



To preserve and enhance the unique village character of Laguna Beach

January 21, 2024

Submittal to City Council RE: Item 10 Promenade Options

Attached are three documents that Village Laguna has submitted previously that outline many of our concerns:

June 5, 2023 letter to City Council

July 3, 2023 letter to the Planning Commission

July, 2023 memo to the Council which outlines issues in response to the Planning Commission meeting. The issues raised in this correspondence are still very important and unaddressed.

The Planning Commissioners made comments such as, "We have a long way to go with this project." "These are not designs. They are diagrams." "Struggling with the whole concept." "Should be designed to respond to changes." "Should be more 'Laguna-ish'." They expressed a need to simplify. "I know what designers do—they get paid a lot of money and they feel they have to show their stuff." The design should not be "like a planned community. It shouldn't feel like we are copying other places." "Not ready for prime time." "Keep all the trees that are healthy."

An issue that has not been raised to date is consideration of the downtown area and particularly lower Forest as a historic resource. Commissioners referred to this obliquely when they referred to Laguna's art colony heritage and suggested we think about how the early Laguna artists would have looked at this space. Of course, the way it is now largely reflects their vision—small shops, walkways on each side, eucalyptus street trees, parking and vehicular traffic.

In reviewing the tape of the July 5 Planning Commission hearing we found several important segments of commentary with no sound—two sections by Commissioner Kellenberg and one by project manager Tom Perez. One of the comments by Kellenberg was referred to in the Commission's motion, but now there is no record of what he said. Council and the public need the benefit of that information. Do we need to hire a lip reader? If we are to rely on the videos of the meetings as the public record, we need to have more reliable methods of recording.

Reviewing all these comments and the concerns in the attached letters should indicate to the Council that this project is not ready to proceed to be further studied for Design Review and other project entitlements and CEQA analysis. The full range of approvable alternatives needs to be available to reviewing bodies, environmental analysts and the public. An obvious omission is the alternative that the Council directed to be prepared—the option that retains the existing curbs and gutters.

This process is dragging on and meantime lower Forest is experiencing a lack of pedestrian activity, as is apparent now. It is time for the Council to recognize that this Promenade experiment has been imposed on the retail merchants and their customers without an objective process due to the pandemic. In good conscience the city should consider an interim hybrid situation that would allow parking and access to the south side of Forest, especially during cold weather periods.

Please direct staff to implement an interim hybrid plan and prepare other options that reflect concerns of the Planning Commission and those raised in the attached correspondence before proceeding with next steps.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Caenn".

Anne Caenn, President



To preserve and enhance the unique village character of Laguna Beach

June 5, 2023

RE: Future of Lower Forest Avenue

City Council:

Village Laguna has refrained from taking a position on the Promenade, reserving comment in consideration of the businesses that were struggling during COVID and later while the consultants prepared detailed plans. With the two public workshop sessions now complete, it is time to raise important unaddressed concerns.

1. **The process**--The closing of lower Forest was an emergency measure meant to support local restaurants that were unable to serve customers indoors. The design of the Promenade was done quickly without normal review. Retail businesses sacrificed parking and convenience for their customers in consideration of the restaurants' needs to use the street area for outdoor dining. The changes to lower Forest were meant to be temporary, and a full evaluation considering all options was to be done later. Now is that time, and it appears to us that all options are not being considered.

In June 2022 the council approved the "Program Plan" to guide the development of two concept plans. The first option was a complete conversion of the street into a pedestrian space. The second option was "a simpler version that maintains curbs, gutters and sidewalks similar to what exists today." This second option would allow flexibility in managing lower Forest—possibilities include restoration of parking and through traffic along with temporary closures for special events. It would also keep the existing sidewalks and trees intact, thus preserving the traditional Main Street character of lower Forest.

At the first workshop in September 2022 questions were raised about the two options the Council had approved for the consultant's work. Some wanted them to consider whether we should have a Promenade at all—because they felt that the community as a whole had never approved this idea except for the needs related to the COVID emergency. "No," the public was told, "We are not here to talk about that. We are only to work on the two options the Council has approved." And now only one of these options—complete conversion— is being presented.

