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Ventura County Civic Alliance LIVABLE COMMUNITIES
NEWSLETTER

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10
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Greetings!

Welcome to the tenth issue of our Newsletter published quarterly by the Livable Communities Working Group of the Ventura County Civic Alliance. This Newsletter is intended to provide updates on one of the Civic Alliance's major strategies, Livable Communities. We will discuss the 10 tenets of livable communities and review projects throughout Ventura County that embody these principles. The City of Ojai is this quarter's featured city and we will review several aspects of Ojai's application of these principles. We will also highlight other news and stories of interest that relate to our quest for the long term sustainability of our cities and neighborhoods.

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Developing in the Village Mixed Use Zone of Ojai



Could this be the site of a Form-Based Code demonstration project for Ojai?

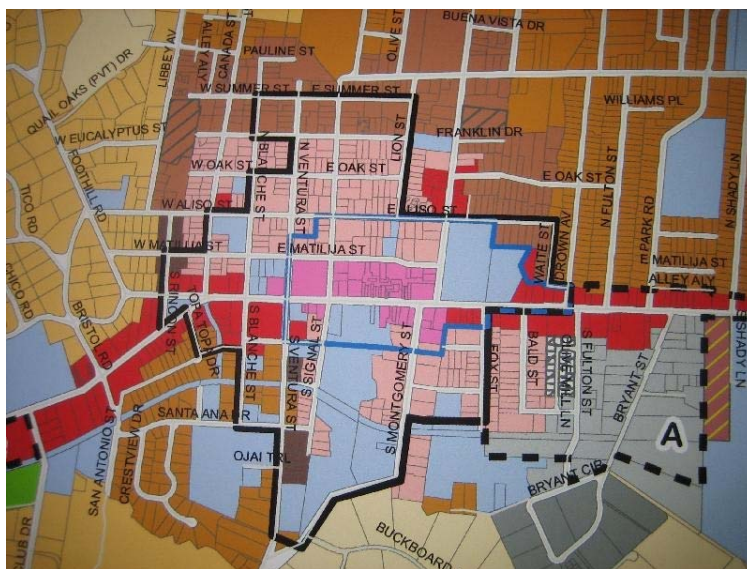
Ojai's Village Mixed Use Zone came into being in the late 1980's as a way to work with the housing

requirements being imposed at the time. This zone is located in the blocks around downtown and was established to provide more flexibility in land use surrounding the city core. The zone focuses on mixed use, and over the years has generated some good projects and some projects that are not so good. Underutilized lands were regenerated, but development was slow.

Even though Ojai has many high density mixed use projects that are walkable and compact, there is still a local "knee jerk" reaction to density. The current density limit is officially 8 units per acre, although bonus allowances can increase the density permitted. There is a city housing element revision underway, and within that process there is interest in a demonstration project that would utilize the city owned land around City Hall (parking lot and behind City Hall) to demonstrate a green project with density and public transportation built under the guidance of a Form-Based Code neighborhood plan. Form-Based Codes start with the community, and are less concerned with uses than with building types. There is a focus on the project from the center of the street. The potential demonstration project land is now zoned for single family and village mixed use, and this project could easily be designed to fit well within the larger neighborhood context.

[See Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 of the City Manager's Report Regarding the Need for a Comprehensive Plan for the City](#)

**This Quarter's Featured City:
.....Ojai.....**



Ojai's Village Mixed Use Zone (designated in pink) Allows New Development Since Peak Hour Trips Are Eliminated

The City of Ojai's main town center still has same pattern of development that existed in 1920. The city is situated within 4 square miles and has a population of 8000 people (in the city, not entire region). Ojai is compact with a lot of density downtown that gives way to rural boundaries that are rich with orange groves. There has not been significant change over the years, and much and the original city core has been maintained. Ojai has the rap of being the home of many rich people; however, the statistics of the city do not support this perception. More wealth is found outside of the city in the county areas where the lots are much bigger than those that are found in town. Ojai is the commercial center for the broader county area.

