

April 7, 2005

**MINUTES OF A REGULAR MEETING AND GENERAL PLAN WORKSHOP #4
OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY AND ENERGY CONSERVATION
COMMISSION****1. CALL TO ORDER**

The Torrance Environmental Quality and Energy Conservation Commission convened in a regular session at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday, April 7, 2005, in Council Chambers at Torrance City Hall.

2. ROLL CALL

Present: Commissioners Basile, Chim, Minter, Persaud, Reilly, and Chairperson McCabe.

Absent: Commissioner Watson.

Also Present: Environmental Administrator Cessna, Environmental Quality Officer Jones, and Senior Planning Associate Chun.

7. GENERAL PLAN CONSERVATION ELEMENT**7a. Introductions**

Environmental Administrator Cessna introduced Senior Planning Associate Chun and Environmental Quality Officer Jones and she clarified that the meeting was to be a brainstorming session with the focus on raising questions rather than answering them.

7b. Presentation: General Plan Process Review

Sam Gennaway with Cotton Bridges & Associates (CBA) reviewed meeting objectives including documenting current conditions with regards to Historic Preservation, discussing issues and opportunities and receiving community input. He explained that the General Plan is a snapshot of present day Torrance with a vision of what Torrance wants to be in the future and an outline of steps to get from today to tomorrow. He briefly explained goals and required elements of the General Plan noting that important local issues can be included such as historic preservation and conservation. Preservation goals enhance the sense of place, improve the quality of life, and provide additional description beyond the land use element regarding the city's development pattern, form, structure and sense of place.

Mr. Gennawey provided a brief history of the city noting that Jared Sidney Torrance purchased 2,791 acres of land for a uniquely planned town of 500 people, with commercial and industrial zones on the eastern boundary separated from residential areas to the west. The original plot featured neighborhood centered development, differentiation of streets by function, important common open spaces, and recognized the need for continued maintenance and aesthetic oversight to preserve the quality of the community. He listed other Olmstead projects in California including Alta San Raphael-Pasadena, Benmar Hills-Burbank, Pacific Palisades and Bel-Air. Irving Gill was hired as the principal architect in early Torrance and designed a wide variety of commercial and residential structures in the city.

7c. Presentation: Finding the Balance

Mr. Gennawey asserted that the appropriate solution to historic preservation balances private property rights with shared community values and he explained that the goal of the meeting is to figure out what questions that need to be asked, what issues need to be studied and what the potential opportunities are to determine the best way to deal with issues and opportunities. Historic preservation will be looked at in the Conservation Element of the General Plan.

7d. Discussion: Current Conditions

Mr. Gennawey reported that the National Trust for Historic Preservation indicates that homes over fifty years old can be considered historic and he noted that over 10% of the buildings in Torrance are already fifty years old or older. He stated that the median year homes were built is 1958 and subsequently the General Plan projects that within 15-20 years 60% of Torrance homes will be considered historic.

7e. Discussion: Issues and Opportunities to be Studied

Mr. Gennawey noted that Torrance is one of the earliest examples of a planned city and he clarified for the record that the area is being called the original plat for now. Aspects of the original plat which are hidden gems are the physical layout of streets, the well thought out urban planning, and the wealth of Irving Gill structures that give the area a coherent look and feel.

Mr. Gennawey took comments from the audience as follows:

- *The uniqueness of the area designed by the Olmstead Brothers has been overlooked and recognizing and labeling the area the Olmstead District would not be making a change.*
- *The importance of design standards was noted with residents not wanting to see any more historic assets lost such as the historic Irving Gill Theatre*

which was replaced with condominiums that changed the look and feel of the area.