Note: The community survey that is often cited as support for converting lower Forest to a pedestrian plaza did not present the complete picture to respondents---important factors such as cost, loss of parking and its revenues, removal of existing trees, implications of the closure for traffic congestion, for flooding, long-term maintenance of the outdoor facilities (which have already deteriorated and now require replacement at considerable cost), the needs of existing businesses that are not restaurants, and alternatives.

In the most recent workshop, May 17, the second option did not appear at all. Only two versions of the complete conversion were presented. This gives the impression that the process is being manipulated to ensure complete conversion, since no other option will be on the table. This is not acceptable. Drawings for the second option should be presented and considered as the Council directed.

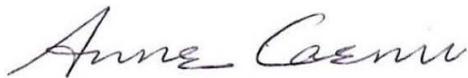
In addition, the decision making should include information on costs, parking replacement requirements, and an evaluation of the total need for closure, its pros and cons.

2. **History**—Laguna Beach is one of the few cities in Orange County that still has its traditional Main Street. Historical photographs of lower Forest show access by horses and then automobiles. Parking on the sides has always been provided. Creating a modern plaza out of a linear streetscape does not serve to enhance Laguna Beach’s historical uniqueness.
3. **Design**—While it is tempting to mimic urban designs that work in dense European cities or to those that are incorporated in modern shopping complexes or that reflect the latest design trends, we should consider what works best for Laguna Beach, what enhances our unique character and build on what everyone loves about coming here—the feeling of being in a place that is different, where its people have respected its character for over a century.
4. **Trees**—Forest Avenue is named for the Eucalyptus trees that early homesteaders planted. The existing trees in lower Forest are essential to the appearance and feel of that space. Yet both of the options presented show nearly all of the Eucalyptus trees to be removed. This is a definite deal breaker. It changes the unique Laguna Beach character to “Anytown, USA.”
5. **Flooding** is a significant concern that has not been addressed in the two options presented. When the curbs and gutters are removed and the street area is raised to meet the elevation of the sidewalks, the ability of the street to serve as a holding area for flood waters is eliminated. Even with new drains in place, the potential for more severe flooding of the shops is increased. See page 74 of the Downtown Specific Plan:

Flooding is the greatest concern of the environmental hazards potentially affecting the downtown. Downtown Laguna Beach is subject to periodic flooding due to overflowing of the Laguna Canyon flood control channel during a major flood event. According to the report from the Flood Mitigation Task Force in 2011, in the near future, this situation can be improved, but not completely resolved.... storms have produced flood heights of approximately one to two feet at Forest Avenue.

6. **Management of restaurant dining areas**—Now that the constraints of COVID have subsided, the takeover of public areas in the streets by some businesses at the expense of others needs to be rectified. Other restaurants not fronting on Lower Forest are not benefitting from city largess in expanding their seating permanently and investing in hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars of constructed improvements outside their doors. The consultants’ options did not address how the seating areas they presented would be allocated for the restaurants, or in how alcohol could be served without the installation of the required ABC barriers. The renderings, which omit any such barriers, give a misleading impression of spaciousness.
7. **Parking**—Recent Coastal Commission decisions in San Diego required that parking taken over for outdoor seating be replaced. In their adopting of the Downtown Specific Plan the Commission considered the Promenade to be temporary and said that it could only be made permanent if there were replacement parking spaces provided. This is a significant impediment to implementation of any “complete conversion” plan and is another reason for exploration of other options now--at this stage in the planning process.

Please redirect this planning effort in light of the above comments



Anne Caenn
President



To preserve and enhance the unique village character of Laguna Beach

July 3, 2023

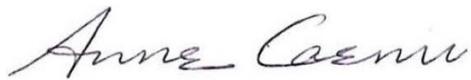
RE: Agenda Item No. 6.1 Promenade Concept Designs

Planning Commission:

Village Laguna has submitted comments to the Council following the last public workshop on the Promenade. These are attached and should be considered in this review. Following are our comments on the staff report.

