

President's Message - September 2017

Has the NIMBY pendulum swung too far?

Growth has been part of the DNA of this country since long before its founding. America grew from a small breakaway part of England to the dominant player on the world stage because of the industrious people of this country building and growing our public and private infrastructure. This relatively unimpeded growth served us well for many years – right up until the later stages of the industrial revolution when the public at large came to the realization that we were destroying our environment and the places that we loved.

One of the responses to this was a strong and organized environmental movement, efforts which brought us rules and regulations which would allow development but in a more controlled, orderly fashion. Limitations were put on everything from urban sprawl to what could (and more importantly, couldn't) be dumped in our waterways and burned up through our smoke stacks.

These efforts have been a huge benefit to the people of the United States in so many ways. Our air is cleaner (look no farther than LA), our water is cleaner (at least in most places), we have parks and open spaces to enjoy. We are a shining example of how a polluted, blighted place can be turned around for the betterment of all.

Among the broad set of responses to the industrialization of the US was the arrival of zoning and building rules. Originally developed in Germany in the late 19th Century, zoning rules came to the US as a means of trying to deal with the ever expanding industrial footprints across the Northeast. Providing clear separation between residential areas and industrial or business areas was an important part of ensuring citizens had healthy and safe places to live.

Building codes have an even longer history. The first modern building codes came out of London's Great Fire in 1666. Rules were put in place requiring some fire resistance be built into homes as they were reconstructed, and that roads be opened and widened during the reconstruction.

This notion of protecting health and safety through building codes has continued to this day, bringing us to the point where many of these rules are developed and

codified for all in the International Building Code, updated and published every three years.

These zoning and building rules have provided us with clean, well-run cities that have safe structures which have saved lives time and time again. Few would argue the benefits we have all received from our zoning and building rules.

But just as the pendulum swung away from industrialization around the turn of the last Century, I look at where we are now with all our rules and regulations and wonder if have reached the far end of the pendulum's path, yet again.

No, please don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating for getting rid of these rules. We've benefited too much from them to simply toss them all aside and allow free-for-all development. Getting rid of zoning and building rules is not the answer, but ensuring a modicum of practicality certainly is.

Building a structure in Santa Barbara today is extremely difficult – something that pleases some people in our community. Through the multi-layered review process and the costs associated with it, even for retrofitting existing structures, we find many people who run out of money or time before they are ready to begin their work, and others who don't bother to try at all. In some areas of our community we have arbitrary rules that are decided by citizen committees, whose direction may change from meeting to meeting depending on who happens to be in the room at the time. There is the real possibility with each application that you spend thousands or even millions of dollars to plan and design, spend years going through the process, only to have nothing to show for your effort at the end.

And its one of the things that is clearly dragging down our economic growth and prosperity.

So how do we resolve this? How do we provide for the safety and well-being of our visitors and citizens while freeing up the private sector to grow and expand in a way that will drive the economic growth we need as a community? Here are a few thoughts.

- 1) Create Clarity: The Chamber has said for years that clarity is needed in the process and in the costs of developing both in the City and in the County. Those looking to build should be given a full accounting in an easy to read format as to what will be required for their proposal as early in the process as possible. Businesses would pay even more for the honor of building in Santa Barbara if that fee meant they had a clear idea of the time frame and full cost of the project up front – allowing them to plan for it and begin construction in a timely manner.
- 2) Streamlining High Priority Projects: Some of this is being done now with the recent announcement from the City's Planning Department that projects in the Downtown core will receive priority attention and dedicated staff support. We can make efforts like this permanent to drive development in key areas of the City, and can expand it to include full pre-check meetings with all of the key staff members of the City to ensure all relevant information is coordinated and provided from the beginning.
- 3) Drive Appropriate Density: While there are still some in Santa Barbara who openly say, "Density is a Four Letter Word," the vast majority of our citizens and employees know that we must allow for targeted density in major corridors if we are to meet even our basic housing needs. Our building and zoning codes fail us all when they prevent us from housing our own workforce and push people to outlying areas not just because of price – but because of the actual lack of availability. Building and Zoning rules are meant to protect our health and well-being, not create barriers to providing the housing we are required to provide.

We can protect our community and the people that work, live and play in it while still allowing for growth and development. It's been done in many places around the world, places we can learn from. It starts with the simple acknowledgement that we've gone too far, and must find a middle ground. From acknowledging that even one time where people spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and many years of time on a proposal that simply can't make it through our process is one too many – and we have dozens of these every year.

Let's be vigilant. Let's protect Santa Barbara. But let's also protect the spirit of free enterprise and the engine that created this beautiful community in the first place.