

Gary London >>REAL ESTATE

Grantville But One Star in the Redevelopment Constellation



Grantville — a 990-acre hodge-podge of auto-related, industrial, commercial, fast-food restaurants, gravel extraction, hospital, neglected creek and wetland, trolley stop and lots of busy auto and truck traffic located off the Fairmont Avenue exit along Interstate 8 — wants to be a model San Diego community.

It is undergoing a Master Plan transformation that could prove a blueprint for the greater redevelopment of our neighborhoods throughout the city.

That is, if the city takes it seriously. So far, it has. The city's redevelopment and planning departments have put together an ambitious agenda to rethink this area. This effort is an outgrowth of the area's 2005 designation as an official city "redevelopment" area through the efforts of former City Councilman Jim Madaffer and many of the community's "stakeholders."

In fact, the stakeholders — property owners, business owners and other interested residents — are actively engaged in a charrette (defined as a sort of creative conclave) with the city.

They are meeting to express their desires, holding workshops, participating in surveys, and conducting "walk audits," all to cause the transformation of this community.

Transformation Needed

Grantville needs to be transformed. During the redevelopment designation process, many argued that there is little that is "blighted" in the classic redevelopment sense. But the community has now passed through its first evolution, even the economic reason for its existence:

- It was once an edge community. It is now a central San Diego location, and gateway to other viable neighborhoods.

- It was once a "throwaway" area for industrial, warehousing and noxious land uses, necessary in any city but not pretty. Today, its land is too precious to maintain this pattern of use.

- It has a trolley stop. Adjacency to trolley stops should dictate greater land use density.

- It has a river. It is overlooked, but it should be recognized as a resource.

- It has San Diego State University just across the freeway, which is having growing pains and needs student housing and services to accommodate its expansion.

In fact, many of these features describe other aging neighborhoods — Midway, Clairemont, Kearny Mesa, Serra Mesa and Linda Vista, to name a few.

The list of redevelopable communities is large, and deserves the attention of city planners, developers and, in particular, policymakers.

To her credit, newly elected City Councilwoman Marti Emerald, who was at best lukewarm to the idea of Grantville redevelopment, declared her support and the assistance of her staff to efforts to redefine the neighborhood.

I see this as a fresh proclamation from a newly elected council member

that resistance to redevelopment is a vestigial platform that cannot work if we are to sustain the economic fabric of our community.

The support of policymakers for redevelopment is particularly important. They must recognize that the region, while currently experiencing a market moratorium on virtually all development, must eventually respond to a market cycle upturn. This will translate into demand for housing and mixed-use projects in much of our urban community.

Focus On Older Suburbs

Unlike the last cycle, new development pressure will focus on the older

suburbs, long ignored, neglected or politically out of bounds. But developers and elected officials will recognize that the region is effectively out of developable land.

Our real estate development future will be in the older suburbs and existing neighborhoods. This will occur whether or not we call it redevelopment.

Semantics doesn't matter. What does matter is that we engage in a regional "reality check" and recognize the opportunity to plan now while we have a pause in our economy.

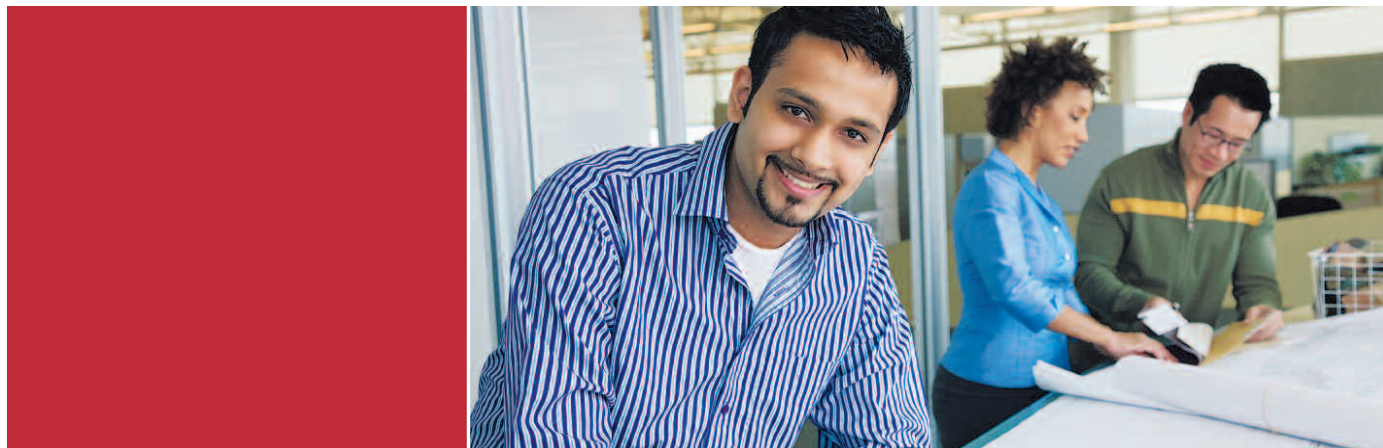
The focus should include:

- Creating the right political atmosphere: Elected representatives must

lead this effort. Redevelopment need not be overly contentious. The point of the effort in Grantville is not that people don't argue — in fact, they argue a lot. But they are proactively, not defensively, engaged. Our political leaders need to reposition the traditional "push back" of community planning groups to "engagement" of stakeholders in the repositioning effort.

- Dealing with infrastructure and service issues: Part of the resistance to redevelopment is sociological. People do not easily embrace change. But another part is readiness, which means adequate streets, pipes, parks, police and

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Redevelopment:

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fire services. This is an especially thorny issue, because what we have is a need, not enough money, and no comprehensive strategy to address this need. And the contrast between future development — which will be characterized by

small infill projects — and past massive development of new communities, which provided for all services and infrastructure — is the absence of a fiscal model for these smaller developments to share the cost of the infrastructure and services needed.

• Writing a new land use and zoning code: The people at the “desks” in the city’s planning and building departments are working with a mostly outdated rule

book. The rules of land use had been written when the green fields of the suburbs were the focus of growth; when separation of land uses was the mantra, not the integration of land uses, which is our urban future. The danger is that to respond to new development demand, our cities simply add a patchwork of new rules, rather than simply throw out the old rules and start again. It is time to start again.

Grantville is a valiant start in the recognition that our existing communities must be newly positioned to accommodate the economic revival and maintain the vitality of our region. But it is one star in the constellation.

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