

Usher to Grassroots Planners: Get in at the Beginning SRO at Planning Event

By Maggi Fajnor

The community room in the Little Tokyo Library was filled to standing room when approximately 70 neighborhood council representatives gave up their Saturday morning, braving the heat and paying their own parking fees, in hopes of learning how to navigate the Planning Department and becoming better advocates for their communities.

PlanCheckNC presented the first-in-a-series of programs designed to help neighborhood council leaders and stakeholders enhance their knowledge of planning and land use concepts, terminology, regulations, issues, and trends. For the July 12 program, The Ins And Outs of Planning in Los Angeles, Vincent Bertoni, Deputy Director, Department of City Planning, and Jane Usher, President, City Planning Commission, shared their respective expertise and insights.

Vince Bertoni, one of two newly appointed Deputy Directors represented the planning department. He began the program with an overview of a department that has evolved over time to oversee many different functions and processes through its 300 employees. The present organization is difficult for developers as well as community members to navigate. Reorganizing and streamlining the process has been an ongoing and as yet not completed task.

Jane Usher representing the Planning Commission pointed out that she is a volunteer. City Commissioners are not paid City employees. Starting with the assumption that any city that is not growing is dying, she approached planning and land use from the perspective of how to effectively participate in the process.

Stakeholders from more than 50 neighborhood council and homeowner associations asked questions and joined in a discussion of concerns and approaches to becoming more effective. Both of the speakers provided different perspectives as they fielded questions together.

One message to Neighborhood Councils has been to use the early notification system to “get in at the beginning.” Stakeholders are consistently advised to begin talking to developers early in the process before money and time have been invested and all of the decisions have been made. Now Neighborhood Councils are asking the same of City Departments and Agencies. Involve us early in the process. Make a place for the community at the table before the decisions are made. Do not come to us when the ordinance is drafted, the plan is developed or the project is ready for approval and ask us to stamp it with our approval.

PlanCheckNC is the oversight committee for the Planning Department Pilot Program with Neighborhood Councils. The Planning Pilot Program was instituted in June, 2007 to ensure that all Los Angeles Certified Neighborhood Councils receive advance notification and land use applications for proposed developments in their own communities and for Citywide initiatives. PlanCheckNC’s role includes providing educational opportunities about planning and land use to NCs and the stakeholders of the City. Everyone is invited to participate.

Up to now the program has been supported by individual NCs joining in partnership with PlanCheckNC. Beginning in August, PlanCheckNC will begin to charge a nominal fee of participants to cover basic expenses.

The next PlanCheckNC program, Community Character, Vision and Design will be on Saturday, August 9, at 10:00 a.m. The program is part of a series developed by neighborhood councils to educate themselves to make a difference.

For further information contact Maggi Fajnor at maggi4F@gmail.com or Cindy Cleghorn at cindy@cmprintmail.com.