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*The USS Halsey in the San Deigo Bay, circa 1980. While San Diego was formerly a sleepy Navy town with some 700,000 residents, today it is a global city with a population of 1.4 million, which is expected to balloon to 2.4 million by 2050.*

# From a sleepy town to a global city

By Mary Lydon  
and Mike Stepner

The city of San Diego Community Planning Process celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. It is a model for community engagement and involvement that is used in the San Diego County planning process and by many of the region's larger cities. As the city grew and new areas were opened for development the number of communities grew and additional groups were formed. In 1968, the city received the "All American City" award from the National Civic League for its Community Planning Process.

The community planning group process is based on the idea that planning for the future of a community must be collaboration between the public sector and the private sector and especially with the people of a neighborhood, the ones most directly affected. The 1960s were a period of social change in the United States and what would be the future of our cities and how we planned for the future was part of this discourse. The "freeway revolts," the impact of urban renewal, battles over historic preservation, flight from the inner city, and suburban sprawl were topics that led to a new way to approach planning — with the participation of those most directly impacted by the actions taken.

San Diego has transformed from a

sleepy Navy town in the 1970s, with a population of 700,000 to a global city with an innovation economy that supports a population of 1.4 million projected to increase to 2.4 million by 2050. This will require an additional 330,000 housing units. On top of that, we will also need the public facilities and service investment to help make our neighborhoods complete. Sadly, the city of San Diego currently has a \$3-4 billion public facilities shortfall. Maybe the citizens could consider paying for trash pickup to increase revenues.

Housing is a critical problem in San Diego. There is not enough and it is too expensive. Community planning groups see all this population increase coming without the facilities investment and have great concerns. There is much work to be done before we can change peoples' attitudes from NIMBY to YIMBY.

San Diego will continue to grow, but it will not continue to grow outward. The green fields of the last half of the last century are mostly built out and some of the remaining ones have become development battlegrounds.

Most of our new housing will be in existing neighborhoods, including the newer neighborhoods of the 1960s-1980s. Housing development will be found in the replacement of large parking lots in places like Mission Valley and suburban office parks. It will be part of the repurposing of dying shopping malls. And

it will be the redevelopment of older commercial strips and new infill in existing residential neighborhoods. Gentle density solutions like the replacement of a single-family house with a duplex, the addition of granny flats and housing off the alleys as we see in places like Coronado and parts of Mission Hills and La Jolla, all can be part of the solution to meet our housing needs.

If we do none of these things we may see a proliferation of illegal garage conversions, doubling and tripling up in small apartments and skyrocketing housing costs. Without solutions to increase home stock and making prices more affordable, our housing crisis will impact our economic viability in the not-so-distant future.

As we continue to grow, a more complex pattern has emerged that is focused on infill development where transit, pedestrian and bicycle orientation are some of the new values. This much more complex land use pattern creates higher risks for developers and infrastructure investment is key. We need to make sure our community planning members are armed with comprehensive information so that their decisions can help us all move forward as we grow.

Community planning leaders have a big job and it is time consuming. In order to provide for the best decisions we should first of all make sure the election process draws qualified community members and

then provides an ongoing comprehensive training process. The online Community Orientation Workshop (COW) provides good information on code, general plan, community plan, development services but we should also provide training on connecting the dots of community planning to how our economy works, the complexity of environment regulations, and how changing demographics impact housing. Our community planning groups need to understand the big picture of our city as well as their communities which will help them make better decisions.

We also need to use technology to reach beyond the Community Planning Board members and connect deeper within their communities for input. There are many new community engagement software tools being used around the country that we could put into place here to help us get the best representation and input possible.

Our community planning group leaders are key members of democracy in action in the city of San Diego. In order for the best outcome to take

place we need to make sure these leaders have the tools and processes that fit with the new order of complex land use decision making.

San Diego can accommodate the projected growth and it can be done in a way that preserves and enhances the neighborhoods. But we need to recognize that it is not just about houses and cars. It is about building communities with appropriate design and location, about adequate services and facilities and about all of us. The key ingredient to moving forward in these complex times is to make building trust and dialog a part of the planning process between community planning groups, developers and the city departments that serve them.

Thank you to all the community planning group members who have served during the last 50 years!

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