

Guest Opinion by Joe Rution

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Limiting Height, Not Growth

Community frustration over of a number of new just-too-big buildings inspired a group of citizens to propose a height limit on new construction. This initiative - which qualified for this November's ballot after garnering over 11,000 signatures - would limit heights in the historic downtown (El Pueblo Viejo) to 40 feet, and in the rest of the city to 45 feet. (The current limits are 60 feet, with a maximum of 4 stories).

The effort of this citizens group, whose members come from divergent backgrounds and political points of view, is in the spirit of grass-roots vigilance that has historically been responsible for this city's great charm and appeal. The sole purpose of the height limit is to preserve Santa Barbara's traditional skyline and architectural profile. Simple enough.

But this being Santa Barbara, the measure became immediately controversial.

Its critics' primary contention is that the height limitation will thwart the city's housing needs. A now familiar refrain is that the limitation is "draconian" (to be effective, so they say, regulatory measures must be "nuanced"), and ignores the inevitabilities of the future. The most prominently cited "inevitability" is the need to accommodate growth by "building up" - the vertical city touted as the ("sustainable") wave of the future.

This objection, in spite of its symbolic appeal, has absolutely no validity as applied to this unique city.

In the first place, initiative or no initiative, we still have a city-wide four story building limit. Nobody is seriously suggesting changing that. Architects have convincingly demonstrated that as much affordable housing can be constructed within four stories - in the proposed 40 or 45 foot limit - as can be in (the current) 60 feet, and just as economically.

Besides, given the limitations of our supporting resources and prevailing community attitudes about growth, we'll never build more than a few 60 foot buildings anyway. Consequently, the amount of housing that might be built in the (contested) 15 or 20 feet per-building space differential will never add up to anything significant - certainly not enough to justify the effects those tall buildings will have on our skyline.

Preserving our city's low profile is hardly a new or revolutionary concept. Since the inception of our General Plan, in which that profile is recognized as key asset (tall buildings deemed "inimical" to the city's character), and the four story limit has long been a part of our zoning code. We are just seeking to fine-tune the existing regulation, as we have seen recently that buildings approaching the current 60' limit are just too high.

We are all too familiar with so-called “nuanced” regulations; they translate to: “easily manipulated by those skilled at working the system”. A review of history reveals that the seminal regulatory measures to which we owe our current good fortune were every much as “draconian” as this one.

But there is a more fundamental answer to these critics.

Who says there is a moral imperative to design all cities according to some single notion as to the form a city must take - just because that notion happens to be favored by the current crop of Urban Planners? Can we not satisfy our future needs in a socially just and environmentally advantageous way while at the same time respecting our own eccentricities and unique values? Nobody has yet demonstrated that a conscientiously managed “low profile” city cannot do this as effectively as a “vertical” one. “Building up” certainly is not the only - much less ideal - way to provide for our housing needs. Indeed, lessons from the not-so-remote past (apparently quickly forgotten) clearly indicate to the contrary.

This goes to the heart of the question about the choices communities are entitled to make as to their “destinies”. Does the now-familiar admonition from “modern” planning orthodoxy (“build up”) require all communities to jettison their traditional and cherished characteristics, even if doing so would yield no beneficial advantage? Should one universal paradigm (the “vertical” city) dictate the fates of all cities, regardless of their divergent backgrounds?

“Building up” may be one way for certain cities to cope with the future, but it clearly isn’t the only way. Before abandoning our fate to the Planners, we should recall their dismal track record when it comes to prognosticating cities’ futures (almost all of which turned on unforeseeable “outliers”), and their formulaic prescriptions designed to accommodate those futures.

The answer should be obvious by now. Santa Barbara has become the city that it is because its citizens have recognized its remarkable uniquenesses - such as its low profile - and have accounted for them in its planning.

Certainly we must remain open to the possibility of adopting new directions in order to accommodate new needs. But that should not necessitate the killing of mockingbirds.