1. The Planning Commission should be involved in planning this project in a detailed way. The Commission should not just be asked to choose between two faulty alternatives. This project is not ready to proceed to any further steps until concerns are addressed and all options have been considered including returning the street to its former condition with parking and through traffic.
2. Comments from the public are not honestly presented in the staff report. A glaring example of this is the statement : “Community members seemed understanding of the need to remove existing trees in the interior of the promenade to make space for newer trees with better soil volume.” The removal of most of the Eucalyptus trees on both sides of Forest was glossed over by the consultant and existing trees to be removed were not shown on the plans. Most of the members of the public were not aware of the planned removal of most of the trees. This would be a huge impact and a key part of decision making for many people. This alone points at the need to explore other alternatives.
3. Staff’s explanation of why they have not followed the City Council’s direction and have not included the option of keeping the existing curbs, gutters and existing trees in place contains many arbitrary assumptions. Following are comments on staff’s list of reasons for not including the option of keeping existing curbs, noted on p. 3:
 - a. Existing sidewalks comply with ADA and would not have to be removed.
 - b. Digging trenches for utilities is a common operation and does not dictate that the option of keeping existing curbs is infeasible.
 - c. The “need” for large walkways next to the stores is assumed criteria by staff and needs to be balanced with the priority to save the existing trees that is dictated in adopted city documents.
 - d. Additional storm drain inlets can be accomplished along with the utility trenches described in b. above.
 - e. Maintaining existing decks is not a required part of the design.
 - f. Construction costs have not been presented for any of the options. In any case public review of costs and benefits of all options should take place.

4. It is not the prerogative of staff to void the instructions approved by the Council. All decision makers and the public should have the opportunity to review all options that have been produced and further options should be developed and presented as a result of the public process.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Anne Caenn".

Anne Caenn
President

Memo sent to Council July, 2023

On Wednesday July 5 the Planning Commission discussed two options for a permanent Promenade along Forest Avenue. Despite superficial differences in design, both options involve “storefront to storefront” transformation along the width and breadth of Forest Avenue from Coast Highway to Glenneyre, including removal of most of the existing trees, demolition of existing sidewalks and curbs, and lots of new paving.

Option 1 is the Straight Shot; Option 2 is the Winding Path. Overall the Commission preferred Winding Path as more “natural.” They proposed lots of modifications, including an effort to preserve more trees.

But the big news: at last we caught a brief glimpse of what staff say is the option mandated by Council for a minimally impactful design. This was not previously shared in public, because staff had rejected it out of hand. After the public hearing was closed, staff presented a single slide for this option (below). It features both a promenade AND parking, as though the idea is to have both a through street and a closed-to-traffic public space.

A promenade for people and cars:



This hybrid is NOT what Council asked for. The idea behind a minimally impactful alternative that would maintain sidewalks and curbs (and trees) in place is that Forest Ave. could be more easily returned to its previous function if desired in future. At the hearing, staff stated that they could not retain the existing curbs and sidewalks, because platforms and railings would be required, and the public did not want “corrals.” Moreover, the platforms impact drainage. But why did staff assume that dining must be elevated? And any alcohol service requires railings under state law, which is missing from both Options 1 and 2. Staff also said a raised, mid-block crossing would be required for ADA accessibility, but it’s not clear why, or why that is a reason to reject this option.

Steve Kellenberg was the only commissioner to advocate for further study of the minimally impactful alternative. He stated, from urban planning research, that nation-wide **90 percent of downtown streets that are closed to traffic end up being reopened to cars.**

We believe it is a mistake for staff to worry over the details of Winding Path without taking seriously the alternative that actually does what Council asked. Staff argued that no matter what, sidewalks, curbs, and trees must go, but this is an arbitrary conclusion based on criteria not stated by council or set in public workshops.

The Commission was dismayed that there wasn't more public comment, considering how much community interest there has been in the closing of Forest and the Promenade. (Only four people attended and a few more phoned with comments.) Where were all those people who had crowded the SusiQ workshops? Well, guess what? They were not noticed about this hearing, which took place the day after the 4th of July holiday—not a time when most people are checking Planning Commission agendas. This is just another example of the City “managing” public involvement. The consultants who designed the plans were not even present, which shows how limiting this review was in terms of meaningful Planning Commission work.

Watch the Planning Commission meeting at.

https://lagunabeachcity.granicus.com/player/clip/2090?view_id=3&redirect=true&h=854f433a54a1ab4fc801151d20bb6134 starting at 1 hour 42 minutes.

Please urge Council to have the Planning Commission hold another meeting that is widely noticed and which especially notices all the previous participants in the planning process. Let them know that you want to see a detailed version of the minimally impactful proposal that Council requested and have staff and consultants immediately address the important concerns the Planning Commission raised.

Thank you for your concern about this important project. It's time for us all to step up to assure this project represents Laguna's goals.