- *Torrance has the second largest collection of Irving Gill buildings in the world but many residents do not recognize the value of the city's treasures. Other areas outside of the city have historic preservation with structures that are not as old, valuable or renowned.*
- *Other cities have historic overlay zones with very specific, controlled codes set into the General Plan for the area that disallow housing built in commercial areas, zone changes or changes to Floor Area Ratios, height limits, etc. Whether or not the area is deemed historic, it was agreed that the area needs attention.*
- *Olmstead wanted open space with people able to walk to open areas from work and home and the Olmstead/Gill vision blended into an eclectic area worth preserving.*
- *Ideabooks similar to those made available to residents of the City of Los Angeles and Anaheim should be available for Torrance residents who want to restore their homes.*
- *Post-war and recent past resources are becoming more and more important.*
- *The Los Angeles Conservancy supports preserving the Fosters Freeze.*
- *Historic homes in outlying areas should not be overlooked.*
- *Concern was raised about creating a slum district in the city with older homes brining down the value of the newer homes in the area.*
- *The original town of Torrance evolved over decades as a result of economic and historic events.*
- *Concerns were raised about the preservation of property rights with some residents advising the city to err toward property rights when making decisions.*
- *Investigation of the Mills Act, Green Building, Leadership Energy Environmental Design (LEED) standards for historic and new buildings, and adaptive reuse was requested as it is prudent to take a look at what the city has and try to reuse it. Mixed use and creative thinking was encouraged and it was noted that in order to embrace a green element, the city would need to adopt the California State Historical Building code with different elements available to keep structures historic.*
- *Some residents do not see the historic value of their neighborhoods.*
- *The question of what the change in balance between commercial and residential space in the area over the last 25 years was raised and whether the character of the neighborhood has also been changed.*
- *Concerns were raised about accessory units and the effects on private property rights.*

Mr. Gennawey noted that the new state law impacts residents as the character of the neighborhood changes.

- *Consequences were discussed as anything made historic today could stagnate what could be historic in 50 years.*

- *Questions were raised about R-3 lots under 7500 square feet and the General Plan requirement of 2500 square feet per unit.*
- *Concerns were raised about the effect of historic preservation on entitlement rights and how property rights would be affected with acknowledgement that rights are already limited by the General Plan.*
- *A study of other cities with historic preservation was requested to see how their property values were affected.*

Mr. Gennaway indicated steps to historic preservation included creating standards, looking at the history, and providing a pattern book and he noted that guidelines could be more stringent, requiring regulation that protects certain elements of the building like the façade and or setback and additions which usually have to be to the rear to maintain the small character scale. Guidelines can have some weight of regulation and a pure historical district would have a design review board with a series of steps to improve the property.

- *The Mills Act is an opportunity for buildings on the historic register to save property tax and there are many financial incentives for those cities who engage in historic preservation.*
- *Costs associated with the review process should be taken into account and it was suggested that homes be considered on a case by case basis by those who want to preserve their own.*

Mr. Gennaway asked for a vision of what historic preservation would be like if implemented.

- *Historic preservation benefits the whole community, not just the historic region and property values have been proven to go up with any historic preservation whether voluntary or mandatory. Guidelines require consistency and following the architectural style of the home because what happens in a neighborhood impacts the community. Allowing the unique charm to be destroyed 2-3 homes at a time changes the entire streetscape and value of property on the street. There are concerns with losing control of property rights but existing city ordinances already limit rights so that nobody has free reign to do what they like and preservation districts have been set up all over the nation with the key being to find the balance.*
- *Not every building over 50 years old qualifies as historic.*
- *At a minimum the Mills Act should be offered which is a contract individual homeowners can enter into with the city allowing for a significant reduction of property taxes if the character and historic elements of the house are maintained. The contract is renewable every ten years.*

Jay Platt, Los Angeles Conservancy, observed that often those worried about property rights are able to realize that preservation does enhance values and community character and they come to see the benefits of preservation through some level of regulation. He acknowledged concerns about property

rights but pointed out that property rights are shared and the most compelling argument for preservation is the widespread success with it around the country.

- *Concerns were raised that the Mills Act would restrict neighbors from doing something that will impact the historic value of their own homes.*

Mr. Gennaway clarified that the agreement is between the homeowner and the city for that individual property.

- *Parking and traffic issues were cited for the entire city and concerns were raised about making too many changes to the FAR.*

Mr. Gennaway reported that there would be a discussion of circulation issues and parking at a meeting on April 13th and he indicated that a significant traffic study of every intersection in the city was being conducted.

- *A speaker cautioned against infringing on others' property rights and expressed concern about creating an area similar to the Adams District south of Los Angeles.*
- *A Historic Preservation Officer is needed to help the city and residents and educational opportunities should be provided to current staff.*
- *Quality of workmanship on older homes was praised and concerns with the level of modern materials and workmanship were discussed. Historical preservation was deemed easy compared to the Palos Verdes Art Jury which dictates a lot.*

Mr. Gennaway reiterated that the meeting was a scoping session and historic preservation would be dealt with in the Conservation Element of the General Plan after they are able to research questions raised.

