

LA WEEKLY

CITY HALL'S "DENSITY HAWKS" ARE CHANGING L.A.'S DNA *Bitter homes & gardens?*

BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS, Wednesday, February 27, 2008

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Soon after taking the job of director of the Los Angeles Department of City Planning in 2006, Gail Goldberg made a declaration that let slip how City Hall is allowing developers to pursue a building frenzy straight out of the storied tale *Chinatown*.



"What have you done? The whole thing's a fraud." —County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, on City Hall's claim that high-rises create affordable housing



"There's really no secret plan here." —City planner Jane Blumenfeld



"All I ask is, don't scare people into paralysis." —City Planning Director Gail Goldberg, about media coverage of her office's activities

Said Goldberg, newly arrived here from a similar post in San Diego:

"In every city in this country, the zone on the land establishes the value of the land. In Los Angeles, that's not true.

"The value of the land is not based on what the zone says ... It's based on what [the] developer believes he can change the zone to.

"This is disastrous for the city.

"Disastrous.

"Zoning has to mean something in this city."

Goldberg probably wishes she hadn't said that, not necessarily because she got reprimanded by L.A.'s famously vindictive Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, but because Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky has [repeated her words in public, over and over](#). Yaroslavsky, who represented the city's affluent Westside District 5 as a councilman until 1994, has been staging a one-man campaign to slow City Hall's feverish promotion of density — a quiet war on the large swaths of suburbia and few hunks of countryside remaining inside the city limits.

With little debate, a trio of new "density enabling" ordinances (a real mouthful, known as the Downtown Ordinance, the Parking Reduction Ordinance and the Senate Bill 1818 Implementation Ordinance) has rolled through Goldberg's Planning Department and ended up in the ornate council chambers on City Hall's second floor.

The first two were easily approved, and the SB 1818 Implementation Ordinance passed on February 20, with only council members Dennis Zine, Janice Hahn, Bill Rosendahl and Tom LaBonge opposed. On paper, the three ordinances will let developers bypass the city's fundamental zoning protections — and profoundly alter the livability, look and essence of L.A.

This is no small thing. The rules for how Angelenos wanted to fashion their city were arduously, sometimes bitterly, negotiated among homeowners, developers, environmentalists and politicians in the mid-'80s, led by then city councilmen Joel Wachs, Marvin Braude and Yaroslavsky. Those core rules today hold tremendous power, creating a blueprint that dictates which Los Angeles neighborhoods should be preserved — and which should be dramatically built up.

Yet in contrast to the boisterous civic debate launched by city and community leaders in the 1980s, the Villaraigosa administration has grown accustomed to only tepid public interference and awareness. Through aide Gil Duran, the mayor has for five months ducked *L.A. Weekly's* routine questions about his agenda's potential consequences citywide — much taller and fatter residential buildings than zoning law allows, significantly less green space, obliteration of residential parking in some complexes and removal of older, less expensive housing. (Hours before the *Weekly* went to press, Deputy Mayor Helmi Hisserich finally responded, lashing out at "heads in the sand" sentiments and warning that "the city is not going to stop growing.")

On the City Council itself, the likes of Wachs and Braude are long gone, replaced by avidly prodensity council members such as Jan Perry, Council President Eric Garcetti and Wendy Gruel, who rarely say no to grand construction plans and work in tandem with obscure

regional planning commissions that routinely override zoning rules in favor of developers and property owners.

Yaroslavsky, silent for the first two years of Villaraigosa's reign, now snaps, "These density hawks at City Hall are trying to undo 20 years of our work."

The constant overriding of zoning protections has indeed been relentless — a binge of "zoning variances" and "zone changes" granted by longtime Zoning Administrator Michael LoGrande, a little-known official who is the rear admiral of a prodensity flotilla inside City Hall that long predates Villaraigosa's administration.

The variances and zone changes — quite simply, permissions to skirt existing rules — are granted on a case-by-case basis, and LoGrande hands them out like candy. LoGrande did not return numerous phone calls from the *Weekly*. Four biweekly Planning Department reports, randomly selected by the *Weekly* from March, June, September and December 2007, show that requests to increase housing density or square footage rolled in at about 260 annually, slowing only as the mortgage crisis hit. Retired Zoning Administrator Jon Perica explains that while the sought-after density increases are subjected to design, environmental and compatibility review, "the Planning Department historically approves about 90 percent."

For anyone paying attention, and very few people are, LoGrande's decisions — buttressed by the rulings of seven area planning commissions populated with Villaraigosa's appointees — are why some corners of the city are taller and more congested than 10 years ago, even neighborhoods whose legally binding zoning plans were supposed to achieve the opposite.

