

Flurry of Development Reform Proposals Fall Short of Reforming L.A. City Hall

By Jill Stewart

While we applaud the mayor and City Council for attempting reforms that try to mimic the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative heading for the March 2017 ballot, today's City Hall proposal is a half-baked effort that continues to shortchange Los Angeles residents in favor of developers who shower the City Council and mayor with money.

Real reform will come when voters enact it, through the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative that will soon begin gathering signatures for the March 2017 ballot.

The mayor and City Council are clearly unnerved by our 70% support from voters. Voters agree we must end the behavior of individual city council members who take money from developers, and then act as land czars, personally seeing to it that these wealthy developers get their land "rezoned" from two or three stories tall to 6 or 10 or even 30 stories tall.

Los Angeles residents pay for this instant wealth transferred to developers: a massive loss of green spaces, livable neighborhoods, quiet streets and street parking, even as these outsized luxury complexes and skyscrapers suck up our water and max out the surface streets, aging water mains and emergency services.

L.A. residents pay dearly, with higher rates, higher taxes and harmed communities.

This is a corrupt system, whether it is legal or not.

The fine words from the mayor today are very gratifying to hear. We do appreciate his, and the City Council's, unspoken acknowledgement of our citywide Neighborhood Integrity Initiative movement, popular in every neighborhood from Brentwood to Boyle Heights.

But sadly, their own plan falls far short.

Our March 2017 ballot measure ends forever the gaming of land in Los Angeles by the City Council. The mayor's and City Council's reforms announced today *continue to allow the City Council and the mayor himself to behave badly* -- by personally seeing to it that developers who shower them with cash can erect giant projects in neighborhoods that don't want it and can't handle it.

The City Council's destructive policies encourage widespread demolition of perfectly sound older buildings. Their own policies are pushing out thousands of longtime residents from Highland Park to Palms, leading to the destruction of more than 20,000 affordable rent-stabilized units since 2001, mostly in favor of luxury buildings that few can afford.

The City Council is allowing developers to destroy neighborhood character from Westlake and Highland Park to Valley Village and Koreatown, and selling out Los Angeles for a future that people here in Los Angeles do not want.

The efforts at reform announced today do nothing to challenge this.

In addition, our Neighborhood Integrity Initiative requires that "Community Plan" hearings be held throughout the city, in every neighborhood, *on weekends and weekday evenings only* so the public has real access to this important process of shaping the future of their neighborhoods.

As much as we appreciate the mayor's acknowledgement that L.A.'s biased system for writing up Community Plans must be fixed, the City Hall proposal contains no tools for meaningful public input into Community Plans.

Our measure does provide these tools: We require the city to hold all Community Plan hearings during times and on days when the real public can attend, and the hearings must be held in the communities themselves, *not downtown*.

The related City Hall measure announced today involving Defunct zoning is, unfortunately, not a reform but a land grab, focused largely on the San Fernando Valley.

The City Council clearly intends to broadly rezone parking lots in the Valley and elsewhere to allow for density. But L.A. parking lots are not defunct zoning areas awaiting giant luxury condo projects or pricey rental complexes going for \$3,000 per unit.

What Los Angeles residents want, and have been promised by the mayor and city council again and again, is parks. Parks, not towers.

Los Angeles is the most park-poor big city in America, a shameful ranking that harms everyone.

The "reform" should have said that Defunct zoning parcels will be targeted for parks, and that the City Council would stop sitting on millions of dollars in unspent parks funds. But nobody asked communities like Reseda, Palms, Venice and Pico-Union what they want.

What the people of L.A. dream of, and what the mayor and City Council dream of, could not be further apart.

One additional reform proposed by the council and mayor today was taken directly from the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative, and we appreciate the effort they made to clean up the city's broken and biased Environmental Impact Report system.

But today's plan to reform the EIRs falls woefully short:

Our ballot reform will forever ban developers from choosing their own consultants to write the

infamous Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) that habitually overestimate population growth and underestimate traffic, infrastructure stress, environmental harm, noise and other harms caused by developers' projects.

In contrast to our clear ban on letting developers' consultants write the EIRs, the mayors' and city councils' plan would create a list of private consultants, pre-approved via a highly politicized process, to write the EIRs. The city needs to do better than that.

Finally, we applaud the mayor's unspoken acknowledgement that the Coalition to Preserve LA, which is funding the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative, has hit upon the greatest worry Angelenos share: the frenzied overdevelopment that drives up our skyrocketing rental prices on every block where rule-bending luxury projects too big for the area are granted by the City Council.

But silent agreement about this problem from City Hall is not enough. Our plan creates a highly focused and narrow moratorium that affects only these outsized projects that bend the zoning rules, and begin with private backroom deals made by council members.

Despite some highly creative claims by our opponents, who laughably say the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative "stops development" in Los Angeles, our pin-pointed moratorium goes after only the 3% to 4% of projects that are allowed to stomp on the zoning rules, often after the developer gives cash and gifts to city officials.

These huge projects are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the gridlocked surface traffic, infrastructure stress, loss of green space, and the rash of ugly boxlike buildings that offer children nowhere to play and pave over the very character of Los Angeles.

This City Hall plan released today does nothing to end the soft corruption that grips Los Angeles City Hall. Voters will make that fact clear in March.