In response to inquiry, Bonnie Mae Barnard indicated that the meeting was being filmed for Save Historic Old Torrance (SHOT).

- *Concerns were raised about the fiscal impacts of new developments on aging infrastructures.*

Mr. Gennaway explained that would be studied in the General Plan but not specifically through historic preservation.

- *The formation of slums was discussed with a resident expressing skepticism about that happening in a city where the median price of homes is over \$400,000.*

Responding to an inquiry about the overpopulation of schools, Mr. Gennaway explained that was not relevant to historical preservation but was being analyzed and would be mitigated.

- *A long range vision was put forth suggesting a recognizable historic area with a group of neighbors on a volunteer committee that would help people who want to expand their homes. Buildings incompatible with the original look of the town will have aged and replacement buildings will look more like the original community.*
- *A desire to make it more difficult to change zoning was noted as currently all it takes is a vote of the City Council*

7f. Activity: Finding the Balance

Mr. Gennawey gave a dot to each member of the audience and asked that they place a dot where they feel the balance is between property rights and shared community.

7g. Community Input

Chairman McCabe explained procedures for public speaking noting that the commission is an advisory body.

Irene Alvarez, Gramercy Avenue, opposed official designation of historic buildings or areas in the city as she felt it would unnecessarily infringe upon her rights. She also opposed the Mills Act as it could result in less property tax and has far reaching implications as property owners adjacent to historic structures could also be affected. She felt that historic overlays depress business owners' rights and asserted that investors are entitled to a fair return without being subjected to the desire of outsiders. She felt that preservationists should preserve their own properties and she liked the new homes on her block as they add value and provide off the street parking.

Debbie Hayes, President of the Torrance Historical Society and the Old Torrance Neighborhood Association, suggested labeling the original boundaries of Torrance the Olmstead District and she provided background on the designers of the city. She did not oppose development but rather favored managed growth with limited density that retains the character of the community. She acknowledged the importance of balancing the needs of property owners with protection of the community's historic assets because what one person does to their home has a positive or negative impact on the whole neighborhood.

Ms. Hayes proposed creating ideabooks for downtown residents to reference before modifying their homes which would offer resources and guidelines and she also suggested compiling a list of historic information pertaining to preservation available at the Katy Geissert Civic Center Library.

Janet Payne, Engracia, Vice President of the Torrance Historical Society, indicated that Jared Sydney Torrance purchased 2800 acres for almost a million dollars from heirs of the Dominquez Land grant and he hired master planners for \$10,000 to create the first model city in the west. She noted that people are

often confused between Frederick Law Olmstead Senior and Frederick Law Olmstead Junior who was hired to design Torrance but Olmstead Jr. was as well renowned in his own right as his father was.

Frederick Law Sr. was the founder of American Landscape architecture and the nation's foremost park maker designing many towns including the parks and parkways in Louisville Kentucky. Frederick Law Jr. was the intellectual leader of the American city planning movement in the 20th century, founded the curriculum at Harvard for landscape architecture and urban planning, and is credited with planning the National Parks Service. Ms. Payne presented a map referencing the area of Historic Old Torrance which is very small compared with Torrance overall.

Torrance was heralded as first model city in the west, major industry signed up, everything was planned: parks, schools, residences, underground utilities, water, business, factories, even transportation systems. Torrance is still a model city and a balanced city according to a nearly 100 year old idea and plan. In the original part of Torrance the streets and layout are the same and citizens want to honor the historical significance of the plan.

Ms. Payne agreed with earlier remarks about recognizing historic Torrance for its unique place in history and she asserted that the area is the Olmstead District and that is not going to change but naming the area would raise public awareness of the town's heritage. Ms. Payne expressed support for offering the Mills Act and Green Building programs.

Liz Fobes, Andreo, submitted materials to the commission and addressed the failure to update the housing element in the process, Torrance's relationship to the national tear down epidemic in historic neighborhoods, property rights and capital appreciation in a historical district, and state mandated zone changes that affect undesignated historic areas. She observed that the General Plan process specifically excluded the state required housing element but included an optional historic preservation element and she reported that Community Development staff would be investigating how CEQA protections can be applied to what remains of residential historic resources in the Olmstead district. The current housing element denies that there are any historic resources or landmarks in Torrance which is contrary to the opinions of experts in architectural history and requires staff to indicate there is no impact on historical resources in CEQA reviews of proposed teardowns and condominiums. She commented on the disturbing implications of continuing the practice for 4 more years until the update is completed and she noted that neighborhoods are on the list of the nation's most endangered historical places.