In the 1960s, a city growth cap of 4.2 million was established as the peak load for Los Angeles' infrastructure and services. This allowed for urban centers like Century City, Warner Center and downtown, while protecting single-family neighborhoods. Three years ago, Perica warned, "growth beyond 4.2 million people would require that existing single-family neighborhoods and lower-density residential areas would have to be 'up-zoned' in the future for more intense multistory density." He added pointedly, "Residents didn't want Los Angeles to look like other higher-density Eastern cities, like Chicago and New York."

Nonetheless, the agendas of builders, land speculators, the chambers of commerce, the Planning Department and elected leaders have produced a virtually nondebated tectonic shift since the residential real estate turnaround of 2002, much increased under Villaraigosa. The shift is pushing L.A. from its suburban model of single-family homes with gardens or pools — the reason many come here — toward an urban template of shrinking green patches and multistory buildings of mostly renters.

To be sure, not everyone sees this in the negative light that people such as *The New Geography* author and social critic Joel Kotkin ("We remain an increasingly suburban nation") and Yaroslavsky do. Downtown developer Tom Gilmore scoffs that Kotkin and other defenders of suburbia and single-family dwellings "take that notion of urbanism and say, 'Oh my god, they're going to do that to your neighborhood too! They're going to make everything a "heat island"!"

To Gilmore, the attitude in Ventura County and cities such as Santa Barbara, Rohnert Park, Sonoma, Healdsburg, Tracy and Dublin, all of which have enacted residential-growth limits to stop urbanization, denies the inevitable.



"Oh my god, they're going to do that to your neighborhood!" —Developer Tom Gilmore, mocking those who are worried

"Growth is not an option," says Gilmore. "We can grow with care, with thought and creativity, or we can grow the way we've grown for 150 years. I don't think the Planning Department has got it all right, but I'm happy they've got a template we can argue about."

But his notion of a grand civic debate under way is a facade. The public have little idea what is being allowed even in their immediate area. Downtown insiders such as Ed Reyes — a city councilman and chairman of the powerful Planning and Land Use Management Committee — working with Villaraigosa's handpicked department heads like Goldberg and mayoral appointees like former Councilman Mike Woo (on the Planning Commission) aren't engaging Angelenos in any serious discussion of their "template." And the mayor is assiduously avoiding a public debate in which he might be forced to justify his vision.

Their template could force urbanism onto all but the most protected enclaves of Los Angeles. The truly protected spots are "R1-zoned" — or single-family-residential only — 318,602 of the city's roughly 1.4 million housing units. The other 75-plus percent of housing units in Los Angeles — including thousands of homes in single-family neighborhoods that residents assume are R1 when they are not — could potentially be "up-zoned" for apartment towers and condos. Some of the most vulnerable areas are the eastern and western ends of the San Fernando Valley — the last quadrants containing some open space.

Of 16,874 housing units built the year after Villaraigosa was elected, 86 percent were multifamily — the vast majority of those rentals. Established homeowner neighborhoods — the glue that historian and former California State Librarian Kevin Starr once noted helped hold L.A. together, even in bad times — are an afterthought; the Brookings Institute reports that L.A. is suffering a middle-class decline more pronounced than in any other urban area in America.

To be fair, some of the mayor's focus has been on truly "underutilized" areas — nearly 100 developments of 100,000 square feet or larger are proposed or approved on sites like the old Sears warehouse in Boyle Heights, land in Marlton Square in South Los Angeles, and the aging Valley Plaza in North Hollywood. Councilwoman Gruel and Council President Garcetti tout this "proactive lead from the mayor."

But there's another side: Around Vanowen and Balboa in the San Fernando Valley over the past decade, ranch homes on spacious lots have made way for apartments, condos or McMansions. Hillside from Hollywood to Mount Washington are so overbuilt that cars are ordered off the streets on "red-flag days." Along Miracle Mile, beautiful Spanish Colonial duplexes that since the 1920s have housed middle-class families sit unprotected from the urbanization steamroller.

Zev Yaroslavsky is a shrewd, politically left-of-center politician and a "slow growth" advocate with two adult children. Now 59, he's been married to health-care and child-care activist Barbara Yaroslavsky for 36 years. Born in Boyle Heights, then home to Jewish immigrants, Yaroslavsky grew up in the Fairfax District, ran track at Fairfax High, and put himself through UCLA (he has a master's in British imperial history) by teaching Hebrew in Long Beach — and playing professional poker.

