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Orange County
S.F. Valley
Ventura County
Inland Empire
Los Angeles
Orange County
S.F. Valley
Ventura County
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Patt Morrison
George Skelton
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Community Papers

Burbank Leader
Newport Beach
Laguna Beach
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California | Local
National
World

STEVE LOPEZ:
POINTS WEST

66 million reasons to re-examine Grand Ave.

February 7, 2007

"I don't like it," Merilie Robertson, a retired teacher, was saying Tuesday as she rode the Orange Line to her home in Canoga Park. "I'm always suspicious when tax breaks are given to corporations that are already very wealthy."

She was talking about the plans to remake downtown Los Angeles with a \$2-billion Grand Avenue project that will include a five-star Mandarin Hotel, a 16-acre park and 3.2-million square feet of stores, offices and housing. And judging from my conversations with her and other bus riders in the Valley, she's not alone in smelling a rat.

Robertson doesn't object to the idea of remaking Grand Avenue, a campaign driven by billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad. Her problem is with the use of public funds — up to \$66 million in tax rebates over the next 20 years, along with free public land and other sweeteners — to make it happen. And that's just for Phase One of a three-phase project.

Of course, that's practically chump change when compared to the L.A. Live project planned for the area around Staples Center, where the public giveaway is worth closer to \$300 million.

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"I'd like to see those public funds spent on something like housing and transportation," Robertson said. "The joke in the San Fernando Valley is that whenever you see potholes being filled and streets being fixed, there must be another election coming up."

Riding the same Orange Line bus was Caesar Gonzales, who commutes from Watts to Warner Center for his job at a collection agency. Gonzales takes the Blue Line to the Red Line to the Orange Line, spending 5 1/2 hours daily on buses and trains, and he said he's

all for any jobs created by the big downtown projects.

But he stopped short of endorsing a public investment in private enterprise.

"I was brought up in a tough neighborhood but was bused to good schools," said Gonzales. "If not, I could have gotten caught up with gangs. A lot of my friends I grew up with are dead. What would I do with the money in my neighborhood? Lots of things. Stores. Movie theaters. A little promenade. Maybe if you had, like, some YMCAs."

Along the Orange Line, which I rode from North Hollywood to the mall at Warner Center, the feelings were pretty much the same. Lots of folks seldom make it downtown at all, thanks to the disastrous planning that has led to nightmarish traffic.

"I think it's rotten," said Dwight Elrich, who teaches piano and wondered why the city doesn't throw his tax dollars into building more of a cultural center in the Valley instead of downtown.

On my return bus ride, Jill Newton, a student and librarian, said she'd rather see \$60 million spent to expand library hours.

"I like downtown more than I used to, but I don't think it should be developed before other places. And it sounds more like it's a development for tourists. A hotel is for



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tourists. A library is for people who live here."

The other side puts up a pretty good argument, pointing out that successful downtown developments would create new jobs and cash streams, filling city coffers and funding the kinds of citywide services the Orange Line riders are clamoring for. They point out the developers have agreed to reserve 20% of the housing they build for low-income tenants. And they argue that the money isn't really a giveaway: The city would simply allow the developers to keep the new hotel and parking taxes they generate for the next 20 years.

The developer, Related Cos., claims the project isn't economically feasible without public financing, and a city audit has rubber-stamped that notion.

Call me a cynic, but I'm not buying it. This is the way the game gets played in Los Angeles, a city run by developers and mismanaged by the politicians who roll over for them.

Is it fair to the Biltmore or the Bonaventure hotels for the city to give millions in tax breaks to the operation of the Mandarin Oriental, where rooms will go for between \$400 and \$700 a night?

Oh, don't worry about that, the city's legislative analyst says. The glittering new high-end hotel won't be competing with the lesser lights down the hill, so those shabby old-timers have nothing to fear.

Easy for him to say.

Where's Joel Wachs when you need him?

In the 1990s, he was the lone Los Angeles city councilman who stood up to the Staples Center developers who said the deal wouldn't pencil out without massive freebies. Only after Wachs alerted the public did they decide they could make do with less.

Single page 1 2 >>

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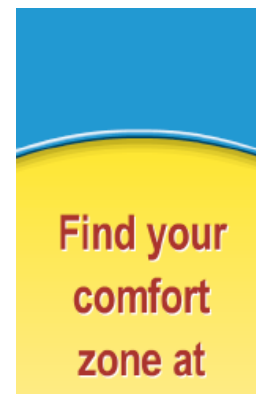
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From the Los Angeles Times

Another step forward for Grand Avenue project

A City Council panel rejects the Bonaventure Hotel's challenge of the \$2-billion downtown L.A. effort.

By David Zahniser

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

September 12, 2007

A key committee of the Los Angeles City Council on Tuesday rejected an effort by the Westin Bonaventure Hotel to derail a \$2-billion mega-project that would bring a luxury hotel and more than 1,300 homes to downtown.

The council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee voted in favor of tract maps for the Grand Avenue project despite accusations from the Bonaventure's lawyer that the project would violate a downtown redevelopment plan by adding too many housing units.

Bonaventure attorney Christopher Sutton refused to discuss his client's challenge. But in an Aug. 24 letter opposing the project, he said Councilwoman Jan Perry should not have voted on it since she lives less than two blocks from the project site.

"Until and unless all alleged conflicts of interest are eliminated, the city as a whole must not even consider these land use matters," Sutton wrote.

Perry said she reviewed the issue three years ago, asking her attorney to confer with the city attorney's office and determine whether she needed to recuse herself. "They reached the conclusion that there was no conflict," said Perry, who represents much of downtown. "I had no greater benefit from this project than anyone else in the area."

The council approved environmental documents for the Grand Avenue project in February, voting to provide up to \$66 million in tax breaks.

Related Cos. had been scheduled to break ground Oct. 1 on the project's first phase, which is east of Walt Disney Concert Hall and will include two skyscrapers housing a Mandarin Oriental Hotel and 500 homes, one-fifth of them designated as affordable.

Because of the pace of the permitting process, construction is now scheduled to begin in December, said Related Cos. spokeswoman Beatrice Hsu.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has been trying to strike a deal with Bonaventure owner Peter Zen that would head off a time-consuming legal battle over the project. Zen issued a similar legal threat two years ago when the city offered tax breaks to L.A. Live, another hotel mega-project being built near Staples Center.

In that case, Villaraigosa reached an agreement that allowed Zen to convert some of his hotel rooms into condominiums if vacancy rates reached a certain threshold.

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