

A threat, or improvement?

Some USC neighbors worry that a project to redevelop a shopping center near campus will destabilize the area rather than enhance it

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It's the most ambitious construction project in South Los Angeles in decades:



The University of Southern California plans to replace its ancient University Village shopping center on the edge of campus with a \$900-million, multistory complex of stores, office buildings and dormitories.

USC officials call the project an "economic engine" that will generate thousands of jobs, make the area around campus more attractive and provide enough student dormitory space to free up housing for neighborhood families.

But some of USC's neighbors don't see the project as a promise of prosperity, but as a threat to their neighborhood's tenuous stability.

Pat Diaz has lived for 56 years in a house a short walk from campus. She doesn't see anything wrong with the University Village, with its breakfast specials at Denny's and \$5 movie tickets.

Now she's joined a small coalition of groups mounting what she calls a "David-and-Goliath" campaign to force USC to spend more of the project's budget to help low-income families who live near campus.

They are worried that they'll be priced out of their homes — that the project will embolden greedy landlords, sink struggling small businesses, and draw new stores and restaurants that current residents can't afford.

The project has the potential to reshape a broad swath of South Los Angeles, pushing families out and shifting poverty south, said Paulina Gonzalez, director of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, one of the coalition members.

"It's not enough for the university to create more student housing. You have to create the conditions that allow families to stay in the communities."

That means "jobs, housing and small businesses," she said.

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Now Moreno has noticed another demographic shift. The percentage of Latino families is shrinking, and the neighborhood is becoming more student-centric. The USC project, he worries, will only accelerate that trend.

No one I talked with wants to block the project. USC has been a good neighbor, they said.

"We want to support the development," Diaz said. "We're just asking them to be responsible, to consider our community's needs."

They want USC to spend \$20 million to expand affordable housing options, commit to filling 40% of the project's 12,000 jobs with local residents, provide financial help and expertise for existing small businesses, and increase the number of dormitory beds the project will create from 1,200 to 4,000.

USC's senior vice president of university relations, Thomas S. Sayles, said some of those requirements are close to being met. Thirty percent of the construction jobs will go to locals, and at least \$8 million will go into a housing trust.

Councilwoman Jan Perry, who represents the area around USC, has organized a negotiating team to consider the rest.

Sayles said he understands residents' fears that the project will raise the neighborhood's profile, and perhaps its cost of living as well.

"There are market forces

at work.... And I can't really predict what's going to happen with rents. But I know the neighborhood will get better," he said. "What we're hoping is what we do will improve the neighborhood for everyone."

But that's not what some neighbors foresee.

Changes already underway — including the new Expo Line, and the proximity of LA Live — have made the area more appealing to young people.

Landlords have begun courting them, converting family-friendly apartments to student housing, charging higher rents and trying to kick families out, according to longtime residents.

Sergio Barrientos lives in an apartment building on Flower Street, a few steps from an Expo stop.

He pays \$612 a month for a single, with ancient appliances and a threadbare carpet.

He's lived in the area for 18 years. "It was all families," he said. "You wouldn't even see a student ask for a place to live."

Now only 13 of the 33 units in his building are rented by families. "If you are one day late with the rent, the landlords will try to evict you," he said.

Then they put in fresh carpets and fancy ceiling fans and rent to students, he said, for \$300 a month more than he pays.

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There's clearly tension

between residents and students. But the notion that one gains only at the expense of the other drags everyone down.

The USC plan will be discussed Tuesday by the City Council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee. There is still a lot of work to be done before it's voted on.

"The important thing about all of this is to look at feelings versus facts and see where they meet," Perry said.

So far, the feelings seem to be carrying the day, but the facts are gaining.

"I don't think there's anybody that doesn't want the project," said Sayles. "It's just the question of what we have to pay to proceed."

For Diaz, who has testified before the council and organized her neighbors, the process has taught her more about people than about politics, she said.

"Nobody in my world has ever had a scholarship to USC," said Diaz. "I had a stereotype of the school, and the USC students — all wealthy.... All I knew about the students was they'd cut in front of me in line at the bank ... or run me down on the sidewalk when they were texting and riding their bikes."

It wasn't until she started working with the coalition that she realized "some of those students grew up right here in my neighborhood."

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