

San Diego approves zoning plan for mid-rise housing near new trolley stops

By David Garrick

San Diego approved growth blueprints Thursday that allow for mid-rise housing and dense urban villages in neighborhoods near new trolley stops in Linda Vista and the northeast corner of Pacific Beach.

City Council members said the new zoning rules will simultaneously help solve San Diego's housing crisis, reduce carbon emissions and revamp blighted areas where bicyclists and pedestrians face major challenges.

They said it would be a significant missed opportunity not to allow tall apartment buildings and condominiums along the \$2 billion Morena Boulevard trolley line, which is scheduled to open in fall 2021.

Critics say the blueprints will damage community character, put enrollment pressure on nearby schools and allow upscale housing near the trolley that will only be affordable to wealthy people who don't use transit.

Community opposition has been fiercest against the increased density and greater building heights the new plans will allow.

In the Linda Vista area, the plan lifts the building height limit for housing projects from 45 feet to 65 feet near the existing Linda Vista/Morena trolley station and up to 100 feet near the new Tecolote station.

In northeastern Pacific Beach, the 30-foot coastal height limit will remain in place, but the plan allows projects with significantly greater numbers of units per acre.

The council approved both plans unanimously. Each was supported by the local development industry, the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce and local cyclists.

"This is an essential component to addressing our housing crisis," said Matt Adams, vice president of the local chapter of the Building Industry Association.

Stefanie Benvenuto, a spokeswoman for the chamber, said more dense housing will reduce the scarcity of available units that has caused rents to sharply increase.

"The density is necessary to help us combat the fact that the crisis is driven out of scarcity," Benvenuto said.

Critics said the plans don't require developers of the mid-rise housing to provide enough subsidized affordable units, making it unlikely residents of the new buildings will commute by trolley.

"Both plans fall miserably short of providing the amount of affordable housing required to make them work," said James LaMattery, spokesman for a protest group called Raise the Balloon.

Other groups in opposition to one or both plans include Moreno United, Reasonable Growth in My Backyard and Clairemont Cares. Moreno United threatened Thursday to file an environmental lawsuit blocking the plan that affects Linda Vista.

Several Clairemont residents spoke against the plan for northeast Pacific Beach because the affected area includes a slice of Clairemont.

"We just can't plow through and build things and not expect them to have an impact on the community," said Julie Wilds of Clairemont Cares.

Concerned about the subsidized housing complaints, the council added a requirement that 15 percent of the units built near the trolley stations in Linda Vista be reserved for tenants making less than the area's median annual income of \$86,300.

No such requirement was applied to units built near the Pacific Beach station, which will be called the Balboa Avenue Station.

Residents near both affected areas also complained that neither plan includes a tunnel or bridge across Interstate 5 to ease access to the new trolley stations.

City officials said both plans include such infrastructure as a goal, which will allow impact fees paid by nearby developers to be spent on tunnels or bridges in coming years.

Pacific Beach residents and some environmentalists also lobbied the council to declare nearby Rose Creek a public park. But council members deferred to city parks officials, who recommended delaying such a move.

Both plans create new bike lanes and aim to make the areas near the trolley stations more pedestrian-friendly. A protected bike lane will be added to Morena Boulevard and stretch from Friars Road to Mission Bay Park.

The plan for northeast Pacific Beach aims to transform the 210-acre area from an auto-oriented commercial corridor into a dense residential village surrounding the new Balboa Avenue trolley station.

It would increase the number of housing units allowed in the area near the Balboa Avenue station from 1,221 to 4,729. That's a near quadrupling of what current zoning allows, and six times the 763 housing units already there.

It would also break up the “megablock” between I-5 and Mission Bay Drive that extends from Garnet to Bunker Hill Street. The goal is fostering a traditional street grid to ease commuting to the trolley. That area is dominated by auto dealers, gas stations, budget motels and fast food chains.

In addition, the intersection of Grand Avenue and Mission Bay Drive would be reconfigured to allow pedestrians to more easily cross Mission Bay Drive on their way to the trolley station.

Most of the new housing allowed in the proposed blueprint would be in an area bounded by Rose Creek on the west, Figueroa Boulevard on the east and north, and Grand Avenue on the south.

The plan affecting Linda Vista covers 280 acres that follow the path of the new trolley line then extend east to include the existing Linda Vista/Morena trolley station on the green line.

The two new trolley stations included in the plan will be where Morena Boulevard crosses Clairemont Drive and where Morena Boulevard crosses Tecolote.

The plan aims to transform a mostly blighted, auto-oriented industrial area into a dense trolley-oriented village.

It would increase the number of housing units allowed in the area from 1,386 to 7,016. That’s about five times what current zoning allows, and seven times the 996 housing units already there.

It would also revamp the street grid there by aligning public streets or private drives with Vega, Dorcas and Buenos avenues at West Morena Boulevard.

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