

To preserve and enhance the unique village character of Laguna Beach

September 28, 2015

Mayor Bob Whalen and Councilmembers  
City of Laguna Beach  
505 Forest Avenue  
Laguna Beach, CA 92651

Dear Mayor Whalen and Councilmembers:

The proposals for updating the Downtown Specific Plan presented by the urban planning firm MIG last month were greeted by the City Council and the Planning Commission with open minds but very appropriate caution. As longtime activists in favor of Laguna's village atmosphere, Village Laguna welcomes Councilmembers' comments on the need to assess the feasibility of the firm's suggestions and to have a policy discussion of the conflict that Toni Iseman pointed out between facilitating more housing downtown and creating more "vibrant" nightlife. As a contribution to these discussions, we'd like to draw on twenty-five years of experience in observing the operation of the specific plan to raise some questions.

As we pointed out in our previous letter on this subject, a planning process should proceed in a logical fashion--gathering information and input from the public, making conclusions on needs and goals, defining problems to be solved and then proposing alternative ways to solve them. We seem to be witnessing attempts by the consultants to solve problems before the other steps have been taken. Thus solutions are proposed for undefined problems—perhaps problems for which no solutions are even needed.

**1. *New second stories:*** What is the problem for which allowing more second stories would be the solution? The 12-foot height limit was introduced to preserve the downtown's pleasing diversity of building heights, preserve public views of the ocean and hillsides, and maintain light, air solar access to the streetscape and maintain the pedestrian scale. How would residents benefit from a relaxation of the rule that has protected the character of the downtown for all these years? Does anyone support this idea beyond the property owners who imagine that they might benefit from it and those who would build the second stories? How could the selective approval of new second stories be done fairly, and what would prevent the whole downtown from going two-story as each property owner insisted on the privilege granted his neighbor? Are the existing residences in the downtown a success for their occupants and their owners? Are the buildings big enough to be attractive as residences, especially given the high rents that can be expected to be charged for them? Where would the proposed new residents park their cars? More fundamental, can these old buildings structurally support second stories? Replacement or substantial improvement for residential use would be required by law to be elevated 2 feet above the base flood level (which historically is 1–3 feet above the ground on Forest Avenue, 2–3 feet on Beach Street, and 3–4 feet at the Coast Highway).

**2. Replacing the gas station on Broadway with a two-story mixed-use building:** How would the City manage to displace an apparently thriving business from the site, and at what cost? Is the Coast Highway, designated visitor-serving in the land-use plan, the best place for a community cultural center? Would the City own the building and lease the ground floor to businesses? Do we really need more retail stores in the downtown? (The retail study we've been promised has yet to appear.) Would a two-story building there create view issues for the surrounding residential neighbors? Is everyone aware that the ground underneath the gas station may well be contaminated and require extensive remediation? (This is in fact the issue that definitively sank the proposal for a new stormwater channel under Broadway some years ago.)

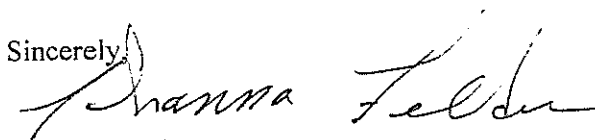
**3. Underground parking on Cliff Drive and behind Las Brisas:** What effect would this have on traffic? Would the neighbors object to the intrusion of hundreds of new cars and pedestrians into their quiet neighborhood? Would the new "park" on the structure's roof obstruct cherished views of Main Beach and the ocean? Would shoppers use the parking structure knowing that they would have to walk back up the stairs with their packages to retrieve their cars? How does the idea square with the community consensus about the need for *peripheral* parking rather than big structures downtown? Would the residents who recently objected to taking on \$69 million in debt for a parking structure at the Village Entrance be any more willing to pay for such a project on Cliff Drive?

**4. Moving the library:** Aside from the unanswered question "Where to?"—is everyone aware that the building belongs to the County and operates on rather limited funds? (The secondhand books sold by volunteers in the basement help buy new ones for the collection upstairs.) That the library is one of the oldest institutions in the City and has a loyal and active support group that generously funds improvements, the most recent of them in 2010? That the building was designed by a respected local architect in 1972? That it's centrally located and close to the high school, whose students it serves? And is there any real community interest in opening up that particular space for a view of the ocean blocked by shops and moving cars?

Some of MIG's other ideas—the pedestrian scramble on the Coast Highway, relocation of the bus station, and a "green" Ocean Avenue—are more appealing than these four at first glance, but we need to know what the changes would do to traffic patterns. Where would the bus station be moved to? While "greening" Ocean Avenue we hope that it will still look like it belongs downtown, not a trendy, millennial anomaly. Where everything is interconnected as it is in our tiny downtown basin, small changes can have large consequences.

Finally, beyond all the practical questions, there's the question of benefits. We're told that visitors love the downtown just as it is, and we know that many residents feel the same way. Before we commit to any of these changes, we need to know how they're linked to problems identified by residents and how they would solve those problems. As the planning process continues, we will be encouraging the City Council to keep these issues in mind.

Sincerely,



Johanna Felder  
President