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# Growth plans upset neighbors

Seven projects slated for the southeast Valley have residents worried about the character of their area.

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A four-mile stretch of the southeast San Fernando Valley has emerged as one of the premier battlegrounds in the fight over urbanization that has roiled neighborhoods across Los Angeles in a manner reminiscent of the growth wars of the mid-1980s.

Developers' plans for the area, which stretches from Universal City to the upper reaches of North Hollywood, include roughly 5,500 new residences and millions of square feet of commercial and office space.

As in similar fights from Century City to San Pedro, developers and residents are at odds over how large projects can grow without severely affecting nearby neighborhoods. Neighborhood activists charge that the development plans are so large, they threaten to destroy their areas' character.

"The question is what's urban and what is suburban," said Terry Davis, president of the Greater Toluca Lake Neighborhood Council.

Compounding the debate is a move by city officials to allow denser development in an effort to encourage construction of affordable housing.

"I've been warning people to wake up, there's a new philosophy and a new direction being advocated by the leadership of the city at all levels," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who worked to curb development as a Los Angeles councilman during the 1980s.

"If you care about this in San Pedro, or Encino, or Lincoln Heights, you have to be heard, because all the city cares about right now is negotiating with developers and their agents."

Five neighborhood councils plan to stage a town hall meeting at the Beverly Garland's Holiday Inn in North Hollywood tonight for residents to talk to developers, politicians and representatives from the city, the county and other agencies involved in the proposed projects.

Residents say their goal is to "step between the city and the developer" and to "force both sides to listen."

Davis and other neighborhood leaders say the city is wrongly considering the proposed projects -- seven in all -- one by one and not with an eye to their effect as a whole.

Developers, however, say they do not believe it is proper to hold their projects hostage to an effort at forming a comprehensive vision for development.

"It's almost unfair to include Valley Plaza in the area around Universal that's seen billions of development in the last decade," said Clifford Goldstein, a partner with J.H. Snyder Co., which has several projects pending in North

Hollywood. "This area hasn't seen development in 50 years."

Snyder hopes to redevelop Valley Plaza, an open-air mall at Victory and Laurel Canyon boulevards that was damaged in the 1994 Northridge earthquake, into the eastern valley's "town center" with adjacent condos and apartments.

On the opposite end of the corridor are two projects near Lankershim and Ventura boulevards that would total 2.6 million square feet. And that square footage does not include a 500-room hotel and the residential units, which would be built in towers ranging from two to 19 stories.

Sandwiched between Valley Plaza and Universal City are proposed developments in North Hollywood: one with three 27-story residential towers, a second with a seven-screen theater and a third with three office towers.

The seven projects total about 5.4 million square feet of commercial and retail uses. The 5,500 residential units and a planned hotel would bring the total of development to about 13 million square feet, neighborhood activists estimate. Planners consider residential and hotel projects primarily by the amount of traffic they would generate.

All the projects are in various stages of planning, with many having multiple steps to go, including lengthy environmental reviews required by state law, before they can be built.

The debate also reflects increasing frustration in some neighborhood councils about their extremely limited role in land-use decisions. The councils were created in 1999 as part of a charter reform to give residents more say in local government.

For residents, figuring out who's in charge of a particular development can be a frustrating exercise. NBC Universal, for example, wants to build 2,937 residential units on its back lot. The property is largely in the county and is zoned industrial. But NBC Universal filed its application with the city, in hopes it will annex the 124 acres and rezone it residential.

The entertainment conglomerate's plan led Yaroslavsky to draft a measure that would require city and county planners to agree on how big a development on the NBC Universal site can be and on mitigation measures to address increased traffic on nearby streets that already face gridlock for much of the day.

"I think it's the first time we've ever done this, I'm not sure it's going to work, but we're going to give it a try," said the supervisor, who represents unincorporated areas in parts of the Valley.

A project proposed across the street from Universal City on a parking lot owned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority also involves several entities. There, the MTA is hammering out an agreement with Thomas Properties, which would build production facilities for NBC Universal,

## Smart growth?

Southeast San Fernando Valley residents are concerned about millions of square feet of proposed developments.



- 1 Valley Plaza Shopping Center**  
Redevelopment of existing shopping center. 775,000 square feet of retail space
- 2 Laurel Plaza**  
Condos and apartments
- 3 NoHo Art Wave**  
Offices, retail, restaurants, apartments and a YMCA. 1.72 million square feet
- 4 NoHo Commons**  
Offices, movie theater. 205,000 square feet
- 5 NoHo Artwalk**  
Residential and retail. 37,500 square feet of retail
- 6 Universal Studios**  
Offices, production space, hotel, condos and apartments. 1.6 million square feet of office, retail and entertainment space
- 7 Metro Studio@Lankershim**  
NBC's West Coast headquarters, retail. 1.05 million square feet

Sources: ESRI, TeleAtlas, City of Los Angeles and developers  
Graphics reporting by JENNIFER OLDHAM  
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as well as additional office and retail space. Then the MTA and the developer must apply to the city of Los Angeles, which would decide how to zone the land.

City planners say they will weigh combined effects of the proposed projects in part by comparing them against community plans for various regions that anticipate how much growth an area can handle. There are different community plans for the Universal City and North Hollywood areas.

The city is researching whether the community plan that includes Universal City allows for the density proposed for projects there and on the MTA lot, said Jon Foreman, a city planner.

Environmental studies required by state law to determine how projects would affect traffic, noise, pollution and other issues also take into account effects of developments proposed nearby, he added, although what's included often depends on how far along another project is at the time the study is undertaken.

Planning experts say these processes fail to consider how dense development might affect the quality of life for residents in the long run, especially if the market cannot handle a huge influx of office or residential space.

"Why does it have to be our public policy that density is good under any circumstances?" asked Joel Kotkin, an urban affairs expert. "What person is

going to spend \$700,000 to live in North Hollywood in a condo, particularly if home prices drop to \$500,000?"

City agencies acknowledge they're at a crossroads in North Hollywood, where they've spent millions subsidizing new development, arts districts and street improvements in a largely successful effort to free the area of blight.

"It's a major challenge now in North Hollywood to keep the balance between tremendous growth and the character of single-family neighborhoods," said Gazala Pirezada, a project manager for the city's Community Redevelopment Agency.

Developers say they've made it a point to listen to residents. Goldstein said his company lost valuable time when it reduced the number of proposed housing units at Laurel Plaza from 1,050 to 742 and made most condos, rather than rentals, in response to neighbors' concerns.

"There are a lot of competing interest groups, representing a lot of different constituencies," Goldstein said. "It's like juggling bowling balls a lot of the time."

"We've been at this six years, and I've invested tens of millions of dollars into this property."