

Regarding increased Height Limit in the Lake Avenue Mixed-Use Center

-- by Mark Goldschmidt 19 July 2016

The Altadena Community Standards District (CSD) Committee was appointed following three County-sponsored visioning sessions held at Loma Alta Park in the spring of 2012, where citizens were asked to come together to share what they liked about Altadena, what they didn't like, and how they wanted Altadena to evolve. Shortly thereafter, our CSD committee was appointed by Town Council chair Bernardean Broadous and tasked with making revisions to the CSD to help the town realize some of the aspirations it had voiced at the visioning sessions. Trails, more parks, more recreational opportunities — nothing in a zoning overlay can satisfy these demands. However, two things jumped out at us: an overwhelming demand for increased retail opportunities, especially restaurants, and 'walkability.'

Retail has been dying or limping along on most of our commercial corridors for decades (with the exception being the Lincoln redevelopment area). Most commercially zoned areas in Altadena form thin lines along our avenues that work poorly for both auto- and pedestrian-oriented retail, although they may have been viable in the streetcar era.

We came up with two possible ways to encourage local restaurants, shops and services. First, loosen up parking restrictions. All the small old-fashioned store fronts would be able to set up for business; people will certainly be willing to walk a certain distance, especially if there are interesting shop windows on the street. So we asked that the current onerous parking requirements for retail uses be reduced, or even eliminated entirely. Of course, we did have to consider retail-adjacent neighbors. In the end, the County agreed to remove any requirement for on-site or extra off-site parking for parcels under 2,500 square feet, and to reduce by 30 percent the required spaces for parcels between 2,500 and 5,000 square feet.

A second option is to increase density. Allowing taller mixed-use (residential over retail) buildings would encourage new construction along one of our moribund commercial areas and bring in new businesses and residents to support a more vibrant retail environment. Multi-family properties would be more likely to attract and retain the next generation, keeping Altadena lively. Residential rents are sky-high now, the housing shortage is acute, and if we desire this development, now is a good time to encourage it. The obvious area for increased density is at the heart of Altadena on Lake Avenue, which, it turns out, was an idea put forward in the 1986 Community Plan.

We recommended four stories (not five, which we've heard bandied about). Perhaps that's too tall for Altadena, but no one on our committee is married to 48 feet. In the face of community opposition, we would support a recommendation to revert to the current County Code's 35-foot limit, which allows three stories.

Anyone can get up and speak to the Regional Planning Commission during public comments. If you wish to voice your objections, please do, being specific about measures you object to, and if possible, offering positive alternatives.