The town is hemmed in by mountains on all sides, with only four main thoroughfares connecting it to the outside world. The lower section of Hwy 33 directly links Ojai to Ventura and the rest of Ventura County. The easterly Hwy 150 leads to the "non-job-center" of Santa Paula, while the westerly 150 winds its way to Carpinteria, and eventually Santa Barbara, via Lake Casitas. Meanwhile, Maricopa Hwy connects to Interstate 5 to the north-east through undeveloped hillside areas. The town is thus pretty much isolated, as if by design.

The Village Mixed Use Zone allows Ojai to work with current constraints to development. The largest constraint is a traffic restriction originated by the County of Ventura that prohibits any additional peak hour trips through Casitas Springs that would come about as a function of new development. Here is

Mixed Use Property Can Take On Many Looks

Ojai Village
Mixed Use
Property



where the built-in symbiosis of mixed use projects becomes important. Mixed use and live-work projects prevent trips, as jobs and residences match up and eliminate the need for a resident to drive out of the city for work during peak travel times. The commercial aspects of the projects keep residents in town and, therefore, a new residence can be built without impacting traffic. As a result, the job/housing balance in Ojai is currently one of the best in the county.

The 10 Principles (Tenets) of Livable Communities.....



The 10 Principles (Tenets) of Livable Communities define those project aspects that make communities appealing and sustainable

Using a Form-

Based Code to update the Mixed Use Zone would make planning for the future much more predictable. This tool is based on the precept that the community will develop a vision of what it wants to see in physical terms (thus the name "Form") and then create the rules (Codes) that communicate how the vision can become reality.

Tenet of the Quarter: Tenet #9 - Making Development Decisions Fair/Predictable... It is Up to City Hall, but Form-Based Codes May Be the Key Providing the City Vision

Site plan, floor plan, General Plan, Specific Plan, Master Plan, business plan, furniture or appliance assembly plan: All these "plans" are sets of notes, descriptions, drawings, or "blueprints"



that tell people how to put things together. There are plans for something as simple as a Lego set to things as difficult as cars, clocks, tools, and machines. Everything that human hands touch requiring fabrication, manufacturing, assembly, invention, or restoration, needs a plan. Even organic and natural products need plans and directions to tell us how to do things like preserving soils, planting trees, growing crops, and cleaning water.

We go through life with these subconscious serial "plans" in our brains for doing, fabricating, building, and it all seems perfectly normal because in most cases the results are extremely predictable. Plant according to the enclosed directions in spring under certain conditions, and you can expect to receive a specified amount of harvest by fall, we are told. Put the parts together according to this manual, and you expect to get a desk as depicted in the accompanying picture, and so on.

If the residential project is designated "affordable", current policy makes it exempt from the traffic restrictions, but there is now a question as to how an affordable project is defined. The first of these such projects had all affordable units, but now projects are being built with some units that are affordable and with some that are at market rate. The new policy questions that have developed with these projects are currently being resolved.

Casitas Springs traffic restrictions are part of the General Plan policy, therefore, CEQA cannot override any of these restrictions. Implied with the Casitas Springs traffic restriction is the recognition that traffic is at service level F (terrible), so don't make it worse; but the second implication is: don't work on a fix. It is okay to continue letting Casitas Springs suffer. A bypass would open up the valley, but many do not want the valley to grow.

Current Ojai traffic has its roots in tourism. However, there is plenty of parking in town as shown in a parking study recently completed indicating that parking in Downtown is 61% full compared to a standard of 85% for what is called healthy full capacity. The Gold Coast bus system runs a regular route and an express run in and out of the valley (service every half hour). The Ojai trolley has 2 loops around Ojai and Meiners Oaks that serves workers, students, and seniors.