He knew the gambling had to stop when he was elected to the City Council in 1975. Before he was sworn in, he paid a last visit to his favorite Gardena casino, the Normandie, sidling up to a group of Jewish matrons who said, "Zev, we know you're going to be an honest politician because you never bluff." He remembers thinking, "No, I just look like I never bluff."

Today, he says Los Angeles desperately needs a subway to the sea. But 23 years ago, he and others raised safety concerns about tunneling under the Westside after a 1985 explosion of naturally occurring methane gas ripped through the Ross Dress for Less near Fairfax. Although Yaroslavsky is sometimes blamed for halting federal funds for the line, he called for further safety studies, while Westside Congressman Henry Waxman led the fight to stop federal funds.*

For his part, Yaroslavsky in 1998 led a successful ballot effort that stopped local sales taxes from being used on the increasingly pricey subway being built under Hollywood. He instead pushed to use those funds for non-subway transit projects.*

Longtime Westsiders remember it was Yaroslavsky who ushered through the huge expansion of the Westside Pavilion in 1986, despite community outrage over gridlock. Developer Gilmore is one of many pro-growthers who blame "Zev" for so disrupting the old mass-transit scheme that today the Westside is "incredibly dense" and has "the worst traffic in the city," but Yaroslavsky tires of getting blamed for inevitable development pressures in his former Council District 5.

It is, after all, some of the city's priciest and most sought-after housing real estate, running from Palms to Encino and including Westwood and UCLA. It's something of a City Hall tradition to blame Yaroslavsky: Even back in 1987, Mayor Tom Bradley's spokesman Fred MacFarlane, in *The New York Times*, blamed the congestion on him. In the same story, an L.A. businessman noted, "Right now, any slow-growth candidate who does not get arrested for molesting children can get elected." But how times have changed.

Yaroslavsky counters today's dominant voice of pro-growthers in City Hall by saying that had he not halted the \$300-million-per-mile subway, Los Angeles could never have afforded to create the popular Orange Line bus lanes in the Valley or the Gold Line light rail from downtown to Pasadena. Sounding like the old Yaroslavsky, he tells the *Weekly*, "In all corners of the city, a revolution is brewing against the pack mentality at City Hall."

One of the issues that most sticks in his craw is the aforementioned SB 1818 Implementation Ordinance. Not exactly a household phrase, the ordinance lets developers build new apartment buildings 35 percent larger than the protective local zoning allows — if developers agree to include some below-market "affordable" units in these buildings.

But does it actually produce cheaper housing — its main aim? Yaroslavsky points to a development on Sepulveda in Westwood where a developer wiped out 31 apartments rented mostly to UCLA students for \$1,500, erecting 59 condos with mortgages of about \$3,000 a month. He recalls scornfully, "The developer says to me, 'Those [\$1,500-a-month] units weren't affordable anyway.'" Yaroslavsky retorted, "How many of those students can afford your condos after they graduate?" And the trend is spreading. In Miracle Mile, he says, "On

Ridgeley and Sixth, there's four parcels of rent-controlled units. One day I'm jogging there, and they're gone!"

Under the SB 1818 Implementation Ordinance, the now-destroyed lower-cost apartments on Ridgeley and Sixth can be replaced with a luxury tower that ignores low-growth zoning — as long as the owner agrees to rent 10 to 20 percent of the apartments at "affordable" prices. The developer can now charge the current market rate (of about \$2,300 a month for a two-bedroom apartment) for the rest of the units he builds at Ridgeley and Sixth — far higher than the rents in the now-destroyed building, and enough for a mortgage in most cities.

Fumes Yaroslavsky of this "affordable" housing, "The whole thing's a fraud. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing."

Yaroslavky's passion dates from the mid-'80s, when homeowners associations howled at a wave of construction from Hauser Boulevard to La Brea Avenue on both sides of Sixth Street in Miracle Mile that destroyed beloved, picturesque Spanish Colonial rentals boasting wrought-iron staircases, cozy alcoves and tile work from the 1920s.

The Bradley administration's urbanization frenzy ushered in shoddy, higher-density, four- and five-story apartment blocks with quickly decaying stucco veneers that looked like they'd been airlifted from Beirut. Indignation generated a wave of grassroots activism. Groups such as the Detroit Street Coalition and Not Yet New York pressured avidly pro-growth City Council President John Ferraro, and Bradley, to protect neighborhoods.

