



To preserve and enhance the unique village character of Laguna Beach

February 7, 2024

RE: Agenda Item No. 6.1 Downtown Specific Plan Phase II

Planning Commission:


Village Laguna has continuing concerns about the content and direction of this phase of the Downtown Specific Plan.

Overall, we question why the most successful commercial area in our city, and one that represents the iconic image of Laguna Beach, is being proposed to be transformed into a different place altogether. One with taller buildings and less parking--all with the purported goal of adding more housing. While we are all sympathetic to the goal of providing affordable housing the plan does not condition these changes on actually producing affordable housing. Nor does it explain how such housing would be funded. In fact, councilmembers were discussing adding market rate housing, and downplayed affordability. Do we need more expensive housing? This is especially questionable in a bustling commercial area, with noise, traffic, music and lots of activity that could be incompatible with day-to-day home living. **We ask you to step back and relook at the goals of this planning.** Why are we trying to change this well-loved and overall successful urban area in such potentially destructive ways?

Following are detailed concerns:

1. Changing the height limits will have a huge impact on the character of downtown. Even changing the basis of measuring the heights from base flood elevation, instead of existing grade, could have negative impacts. Why is this change needed when the almost all the lots are already developed and their entrances and first floors are related to the sidewalks adjacent to them? We urge you to retain the existing limits and measuring system.
2. What does "decoupling parking costs from residential and commercial lease costs" mean? Is that another way of saying that parking needs increased by more density don't have to be provided or paid for by the developers of that increased density? Parking has been a continuing concern for decades. Why are we considering making this problem worse by not providing for ways that parking is required to be addressed as part of planning for increased densities? We are concerned that this is just a recipe for creating the need for public expenditures to provide the needed parking and parking management.
3. Do not promote permanent parklets that use up parking spaces available to serve all downtown businesses and their customers.

4. Unlimited density was presented as a possibility at the Council meeting. In addition, the staff information suggests “residential uses by right” in the arts district and the central bluffs. Both these policies further erode the city’s and the planning commission’s ability to properly plan those areas. We urge you to reject both.
5. The list of historic properties should include all of the properties in the previous version of the Downtown Specific Plan. 65 properties were listed originally but only 27 were shown in the revised version. In addition, descriptive information should be given for each property, not just the address. For example the list should say “Hotel Laguna” as well as 425 South Coast Highway.
6. The current Downtown Specific Plan discusses how a lower Forest Avenue would function on a limited or temporary basis and does not recommend a permanent Promenade. We urge you not to amend that provision as the planning for the Promenade is presently “paused” and the options have yet to be completely evaluated.
7. We encourage staff’s suggestion to develop objective design standards, especially since these will help us to deal with the arbitrary edicts that come from the state. However, they should not take the place of discretionary review for TUPs, CUPs and Design Review.



Anne Caenn
President