

COMMENTARY

Gary London >> COMMENTARY

Making the Case for a Park in Mission Valley



An immense mixed-use project has been proposed to rise up from the parking lot of the 166-acre site of Qualcomm Stadium in Mission Valley.

The River Park at Mission Valley proposal is to build 3.76 million square feet of office building space (including nine midrise and high-rise structures), 500,000 square feet of retail space, 5,900 residential units and a 300-room hotel. It's envisioned as a 20-year, phased project.

The proposal is the creation of a private task force composed of this city's most prominent consultants and experts in land use, redevelopment law, architecture, planning, engineering and project economics.

The resulting project is both massive and audacious. And it should be seriously considered.

Although initially presented as the best alternative to keep the **San Diego Chargers** football team in town, it is not dependent on the Chargers, who apparently have other ideas of where they want to eventually relocate.

In fact, the project is more feasible if it doesn't include the Chargers, principally because it would not have to support the considerable front-end costs of the football stadium.

My view is that if the Chargers don't want to be a part of the project, they shouldn't be pressed.

The civic goal for the Chargers should be to keep them in town. That can be achieved most anywhere that works for them, the city and their fans.

River Park can stand on its own. It's a dense, mixed-use project located in the very center of San Diego on an underutilized site with tremendous potential. It's next to the San Diego River, a forgotten environmental asset that can define this project at its banks. It can be built sustainably, in phases, and evolve as the market opportunities are presented.

City Treasury Fix

Most importantly, the city needs to seriously determine what to do with its underutilized assets. An asset management strategy must go hand in hand with the current fiscal discussions on other ways to increase revenue and reduce costs. And this is the most

prominent, biggest — and most upside-down — asset in the city's portfolio. It is simply ridiculous for the city to be fettered with an outdated, fiscally irresponsible lease with its current tenants.

This 166-acre Qualcomm Stadium site is one of the West's largest parking lots. It is fiscally prudent for the city to redevelop this site. It is equally important for its residents to engage in an important civic debate on how to make better use of its assets.

This proposal is designed to be the first salvo in that debate.

Here is how I would frame that debate:

- It shouldn't cost the city anything and, in fact, should be presented as a giant opportunity to provide a new source of revenue for the city. The project must be self-sufficient, generating all required revenue for its implementation within its boundaries with no effect on the general fund, the provision of city services or the city's ability to build other needed infrastructure. The result of the task force's effort is a conceptual model that achieves these objectives.

- It should be thought of as our Century City, a prototype of a modern mixed-use development. A brand-new community that can be attractive to businesses, their employees and visitors. The model includes substantial employment uses with attributes generally unavailable in an urban setting, such as large floor plates and 4+/1000 parking ratios. These uses are intended to draw large, corporate users interested in relocating to a transit-oriented campus setting in close proximity to employee housing and entertainment amenities. The intention is to replicate the amenities available in the substantially built-out, suburban office market, rather than competing directly with downtown.

- The project would function as an economic driver. Given its location at the heart of our region, with four major freeways in the immediate vicinity, this underutilized city asset can serve as the cornerstone for 21st century economic development.

There are complications, and they are equally monumental:

- Such a project creates traffic. No matter how much we try to integrate homes and offices on the same site to encourage a better link between where we work and where we live, inevitable transportation issues must be mitigated. A project of this magnitude will need

road expansions and an infrastructure plan.

- There are equally challenging environmental issues, particularly the preservation and enhancement of the San Diego River, which represents the south border of the site. The concept would be to engage the river by orienting the project to it so it can be enjoyed and admired.

- The probable approach is to proclaim the site as a redevelopment area. This is no small feat in light of tighter rules on such designations. But with redevelopment designation comes tremendous financing tools that will be needed to move forward.

Call For Action

But the biggest complication is our collective lack of imagination. This can be expressed in political terms — our elected leaders will be challenged by the inevitable push back from the predictable opponents. Big issues bring big opposition.

Here's the call for action: Mayor Jerry Sanders, who has been presented with the plan, should form a Qualcomm Redevelopment Task Force. All constituencies should have a representative assigned to that task force. Here is my recommended agenda for them:

- Determine whether the city should redevelop the site.
- Decide whether to retain the site and lease it, or sell it. Outline the terms of these alternatives.

- If the city is to retain the site, which is my bias (I prefer a permanent revenue stream that can benefit the city for years to come), recommend a development plan, starting with River Park as the basis for this discussion. Conduct a feasibility study.

- Finally, propose a structure going forward such as a public-private partnership, how it is to be led, etc.

Without thinking "big" the project probably cannot work. A watered down project is a wasted opportunity.

River Park requires high density, a diversity of land uses, and large infrastructure support for it to work.

If this can be achieved, it will become a monumental source of civic pride — and revenue — for the city of San Diego for the next century.

Gary H. London is president of The London Group Realty Advisors, which provides real estate consulting and economic analysis. London participated in the 18-member Citizens for Qualcomm Site Redevelopment Task Force.

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Armon Mills • amills@sdbj.com
President & Publisher
Reo Carr • rcarr@sdbj.com
Associate Publisher

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Managing Editor
Brad Sondak • bsondak@sdbj.com
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Executive Assistant
Cindi Tyburski • ctyburski@sdbj.com
Receptionist
Dorothy Blanchard • dblanchard@sdbj.com

4909 Murphy Canyon Road, Suite 200
San Diego, CA 92123
(858) 277-6359
Fax (858) 277-2149
E-mail: sdbj@sdbj.com
Web site: www.sdbj.com



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GSA Preserves Legacy of Historic Buildings

At the U.S. General Services Administration, we believe that our nation's historic public buildings — similar to family heirlooms, chronicling the passing of eras — are monuments to the strength, spirit and longevity of our government, forever preserving a place in time.

Since May was National Preservation Month, a celebration of the diverse and unique legacy of our country's cities and towns, it is a great time to recognize the heritage and history of our nation's historic public buildings.

Architectural treasures such as the Tomochichi Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Savannah, Ga.; the U.S. Custom House in San Francisco and the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium in Washington, D.C., all

share a common thread.

GSA currently manages 482 historic properties, 107 National Historic Landmarks and two National Historic Sites. From stately Greek revival monuments to bold modern masterpieces, GSA's buildings reflect 200 years of architectural excellence.

Many are grand structures with ceremonial spaces that symbolize the permanence and stature of the federal government, and serve functional purposes.

Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, GSA has been entrusted to spend \$5.5 billion on approximately 250 building projects nationwide. More than half of this funding will be spent on historic properties.

Among GSA's inventory of historic build-

ings is the oldest operating federal building, the Robert C. McEwen U.S. Custom House in Ogdensburg, N.Y., built in 1810.

GSA's Center for Historic Buildings provides national leadership for compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and other stewardship directives. To help GSA accomplish these goals, the center develops strategies and promotes best practice sharing to support the viability, reuse and integrity of historic buildings GSA owns, leases or has an opportunity to acquire.

GSA offers the 2009 Historic Building Poster and Brochure Series online at gsa.gov. The series highlights the GSA's most significant historic buildings.

Paul Prouty is Acting Administrator of the U.S. General Services Administration.