

Paving the Way

Effort to Make Downtown More Walkable Takes Big Step This Week

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When the city's Planning Commission released a fiery memorandum in April, under the banner "Do Real Planning," one concern rose to the top. "Demand a walkable city," read its first sentence.

That's easier said than done. Many officials praise so-called smart growth, yet few planning regulations mandate it.

But on Thursday, June 14, in a presentation before the Planning Commission, city planners will unveil how they intend to actualize that demand, starting with Downtown. It marks the first official report for a project charged with implementing widespread design changes to Downtown streets.

If approved and adopted, the new effort, known as the Downtown Urban Design Guidelines and Standards, could mean that developers who are currently asked to widen streets for cars could instead be required to create wide, tree-lined pedestrian walkways and paseos for foot traffic.

Proponents say that would dramatically alter the city's one-size-fits-all street standards and spur developers to help create a walkable city.

Though still in a preliminary stage, city officials say this week's progress report is a culmination of numerous Downtown street studies, years of work and the input of multiple departments on principles that have never been officially implemented.

To say the guidelines are politically popular is putting it mildly.

At a Budget and Finance Committee meeting last week, funding to implement the Downtown project gained approval in less than 10 seconds. When one Downtown stakeholder rose to say he supported the project, Committee Chair Bernard Parks barked simply, "So do we."

The guidelines that will be presented this week include:

- Minimum 15-foot wide sidewalks on average.
- Street standards should be based on the context of the surrounding neighborhood rather than a single citywide formula.
- Consistent street standards that don't change from block to block.
- Development and maintenance of sidewalks with sustainable and pedestrian-friendly features by the property owners.
- Any parking structures must be fronted by active uses.

Observers say it signals a push by the Planning Department not only to promote the pedestrian-friendly vision extolled by Planning Director Gail Goldberg, but to proactively affect development — and to remain relevant in the city's pursuit of

smart growth.

Goldberg has repeatedly called for her department to consider projects with pedestrians, not automobiles, in mind. The move to establish new guidelines also represents a milestone for the Department's Urban Design Studio, launched late last year and charged with turning many of the talking points into action.

Meeting weekly with other departments, and drawing on past street surveys, the Urban Design Studio has helped finalize the standards and beefed up restrictions that city planners hope to make law by the end of this year. Though planners say some of the guidelines are already used when reviewing projects, the June 14 meeting will serve as the first formal stage to set them in stone.

"Recommendations and refinements really don't mean anything unless it's in the Community Plan," said Emily Gabel-Luddy, who heads the Urban Design Studio. "I don't claim I invented this, I just say, 'Wow, what a great opportunity to carry it forward.'"

Cementing the Rules

The difference between standard 10-foot sidewalks and the widened walkways that the city wants on most Downtown Los Angeles blocks can already be seen at the corner of Hope and 11th streets.

There, Portland-based developer South Group is finishing work on the mid-rise housing complex Luma and the ground-floor retail that opens up to both streets. Surrounding the building, and next door to where the company's Elleven building houses a buzzing Starbucks, the developer included designs that meet many of the new guidelines.

From an outdoor table at 11th and Grand last week, Luddy sipped coffee and gazed approvingly at a new curb extension that slopes outward into the road, gobbling up the first 10 feet of the parking lane. The result is a spacious crosswalk and a 24-foot rotunda of a sidewalk.

The sky was gray enough that steam wafted from Luddy's coffee cup, like a Seattle morning in South Park. The comparison was fitting, she said. The spaces that South Group set out to develop around the housing are unlike what any other Los Angeles developer has done for pedestrian traffic, Luddy said.

The wide sidewalks hold park benches, double rows of trees and planters. The long block is intentionally cut short by a pedestrian alleyway. The project's parking structure is invisible from the street and set back so as not to pit dog-walkers against drivers.

Luddy called it the model of what she wants to see everywhere Downtown.



photo by Gary Leonard

The wide sidewalks at 11th and Grand, part of South Group's housing project, exemplify the pedestrian-friendly design standards the Planning Department is pushing. The South Group effort includes benches, planters and double rows of trees.

"[The South Group] came to me after their project had been completely approved and asked for a change in the standards," she said.

South Group Principal Jim Atkins said the city still wasn't immediately receptive, leading to a long, costly approval process.

"The Department of Transportation wanted us to build a wider street. We pushed back and suggested, 'Why don't we build an extra sidewalk instead of an extra lane of traffic?'" said Atkins.

Since Goldberg established the Urban Design Studio, Luddy and city planner Simon Pastucha have been charged with the tough task of bringing LADOT, the Bureau of Engineering and other departments to agreement on a vision for Downtown streetscapes, despite concerns that such designs could create traffic problems.

Luddy said the guidelines will not exile cars and will include traffic analyses.

"This is not the panacea. Smart growth is not going to mean everybody walking and taking transit, but the important thing is that it provides choice," said Luddy.

Planning Power

The new guidelines encapsulate much of what elected officials have talked up for decades. In fact, the specific standards the Urban Design Studio have been asked to implement are not entirely new. Many of the recommendations arose out of a study initiated by the Community Redevelopment Agency in 2004.

"The CRA has been using them for more than a couple of years when reviewing projects," said Pat L. Smith, a longtime consultant to the CRA on street issues.

But often that has caused more problems than it has solved.

Smith said it meant the CRA was picking up the Planning Department's slack, using their stricter standards on a time-consuming case-by-case basis.

That concern was high on the list at the first-ever joint meeting of the Planning Commission and the CRA's Board of

Commissioners on May 31, partly to highlight the new coordination.

Planning Commission President Jane Ellison Usher called it the "age-old complaint" — that developers who bring projects before the Planning Department and the CRA hear very different things. Developers who might meet Planning Department standards can be ordered back to the drawing board by the CRA.

Instead, demands made of developers to encourage smart growth should be "front-loaded" and made clear from the beginning, many said.

"Those are conversations that should be very early in the process," said William Jackson, president of the CRA Board of Commissioners.

City planners see the urban design guidelines as just such a device.

"It's not going to be just the CRA doing these things, it's going to be all of the city departments speaking with one voice, all in agreement," said Smith. "Everybody's hoping, and I think this is what will happen, is that the Planning Department will step forward and take over more of the planning and urban design function so that the CRA doesn't need to."

If approved, the new standards will change how the city and developers interact on street level development, proponents say. However, change may be felt most acutely by those who live, work and walk by the projects.

Like at 11th and Grand, where commuters seeking coffee circle madly on a weekday morning for parking, finding only a plethora of places to walk.

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