

L.A. city planning process needs reform

Los Angeles' process for traffic studies and mitigations for new development is a mess - just as city officials want it to be. Many city residents are pushing for an overhaul of the way the city calculates the environmental impact of new developments.

That's the entry point for Jack Weiss, the embattled Westside councilman who wants to become city attorney.

Beset by residents of an area afflicted by relentlessly slow traffic caused by overdevelopment without good planning, Weiss has proposed ending the system that allows developers to hire their own consultants to do environmental and traffic impact studies.

Instead, the consultants would be hired by the city Planning Department, which would then bill developers for the cost of the studies. Such a change would tend to reduce developers' control over EIRs, which some critics contend now look more like advocacy documents for the project instead of objective evaluations of environmental effects. For instance, opponents of the Point Vista housing project in San Pedro have taken issue with what they consider outdated data in that project's traffic study.

But the trouble with this idea is that it's hard to believe that the public would be any better served if it became another function of an already dysfunctional City Hall. Indeed, it could turn into an administrative nightmare for the city because Los Angeles has scores of projects in the planning stages at any one time.

As it is, council members continue to act as lords over development in their districts, which makes the role of the Planning Department largely that of a rubber stamp. So when residents feel a project will have dire consequences to their neighborhood, they can't count on City Hall.

Indeed, the HEIR process proposed by Weiss won't necessarily make it better, just more politicized.

This is a town where politicians hold press conferences to announce that trees are getting trimmed and potholes filled and then run off to a campaign fund-raiser to make sure they get re-elected without actually doing anything substantive.

A better solution would be for the City Council to respect charter reform and give up its fifteen rights over development, empower the planning bureaucracy to stand up to the elected officials, and do away with political contributions from real estate developers and their agents.

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