Ms. Fobes reported that in recent decades political decisions have vandalized historic neighborhoods with insensitive development that affects the value of the neighborhood as a whole and she stated that studies nationwide prove that the value of preservation areas increase 4-5 times faster than other areas of the community but with current zoning, one property owner in the

historic neighborhood can build a condominium that robs every other property owner of the double or triple capital appreciation that he or she could expect which affects property rights of the whole neighborhood. She added that state mandated zone changes affect undesignated neighborhoods but historical districts are exempted and that protection could be useful right now.

Jay Platt, Los Angeles Conservancy, commented on the incredible successes with historic preservation nationwide resulting in economic revitalization, stabilization, and increased values for homeowners. He reported that Torrance had received a D- on the preservation report card for all the municipalities in Los Angeles County and he noted that the survey of historic resources within Torrance done several years ago had prevented the city from receiving a failing grade. He observed many supporters of preservation in the city demanding control of the development that is destroying the area and recommended the city establish a preservation ordinance which would enable the Mills Act. He related that preservation ordinances are most successful when tied in to hiring a historic preservation officer who is the point person for preservation issues and he added that becoming a Certified Local Government (CLG) would open up funding sources only available to CLGs with that money available for community enhancing projects.

Mr. Platt commented on the importance of historic structures in Torrance being critical not only to the city but also to American architectural history and he observed great success with historic districts in Los Angeles and around the country. He reported that 12 neighborhoods in Los Angeles were trying to achieve historical designation but were being held back by funding and staffing at the city level and he indicated that he was available to help Torrance in any way possible.

Mr. Platt suggested a conservation district approach which is more focused on maintaining the physical character of neighborhoods and has much less stringent historical regulations.

Janet Payne spoke on behalf of Gene Higginbotham who hoped that the city would adopt the California State historic building code to be used during renovation as that would allow him to reuse historic windows, install sustainable materials and also give him a break on Title 24 energy requirements. Mr. Higginbotham felt he would greatly benefit from implementation of the Mills Act as could many other people in the community and he felt Torrance was in a unique position for Green Building guidelines. He proposed saving the Foster Freeze and creating a new downtown trend with mixed use at that property and he felt the city needed to be more flexible with a number of requirements and that becoming a CLG would bring good ideas to the city.

Responding to Ms. Payne, Environmental Administrator Cessna explained that the Council is the policy making body and looking at a broader picture in terms of the General Plan and although they would work together, the Council Committee would probably take precedent.

Janet Payne reported that the committee had considered four options: 1) Taking no action; 2) Officially recognizing the original tract in name only as the Olmstead District; 3) Implementing a voluntary program such as the Mills Act; or 4) Creating a mandatory program through the establishment of a historic preservation overlay zone. Ms Payne expressed concern that a recommendation could not be taken to the Council for a decision with consideration of the General Plan.

Chairman McCabe reported that the commission had been working on a Green Building program for some time.

Judy Weber, Border Avenue, questioned whether the city's status as a chartered city affected guidelines and boundaries in the new or current General Plan for specified areas or areas as a whole and while she acknowledged that historic preservation sounded scary to some people, she noted that property owners are already limited in their ability to make changes to their homes by their neighbors who have the right to object to the height of planned additions. She also requested that statistics be made available to illustrate the success of historic preservation on property values which has been proven in many cities.

Mary Steinkamp, Acacia, asserted that historic preservation was smart growth as reusing vacant, unused or underused buildings uses already existing public infrastructure, generates taxes and the buildings are often oriented toward pedestrians which reinforces the viability of public transport.

Nina McCoy, 220th Street, indicated that she is a strong proponent of economic redevelopment and she felt that smart growth has positive benefits. Existing assets being abandoned is not smart growth and encouraged reinvestment of historic areas revitalizes and revalues nearby existing investment in both the public and private sector. People are moving back to historic neighborhoods and buildings and neighborhoods within the city need to be kept viable to make that happen as economic growth means new jobs. Small businesses create 85% of new jobs and older buildings often provide affordable rents for small businesses to get started. Business districts are sustainable with a diverse range of businesses and rental rates which are not available in a regional office center or office park. She added that new construction is generally 50% labor and 50% material whereas rehabilitation is more about the labor which creates a greater local economic impact for rehabilitation than new construction does.

