertakings of this magnitude require creativity, commitment and resources ? that evolution needs to be organic ? and that local support is essential for success.

Robert L. Scott is executive director of the Mulholland Institute and past president of the L.A. City Planning Commission under former Mayor Richard Riordan.

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