

What's coming next for Playa del Rey?

Residents wonder as developers start making plans.

By Kristin S. Agostoni
Staff Writer

It was quiet Playa del Rey that lured Lance Williams back to Los Angeles after college.

He could have stayed in San Diego, but there was something he liked about the beach town along Culver Boulevard, where businesses are within walking distance of homes at Del Rey Lagoon and some mom-and-pop shops have been around for decades.

Today, Williams owns one of them — he took over the now 50-year-old Playa del Rey Florist a decade ago — and lives in the community as well.

“This quaint little town is what brought me back,” said Williams, who walks to work. “This is like one of the last refuges of a true beach community in Los Angeles.”

And as is the case in most small towns, word travels fast when land changes hands and planners focus attention on the area.

These days, residents and business owners are wary of what developer Ed Czucker of EMC Development is planning for a trio of Playa del Rey properties, including the Toes Beach sand dunes, which an EMC affiliate bought from a group of investors.

A separate effort is under way to create a mixed-use overlay zone along Culver from Pacific Avenue to Nicholson Street and give landowners incentives to rebuild — possibly with higher densities — while chipping in for community updates. That proposal is in the early stages and will likely lead to a public meeting sometime before Christmas, said Chris Koontz, the planning assistant handling the project.

“It’s just a way to attract some investment,” he said.

In the meantime, a loose coalition of residents and business owners have joined forces as the Playa del Rey Neighbors Association. Their goal is to have a say in the way the mixed-use corridor is defined and to push existing traffic and development concerns to the forefront, said Thea Geller, the group’s leader.

Already, she said, the community feels squeezed by traffic from the South Bay and new projects in Marina del Rey and Playa Vista. Members don’t want to see an influx of new residential plans or big multistory buildings lining Culver.

“I don’t dispute the fact that we could use some other businesses that the neighbors would enjoy,” said Geller, who has lived in the area since 1992. But, she added, “I think we need to be recognized as a viable neighborhood and not a place where developers can come in and do damage, take their money and walk away.”

EMC Development hasn't decided what to build on the land locals call the Toes Beach dunes, a private 3-acre parcel adjoining the beach which was slated a year ago for 35 town homes, said EMC attorney Derek Jones.

In nearby Marina del Rey, Czucker is pursuing plans to redevelop the leasehold that houses Edie's Diner and Harbor House restaurants, both of which would be razed for a new mixed-use complex of apartments and retailers.

In addition to the Playa del Rey beachfront land, Jones said affiliates of EMC Development have taken over a triangular-shaped parcel owned by Playa Vista — now mostly vacant — and property at the corner of Culver and Vista del Mar.

The corner site houses Outlaws restaurant, a parking lot and a three-story Spanish-style building with a florist, advertising agency, Tanner's Coffee Co. and offices. Owned for years by Hermosa Beach resident Nick Fender, many see the tall building with the brick-colored awnings as a cornerstone of the community.

As longtime boutique owner Merry Duclos explained, "You know you're coming into Playa del Rey when you pass that."

Rumors have swirled that Czucker also bought a former Jewish preschool on Culver, property that changed hands in October, records show, but Jones denied it. Property records indicate that site is owned by a corporation called Cove Spring Partners.

"There are three (properties) and only three," Jones said. EMC Development hasn't finalized plans for any of the sites, including the waterfront land, said Jones, who also represented the previous landowners. Residents and local officials had successfully convinced them to pay for an environmental impact study.

"We are reviewing the draft environmental impact report and considering some design modifications based on input received from community members," Jones said.

Plans for the triangular-shaped lot at the foot of Vista del Mar and the building at 200 Culver Blvd. are still being studied, he added.

"It takes someone like Ed Czucker to buy that property. He's got a lot of money, a lot of vision," said Fender, who owned the site for 31 years. "I've had zero conversations with him. ... He has some sort of a vision."

Jones wouldn't say whether preliminary plans involved bulldozing buildings.

"I think it's fair to say that while the project designs for 200 Culver are in the very early stages ... EMC Development is looking at doing mixed-use development very much in line with what the city is looking to encourage along Culver Boulevard," he said.

At a meeting last month on a rooftop deck near Del Rey Lagoon, Koontz told a group of residents and business owners the proposed mixed-use overlay isn't tied to any one developer. A community plan update several years ago called for officials to take a look at the business district.

Existing zoning codes for the small, narrow lots lining Culver could make it difficult for a development company to rebuild and recapture its investment, Koontz said. Some of the structures are in need of significant updates, he said, and the codes wouldn't allow much more than a single apartment or condo atop a small storefront.

Complicating matters, street parking is tight, and businesses lining one side of Culver abut the state-owned Ballona Wetlands.

The idea is to offer developers a "carrot and stick approach" by potentially allowing a larger floor-area ratio while asking for community updates. The possibilities include planting trees along sidewalks and burying utility lines, Koontz said.

And while some residents at the meeting said they'd like to see more variety in their retailers and aesthetic improvements, there was little, if any, support for denser developments. Others questioned the need to rebuild.

If possible, Geller said, the community association would like to create a residential-to-commercial ratio.

"I don't think that Culver needs more residents," she said. "I wouldn't want to see things higher."

Like Williams' flower shop, Duclos said her women's boutique, Showroom, has managed to survive for 50 years on Culver. Her parents started the business and at one time ran several others.

One weekday morning, the El Segundo woman left her front door ajar as she walked along the boulevard, pointing out businesses and store owners she's known for decades.

"This is sort of the last bastion of little beach town," Duclos said.

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Staff librarian Sam Gnerre contributed to this article.

USER COMMENTS (5 of 5 total)

"I was born and raised here, my parents still"

live here and will probably never move. I also have 3 siblings and 1 adult child here. I have a very good job where I'm hoping to stay until I retire. Am I supposed to give that all up? Do you have any other snarky comments you'd like to make? And WTF does "people like you" mean?

- KT

posted: Monday, September 24th at 21:51 PM

If you can't afford to live near your work, maybe it's time to leave the area entirely. It is people like you who give LA its worst attribute -- traffic.

- Sanity

posted: Monday, September 24th at 13:36 PM

"Helloooooo -"

Don't you realize that living on the westside is not affordable and thus the need for commuting? Do you really think I want to spend 2 hours in my car every day?

posted: Monday, September 24th at 12:05 PM

As a resident who lives on Culver Blvd., the number one improvement I would like to see is for the wretched cut-through traffic to SLOW DOWN. When will people in LA realize the importance of living close to where you work?

posted: Monday, September 24th at 8:36 AM

To Marina Del Rey residents, life will never be the same, after the developer gets done. There will be unforeseen and unintended consequences that YOU will have to live with. Do not allow any zone changes or C.U.P.s; you'll be sorry if you do.