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## The community – by the people, for the people



By Michael J. Stepner & Mary Lydon

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address reaffirmed the foundation for this country, that we are governed by the people for the people. Community planning is at the heart of that axiom.

Community planning is a continual process by the people that helps create the communities we want in order to prosper, be healthy and thrive. There are two certainties to community development. Change is inevitable, and no city is ever built out. The goal is to manage the changes as equitably and sustainably as possible.

Today, San Diego, like most cities, is feeling the impacts of big changes. Growing or declining populations due to demographic and social fluctuations, an alarming warming climate, aging infrastructure, insufficient public dollars, and – most stark of all – extreme political divisiveness. Now more than ever community members and leaders need to come together for dialog to plan and create our communities.

In his State of the City speech, San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria set four priorities for his administration: housing, homelessness, infrastructure, and public safety. But the city of San Diego has a budget deficit of \$254 million for fiscal year 2025-26. A sales tax increase to provide \$400 million annually, which would have gone a long way to pay for these crucial needs, was narrowly defeated.

If the citizens don't trust those who govern with their tax dollars, how do we pay for the needed infrastructure? As the late, great parking planner Donald Shoup said, "parking is never free." If we are unwilling to pay for infrastructure for the overall community, we will end up needing to set up a system of demand pricing.

As an example, in order to sustain Balboa Park's infrastructure, parking and other fees could be established to support it. Voting down a sales tax measure may point to demand pricing as a solution, where only those who use it pay for it. This may be a strategy for some things and would be worth exploring.

In addition to the budget deficit items, there is a need for production of 13,500 new homes annually. The need for housing and how to meet that need is the subject of much debate. We need to make sure the new policies and tools to encourage housing provide the right type of housing in the right places. Also, that there are services and infrastructure in place to support them. Taking into consideration creating complete communities, and not just housing, will go a long way toward making sure we are building sustainable communities.

To build trust for managing change and to ensure that change is value-added for the neighborhood, we need to engage in dialog.

An outstanding community dialog took place with a team of San Diego civic luminaries, including top planners and designers, for the Civic Center revitalization. Part of their recommendations included guiding principles that can be used for planning in all of our communities:

1. Space should be mixed use.
2. Be aspirational with architecture and planning that embraces San Diego.
3. There should be a draw to the area that adds excitement and creates a sense of place.
4. Vibrancy is key, and the arts should play a role.
5. Build outward versus inward.
6. Align amount of office space to future needs.
7. Workforce housing, and not just luxury high-rises and affordable housing, should be considered within the mix to champion diversity.
8. The city should look holistically at our communities and bring together the Climate Action Plan, SANDAG Transportation Solutions and Green Space strategies into one overall solution.

To plan for community building, a deeper dynamic also needs to be in place. In 2023, then U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness an epidemic. He said loneliness jeopardizes health, well-being, and a sense of belonging.

Canada's Victoria Transport Policy Institute released a report called "Planning for Quality of Life: Considering Community Cohesion and Related Social Goals." The group's research found that walkable places can increase social capital. Social capital includes elements like equity and affordability, fitness and health, personal security, and attractiveness of the public realm. But the report identified that the most important quality of life element was community cohesiveness. They define community cohesion as "the quality of interactions among people in an area, and the strength of connections among them, indicating by the portion of residents who know, trust, enjoy and spend time with their neighbors."

Walkable communities play a big role in community cohesiveness. Having opportunities for physical activity but also opportunities for unplanned encounters with neighbors helps to decrease social isolation. By walking we are twice more likely to have a friendly encounter than if we drive.

Parks and open spaces play a key role in community cohesion. A local group of San Diegans recognizes the value of public places and is in the process of rolling out a new nonprofit called San Diego Coalition for Public Places. The focus will include advocacy for accessible well-designed, funded, managed, and maintained public-serving places that create and sustain a beautiful, socially inclusive, and economically vibrant city of San Diego.

Social isolation can negatively impact our democracy as well.

Being alone, whether by choice or not, and over-relying on social media as a social connection, is changing the tone of our civic dialog. Community planning and other curated gatherings can help us move away from our screens and out into our communities.

Civic Saturday San Diego is part of a national program through Citizen University based in Seattle. It creates a place for deepening a shared sense of civic purpose. A San Diego program began before the pandemic but has been on hiatus. A group of San Diegans is exploring putting it back into action where it is needed now more than ever.

Community planning and leadership remains a critical activity in our democracy. It does take engagement by the citizens and their government to build communities that are healthy, prosperous and thriving. Trust is the key ingredient.

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