

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Measure B Lacks Sustainability

The building-height initiative is too simplistic for Santa Barbara's complex planning issues

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 10.26.2009

The funny thing is, most of us agree on what we want for Santa Barbara: a personal, livable city. Despite the onerous cost of housing, despite its proximity to Los Angeles, and despite its penchant for fires, floods, Pacific storms and earthquakes, we moved here or remain here as adults because it is a beautiful city, a friendly city and a right-sized city.

You nearly always see someone you know while out for errands, and yet the city isn't so small that there's nothing to do but mind everyone else's business.

What we've disagreed about since it was discovered more than a century ago by vacationers from L.A. and the East is how to keep it that way. We've tried limiting access to water, which seemed artificial but may have made a lot of sense in terms of living sustainably in our semi-arid climate. We've implemented building-height restrictions and zoning, and balked at the state's mandated growth assimilations.



Now, with anger over the corridor-creating [Chapala One](#) development, we're looking at further restricting building heights. It makes some sense on the surface, kind of the flip side of "if we build it, they will come." But is Measure B consistent with a livable, personal city?

I contend that it's not. Instead, it encourages the sprawl that defines our immense neighbor to the east, the City of Angels. It exacerbates the problem of affordable housing, thwarts the goals of alternative transportation and increases pollution.

Santa Barbara, naturally confined between the Santa Ynez and the Pacific Ocean, would be better off taking "compactness" as a model for growth. A compact city provides amenities such as apartment space over street-level shops; frequent public transit with buses or vans commensurate with the need; and sidewalks, traffic signals and bike lanes that encourage zero-emission commuting. It's good for our health and the environment, appropriate for our climate and contributes to the approachable feel of a right-sized, sustainable city.

Sustainable cities are not a new concept. One of the first to observe and write about them was an urban planner named [Jane Jacobs](#), author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). She noted how well-functioning, organically grown city neighborhoods worked at that time. Nearly everything could be purchased within a radius of a few miles, and children were raised in an atmosphere of familiarity with their neighbors and the shopkeepers.

The way we want Santa Barbara to look is inescapably intertwined with how we want it to feel. Measure B is a reaction that is too simplistic for the complex planning issues we face. What we need is to pour this energy into updating our General Plan, the 20-year look-ahead that is now in process.

Instead of protecting 15 or 20 feet above our downtown buildings, let us protect what remains of our open spaces. Sustaining our parks, our trails, our national forest and our dwindling farmland and ranchland will preserve the look and feel of Santa Barbara and allow our children, our wildlife and native species places to roam.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*