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Has Mixed-Use Development Damaged Oakland?

As the city of Oakland prepares for the change in mayor, ushering in Ron Dellums while former mayor Jerry Brown takes his place as California's new Attorney General, the various developments under Brown's reign and the current condition of the city are being reviewed. For the past couple of years, battles have been waged over individual developments, with members of affected communities raising complaints; however, as even those who are pro-development are beginning to question the city's structure, a broader problem in Oakland's city planning is becoming evident.

In order to examine this very problem, the [San Francisco Business Times](#) ran a 20-page supplement on Oakland's development under Mayor Brown. Ryan Tate, in a larger article about Oakland developer Hal Ellis, summed up with this revelation:

“Though downtown has added 4,000 housing units in the last eight years, filled up its office towers, including seven at City Center ... retail has lagged. Instead of a regional mall, City Center has 60,000 square feet of mostly fast-service restaurants and small shops ... A more recent mixed-use development from Forest City ... also drastically scaled back its retail ambitions. In 2000, at the height of the dot-com boom, the project was to include 100,000 square feet of retail. Plans now under way call for 9,000 square feet of retail ... That sort of organic retail growth can add character and bring excitement to a neighborhood. But it does not bring the kind of sales tax revenue that big-box retail ... can bring the city. Nor does it meet many of the retail needs of new and soon-to-come residents. The resulting retail vacuum is the greatest failing of the development boom under Brown, [Hal] Ellis said, a boom he otherwise praises in no uncertain terms.”

The current situation roots in the longer and even more complicated history of Brown's redevelopment plan. When originally running for Mayor in 1998, Brown proposed a plan to revitalize Oakland by bringing residential development to the city's downtown. The theory was that once the downtown area held a critical mass of residents, retail would be drawn in, creating a natural, rather than forced, mixed-use neighborhood. Brown was seeking to end the pleading and subsidizing that had formerly marked efforts to bring retail establishments into the city center.

So, in an effort to rejuvenate the city and “put Oakland on the map,” the Brown Administration fixed upon an objective of bringing 10,000 residents into the city center, which became regionally famous as “the 10K plan.” But eventually, the endeavor attracting residents took over the Administration's attention, and original aim of bringing in retail dissappeared. It seemed that Brown had completely forgotten about the rationale behind the plan.

Abandoning the effort to obtain the retail half of the mixed-use downtown neighborhoods has left Oakland in economic and developmental disarray. First of all, California's economy and taxation plans are such that cities tend to lose money on residential neighborhoods, because city services cost more than the tax revenue received. This money is generally made back via commercial districts and their

additional sales tax revenues. But without the added retail to balance the residential boom, Oakland is actually taking a financial blow.

And even in those areas that have been revitalized with a mixture of residential and commercial buildings are facing serious problems through poor mixed-use planning. A foresighted plan would have set aside a certain area for entertainment, bars, nightclubs, and other commercial establishments that might create noise problems for nearby residents. But under the come-one-come-all attitude adopted by the Brown Administration, with few provisions for these kinds of problems, developments have sprung up haphazardly, and the clashes between residents and entertainment establishments can only ensure that both will suffer, and one or the other may eventually leave.

This would have been a relatively easy situation to solve with some forethought, as Oakland does, in fact, have a General Plan. But the Brown Administration failed to take the necessary steps to ensure that the city's plan could be followed by new development—in short, the overarching plan for the city was not met with the appropriate updates. The General Plan was updated at the beginning of Brown's years in office, highlighting the basic types of development for areas of the city, but the zoning map was never updated to coincide with the General Plan. Consequently, the mandates of the General Plan and the zoning map are often at odds. Legally, the General Plan supersedes the zoning laws, but it leaves developers very unsure of what is allowed in a certain neighborhood. This creates poor development in some areas, and grinds development to a halt in other neighborhoods.

Though many of Oakland's residents may find themselves going into a stupor contemplating the causes of the current city planning quagmire, the results are clear. J. Douglas Allen-Taylor, the author the piece for the Berkeley Daily Planet, writes that residents see the impact “when you try to go down to the neighborhood shopping center, and you can't find any parking. Or you can't get down to the shopping center when you need to—just after five—because the streets and freeways are hopelessly clogged, and public transit is either inconvenient or nonexistent along the line you need to travel. Or, worse yet, there is no shopping center in your neighborhood at all.”

The conundrum is an interesting one, insofar as it highlights the difficulties proponents of smart growth and new urbanism must be aware of as they try to bring mixed-use neighborhoods to cities. Mixed-use neighborhoods, themselves, are not the cause of Oakland's current mess; a poorly-planned and poorly-implemented plan to create mixed-use neighborhoods is the cause. Euclidean zoning laws are simple, and ensure the preservation of residents' peace, developers' comprehension of their duties and regulations, and the city's economic budget. Much more effort is required to maintain the balance while creating the high-density communities that are best for the environment and social health.

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