Angry citizens won a huge victory with approval of 35 legally binding land-use plans citywide, now known as "Community Plans." Largely shaped by residents, Community Plans made it harder for developers to roll through medium-density neighborhoods such as Miracle Mile. Community Plans protected the suburban character of low-density areas being eyed by developers near big streets like Florence, Reseda, Vanowen, La Brea and South Broadway.

But here's the clincher: SB 1818 trumps restrictions built into the Community Plans because it's state law. Each Community Plan is slowly being revisited by the Planning Department in negotiations among homeowners, renters, business owners and city planners, so that neighborhoods conform to projected growth. Right now, 12 city planners (plus support staff) are redoing a big batch of Community Plans including Boyle Heights, Central City, Granada Hills, Hollywood, San Pedro, South Central (redubbed Southeast), South L.A., Sunland-Tujunga, Sylmar, West Adams, West L.A. and Westlake.

In this top-down process, the Planning Department contacts each affected neighborhood council (after notifying the City Council member who oversees that neighborhood) that changes are in the wind — usually to densify the neighborhood.

Some areas face unusually dramatic growth, not because their Community Plan calls for it, but because city planners got \$1 million from the prodevelopment Southern California Association of Governments, combined with Proposition A transportation funds and property taxes, to research and plan extremely dense new neighborhoods near train stations in mostly poor areas along Exposition Boulevard in South Los Angeles, along Soto and Indiana streets on the Eastside, and near Gold Line stations in Chinatown, Lincoln Heights and Cypress Park.

Wes Joe, of the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, says that his Community Plan was rewritten in 2004, just before Goldberg got here from San Diego, so Silver Lake won't be up for review for some time. Joe says city officials contacted one in five Silver Lake households that year to help redo the Community Plan, and those meetings drew the "usual array of Anglo homeowners" in a neighborhood that's also heavily Latino. Steve Leffert, the president

of Lake Balboa Neighborhood Council in the Valley, says that Lake Balboa's two adjacent Community Plans were rewritten in 1993 and 1994, and he's heard nothing from the Planning Department — yet.

The ostensible purpose of Community Plans is to manage the growth that is now officially capped at 4.2 million before city services — like sewerage and local roads — are strained beyond capacity. Perica points out that the current population of 3.9 million doesn't include the 300,000 to 400,000 undocumented residents who make up 10 percent of the city, some living in 50,000 to 70,000 illegally adapted garages and storage spaces, according to the Department of Building and Safety. "Keep that in mind the next time you're stuck in traffic," Perica says. And the planning that exists for that shadow population doesn't begin to address the scale of the problem.

Some residents are stunned by the way the city is trying to circumvent the intent of the Yaroslavsky-sponsored slow-growth measure known as Proposition U, embraced in a landslide vote in 1986, which cut in half the size of buildings allowed on commercial strips adjacent to residential areas.

Voters ushered in Prop. U after then Mayor Bradley, Council President Ferraro and prodeveloper council members like Pat Russell embraced wildly inappropriate projects. Westwood Village was targeted for massive growth, and a huge trash-burning facility, Lancer, was pushed in South L.A. One flash point came with the \$43 million, six-story Encino Terrace Center office tower, which now looms over an attractive Encino neighborhood, wiping out privacy below and casting a permanent shadow.

Prop. U aside, North Hollywood and Hollywood are now targeted for 20-to-35-story skyscrapers that include a mix of residential on the upper floors and commercial on the bottom. The 35-story Columbia Square building will tower over Sunset Boulevard at Gower Street. Such skyscrapers represent dramatic — and virtually undebated — departures for Hollywood and the Valley. Neither skyscraper site is protected by Prop. U, which doesn't apply to Hollywood, downtown or the Metro Rail site in North Hollywood.

Beyond what's in store for Hollywood and the Valley, Yaroslavsky also believes that the SB 1818 Implementation Ordinance places treasured, low-slung neighborhoods such as the Fairfax District's historic rental corridor at risk. But since the mayor is ducking public discussion, Yaroslavsky, a powerful elected official, finds himself instead debating two little-known, if influential, city employees who serve at Villaraigosa's pleasure — Goldberg and Senior City Planner Jane Blumenfeld.

"This is where Gail Goldberg is missing the boat," Yaroslavsky explains of the threats to established, steady neighborhoods. For example, in the Fairfax District, where SB 1818's incentives allow developers to blow past existing zoning, "You've just increased the chance of demolition and redevelopment from impossible to probable."