Brenda Culp, Portola, stated that solid waste landfill is increasingly expensive in dollars and environmental quality and most of that is construction debris from razing existing structures, so preserving instead of demolishing building inventory reduces construction waste. New urbanism reflects good urban design principles which have been around for 100 or more years in historic neighborhoods which were built to be dense. Historic buildings are not liabilities

but are assets not yet returned to productive use and rehabilitating them puts jobs where workers already are.

Mary LeTendre, Lincoln Avenue, felt that preservation is best for all of Torrance as historic preservation is economic development that is also community development, reinvigorating historic neighborhoods and reinforcing schools by allowing them to recapture an important education and social level in the neighborhood. No new land is consumed when using old buildings for new purposes and it is far less costly to repurpose an existing building and nothing is destroyed. She asserted that diversity in a neighborhood with many housing styles sharply contrasts with bland monolithic developments in Torrance and revitalizing Main Street will reduce the demand for another strip mall.

Alan Smithart, Crenshaw Boulevard, expressed opposition to the proposed overlay district as he felt it would infringe on the property rights of other people. He asserted that old homes go down in value and are not equipped for modern equipment like computers, and he stated that many homes in the area did not qualify and should not be included. Mr. Smithart suggested that only individuals who want to have their homes identified as historical do that so that others who are not interested do not have to pay the costs of regulation and he related past experiences with property in the hillside area being subjected to extensive review processes.

Bonnie Mae Barnard, Gramercy, SHOT, distributed materials to the commission noting that previous speakers had been reading from an article on Smart Growth included in the handouts. She added that the March issue of National Geographic had an article on Frederick Law Olmstead and she announced that the president of California Heights who lives in an overlay zone would be speaking at the April 13 SHOT meeting. She indicated that SHOT is available on a volunteer basis to aid with research and has been in contact with many communities that have historic preservation in place.

Ms. Barnard reported that the National Historic Preservation Act was established in 1966 in response to widespread demolition of historic structures because the spirit and direction of the nation are founded upon history and heritage which needs to be preserved. Preservation of irreplaceable heritage is in the best interests of the public in order to maintain the legacy and enrich future generations and she felt it needed to happen in Torrance to maintain cultural assets noting that how it happens will be determined by the governing body.

Ms. Barnard explained the origins of SHOT and presented an article about Old Town Orange which shows historic preservation as a powerful tool to revitalize an area. In an analysis of 320 cities across the country, mayors and economic development professionals were asked to rate top priorities of city success and historic preservation ranked seventh out of 45 economic tools available. She added that 15 out of the 20 cities deemed most successful economically had strong historic preservation in place and the housing value in Old Town Orange had increased 38.6% over non historic properties when it had

previously been in the lower 1/3 of the city. Income levels and educational levels changed drastically for the better in preserved areas with a 99.1% change for the better for economic viabilities.

Dayna Berman, Post Avenue, pointed out that many people who moved to the area selected it because of the historic homes and there are many other neighborhoods to live in if one is not interested in that. She commented that she had not heard anything about making strict guidelines and she pointed out that planning guidelines already in place restrict changes to properties. She noted three neighborhood organizations in the area, two of which are historically oriented with a goal of trying to keep the community and neighborhood intact

Kurt Von Ruletz, Arlington, expressed appreciation for the old homes in the area but wanted to make sure that individual rights were considered.

Chairman McCabe thanked the audience for their comments and indicated that the commission had clearly heard their concerns.

MOTION: At 9:27 p.m. Commissioner Reilly moved to close the public hearing. Commissioner Minter seconded the motion and a voice vote reflected unanimous approval.

7h. Summary and Next Steps

Commissioner Chim thanked the public for coming to voice concerns on the General Plan and Historic Preservation. She expressed support for some form of preservation but also expressed concern about private property rights of individual homeowners which she understood to be more of an issue for the City Council and the City Attorney.

Environmental Administrator Cessna explained that information received would be digested by the consultants and would come back as a draft for the General Plan Conservation Element. She reported that unless a large number of sign cases come forward, the May commission meeting would be focused on Green Buildings as part of the General Plan Conservation Element. Chairman McCabe indicated that he would email her questions about the 1992 General Plan and he encouraged others to do the same. Environmental Administrator Cessna cited a need to focus on Green Building because it is not included in the previous General Plan.

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