

The battle over L.A.'s skyline

THIRTY YEARS AGO, homeowners and neighborhood groups worried that high-rise towers along some of the city's major boulevards were destroying their low-rise communities and turning suburban Los Angeles into a gritty, traffic-clogged Manhattan. Sympathetic politicians heeded those worries and launched a ballot initiative, Proposition U, to stunt the growth of development in most of the city. The measure passed by a wide margin, fueled by anger at City Hall's failure to manage the boom or acknowledge residents' angst. It remains a significant constraint on developers' ability to build enough housing to meet the population's increasing demand.

Today, Los Angeles is again facing a development-curtailling ballot initiative from neighborhood activists who are concerned about — or outright opposed to — L.A.'s increasing density and urbanization. This time a coalition of community groups, along with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, want to halt projects that seek exemptions from the general plan, the city's master planning document. They also want a two-year moratorium on the construction of any project that is denser or taller than allowed by current zoning rules, even if it has been approved by the City Council.

The goal, according to the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative, is to "end harmful speculative and politicized land-use decision-making by city officials." If put into effect, however, the strictures could worsen the housing crisis, slow job-creating investment and waste the opportunity to revitalize moribund corridors along the city's new transit lines.

Nobody would argue that Los Angeles has an intelligent, fair or transparent land-use development system. For years — no, decades — The Times and other City Hall observers have bemoaned the city's haphazard approach to approving major projects. City leaders have consistently underfunded ef-

orts to update local zoning rules to reflect community needs, and they've failed to make sure that development doesn't overtax the public infrastructure. Projects are too often considered on a case-by-case basis, with council members dictating what's appropriate on a particular site based on the whims of developers or neighborhood groups. There's a perception that the system is at best inept, at worst corrupt.

So the frustration underlying the initiative is understandable. And its proponents hit some of the right targets. They want city staff, rather than developers, to generate the required environmental impact reports, an idea that is worth exploring. They say the Planning Department should regularly update its community plans, which establish appropriate local development standards — and which in some cases are decades old. The council wouldn't need to approve so many exceptions if plans and zoning regulations were regularly modernized to reflect the needs of communities. The cynical view is that city leaders like the system the way it is. Each council member rules over land-use decisions in his or her district fiefdom, and that power attracts campaign contributions from those hoping to curry favor.

But a ballot measure is a terrible way to do planning. Even worse, a moratorium on construction could cause serious harm in a city that has an affordable housing crisis and isn't building enough units to meet the needs of current and future residents. Mayor Eric Garcetti and the City Council cannot dismiss the initiative proponents as NIMBYs or BANANAs (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything) and ignore them, as is the typical City Hall response. Los Angeles' political leaders need to confront the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative head on. That means addressing the very real concerns that Angelenos have with land use and development, and getting to work on a reasonable reform alternative to ballot box planning.