Residents of Ojai using Highway 33 to commute to the rest of the county are frequently presented with a conundrum. They encounter traffic snarl on the 2-lane thoroughfare at an increased frequency during rush hours. Public transportation is still limited to the few bus trips now going back and forth, and bicycle riding along the narrow and winding highway can be quite dangerous. Jobs in town are limited in terms of number and diversification. As residents wait in traffic, they have time to contemplate how much Ojai should grow and develop, if at all. There is concern that easing traffic restrictions with highway widening efforts may bring about more development, and potentially more traffic. Enough critical mass to expand public transportation is lacking, and most major job-based industries prefer being where access is easy.

While many residents may be happy with the status quo, the long term financial health of the community could be at stake. The City's population has remained stable at about 8,000 people with a low level of new resident immigration and the emigration of many younger members of the population in search of job opportunities elsewhere. There has been an increase in the number of (part-time resident) second homes in the area, while school enrollments have declined. Ojai risks becoming a "Carmel-South" theme town for tourists: a destination that appears to be a prosperous town until a closer inspection reveals that it's not affordable to many.

To the degree that Ojai wants to remain a "real" and vital

A desk, a car, and a wrench are all predictable items to plan and assemble because we know in advance what they'd look like, and what we want and need, even if we intend to modify or modernize them. When it comes to our neighborhoods, however, all we know is that we want them safe, beautiful and convenient. Generally, we have only the vaguest clue about how they should look, and are willing to relegate the task of figuring that out to others, usually elected or appointed officials, who might not have any stronger clues than we do. Few can paint a clear picture of what the expected outcome will be.

Most of the time we rely on a colored zoning map, which is a plan for the community, to give us directions. But even those who put colors on these maps that tell us where to put the houses, the office buildings, and the market (with all of the proper height limitations and building setbacks) don't have a clue as to the quality of neighborhoods that will be built based on all those rules. In reality, when it comes to one of the most critical planning and designing tasks we have, that of determining our human habitat in the form of our neighborhoods, communities, towns and cities, the directions can be maddeningly vague and confusing. Vagueness leads to cost escalation and lack of fairness, which contributes to development cost in our region.

After a half century of building communities in this way, the results are predictably abysmal. Sprawl continues to gobble up precious natural resources. Concern about traffic has been so routine for decades, that we are now devoting an untold amount of time, money and energy for traffic reports on radio, TV, and the internet. Air and water quality become the political footballs kicked around between providers and users. In addition, the current state of our city aesthetics leaves much to be desired.

Partially in response to these high levels of development unpredictability, a group of architects, planners and urban designers came together in 1993 to form a movement known as New Urbanism. Along with a concerted effort to recapture the development pattern of traditional town planning that is more pedestrian friendly and less automobile-centric, they proposed new sets of tools and rules to make development outcomes more predictable. According to these rules, known as Form-Based codes, the general physical aspects of the community should first be decided through a series of community outreach efforts. Through such processes, professional designers create visions and concepts for communities with specific physical attributes and characteristics, from the scale and massing of the development to its level of intensity (i.e. density plus whether it's mixed-use, attached dwellings or detached). Also included in the concepts are the neighborhood pattern, the circulation pattern, the actual positioning of parks and public amenities, and sometimes even the actual architectural styles.

Once adopted, these plans serve as foundations on which developers can fit detailed plans that follow the directions or are adjusted where necessary. Starting from the desired outcome, the planners/designers work backwards to create the codes that enable these outcomes. This process is very similar to that used to design a car, a plane, or any other piece of equipment, namely defining what is wanted, and then coming up with the ways to make it happen. Uncertainties are expected to be significantly reduced, while the likely outcome is already predicted.

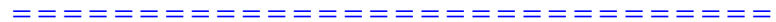
More recently, Form-Based codes have evolved into Smart-Codes, a much more legal and fine-grained type of document that can help municipalities apply these relatively revolutionary tools to very large scale communities or city-wide, replacing the conventional separation-by-use zoning codes altogether. One of the

community, with job/housing and urban/natural balances, it will need to consider some strategic plans for sensible growth. Such growth should not be purely physical and horizontal, but should also incorporate economical, cultural, and sustainable elements that are all important for a healthy community, regardless of its size. In some cases, sensible growth may require intensification of land uses, such as in-fill development or higher density in designated areas. In other cases, the diversification of choices, such as adding different housing types to the mostly single family detached housing stock, might be required. Some critical mass of population is also needed to justify improved public transportation in order to make it financially more efficient and less dependent on subsidies. Such a change will decrease the dependency on individual transportation. Right now, the Village Mixed Use Zoning is helping to keep Ojai vital, but census numbers available in 3 years will be an important check point for this.

As an excellent move towards vitality, the City recently explored the use of Form-Based Codes to re-plan its "Village Mixed Use Zone" in the downtown area. While the zone was conceived in the late 80s as a way to address the housing requirements of the time, it has not been fully utilized. Using a Form-Based Code to update the Mixed Use Zone would make planning for the future much more predictable. This tool is based on the precept that the community will develop a vision of what it wants to see in physical terms (thus the name "Form") and then create the rules (Codes) that communicate how the vision can become reality. With this approach, the community already has the outcome in mind, and the codes are designed to steer development towards such an outcome.

A Special Thanks to Dao Doan for Contributing to This Quarter's Newsletter

Dao Doan of Mainstreet Architects contributed the description of Tenet #9 and the detailed discussion of Downtown Ojai in this quarter's Newsletter. The Civic Alliance thanks Dao and his firm for their support.



The Ventura County Civic Alliance thanks our 2008 Vision 20/20 Sponsors, Cal State University Channel Islands (CSUCI), AT&T, Limoneira, Procter & Gamble, and First Five of Ventura County, for the generous support provided to help us plan for a future that sustains our quality of life and community over this past year.

[See More Detail Regarding Ojai's Current Zoning](#)

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first such attempts at this transition can be studied in Miami, Florida. Other cities that have adopted Smart-Codes as parallel options to their conventional zoning codes include Gulfport and Pass Christian, Mississippi, and Montgomery, Alabama.

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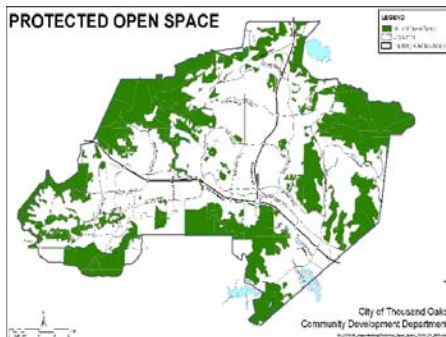
With varying degrees of success, the types of neighborhoods that emerge from this new planning process are increasingly leaving their mark across the country. Some of the many well known examples currently built across the country are Kentland and King Farm (now over 10 years old) in Gaithersburg, Maryland; Hercules, California, near the Bay Area; Orenco Station, near Portland, Oregon; and Prospect, Colorado.

Form-Based codes and several variations of this approach are still evolving, and though these approaches have their detractors and controversies, the Civic Alliance believes that they are critically important at this time when business as usual is no longer sustainable within our region. A healthy discourse on this subject is critical for bringing us toward more predictable outcomes in our planning methodology.

[Find Out More About the 10 Principles \(Tenets\) of Livable Communities](#)

A Thousand Oaks Follow-up - The TO Boulevard Project Advances

On May 5th, A tentative road map to transform Thousand Oaks Boulevard into a vibrant pedestrian-friendly street with restaurants, stores and plazas was



cleared by the Thousand Oaks City Council to undergo an environmental review process. The council's 4-1 vote on the Thousand Oaks Boulevard Specific Plan allows for further revisions of the plan, which sets out land-use and development guidelines along the 275-acre commercial corridor.

[Read the Ventura County Star Article Regarding the Thousand Oaks Boulevard Project](#)

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