Though Goldberg counters that the new law doesn't threaten the Fairfax District, in a moment of candor she agrees that SB 1818 is an unavoidable state law that's "a terrible fit for Los Angeles." Blumenfeld, too, concedes that it's "draconian ... but we're trying to make it work."

But Yaroslavsky says it was Blumenfeld, not the state, who pushed the new densities well beyond the state requirements to "35 percent more density," and Blumenfeld then "laid out all the 'findings' to approve it."

Villaraigosa isn't part of this growing rancor. His own views are unknown, aside from his repetitive claim that the "construction crane is the official bird" for Los Angeles.

Meet Jane Blumenfeld, the object of Yaroslavsky's scorn and senior planner for the city of Los Angeles. After receiving her bachelor's in history from the University of Wisconsin, and then a master's in city planning from the University of Pennsylvania, she came here in 1978, working as a planning adviser for Mayor Bradley, just as young Councilman Yaroslavsky was ushering through Prop. U to halt commercial high-rises near homes.

After spending some years in the real estate business, Blumenfeld worked as chief of staff to former Councilman Mike Feuer, then rejoined the Planning Department in 2001. A small woman with a quick wit propelled by spurts of sarcasm, Blumenfeld appears a bit stunned by the charges Yaroslavsky lodges against her, like an elf reacting to the roar of a bear.

"All right ... all right," she says calmly. "Let's just take a look at *his* work."

Blumenfeld leads me through a maze of hallways in City Hall, to an inner office where she points to a color-coded map. "See that?" she says, pointing out that 83 percent of the commercial parcels in the city are marked — indicating Prop. U is in force. "It's not physically possible to build growth there, because Zev has blocked it with Proposition U."

But that's not true. In 2002, under Mayor James Hahn and with virtually no public scrutiny, the City Council watered down Prop. U, creating a new land zone confusingly dubbed "Residential Accessory Services." In such zones, projects can be doubled in size if the developer merely agrees to mix housing units with businesses. In another nod to developers, and calling it "smart growth," the council decided that projects with "affordable" housing can be one-third bigger than permitted if they are within 1,500 feet of a bus stop. Together with SB 1818, much of L.A. is now open to multistory construction. ([Click here to download PDF of the map.](#))

To Blumenfeld, those neighborhoods are underutilized "transit corridors." She also denies Yaroslavsky's charge that Fairfax — as well as other stable villages that make up L.A. — is threatened by SB 1818. Developers still find that "land is expensive, lumber is expensive. The [state] law's been in effect for almost three years, but we've not seen any projects on Fairfax."

"So why write these incentives into the new law?" Yaroslavsky retorts. "The city can't keep talking out of both sides of its mouth."

City leaders first learned of plans to mandate denser California cities in a 1996 memo from the State Department of Housing and Community Development. But Yaroslavsky insists he didn't hear about SB 1818 until last summer, when a mole from the city's Planning Department leaked him a draft of the plan for apartment buildings 35 percent bigger than allowed.

"We were appalled," Yaroslavsky says. So the county supervisor again became the town crier. Pro-density groups begrudgingly credit him for pressuring the council to ban these higher buildings next to or across alleys from R1 (single family) homes. But other neighborhood protections, such as a lengthy appeals process, were stripped away.

"This all comes from the stupidity of doing these things behind closed doors," Yaroslavsky says. "Now everybody's weighing in. They didn't know what was going on. Now the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council is picking this all apart, and rightly so."

On hearing Yaroslavsky's version, Blumenfeld rolls her eyes.

"There's really no secret plans here," she says. "We don't do anything in this department that's not superpublic and transparent, and nobody knows better than Zev the steps we go through to adopt an ordinance. There were many, many public hearings."

She cites a series of committee meetings, describing them as poorly attended: "'Wow! A plan to implement SB 1818! Let me give up my Saturday to go to this!'"

In fact, Angelenos don't have a clue what's been happening, or what's coming. In the 32 months since Villaraigosa was elected, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Daily News* have written only four stories about a plan to allow apartments without parking in order to squeeze in more units. The phrase "SB 1818" has appeared in just 14 articles. The mayor's czar of zoning variances, Michael LoGrande, is virtually unknown — mentioned just six times in Los Angeles print media in the past two years. And the "superpublic" hearings cited by Blumenfeld were attended almost exclusively by lobbyists, a few activists and the occasional curious neighbor.

"There should be a debate!" Yaroslavsky wheezes, a victim of allergies, dabbing his nose with a handkerchief.

"The proponents of the density hawks, including the director of the Planning Department, and the real estate industry, and the L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce — they had the audacity to say that they negotiated the plan [with homeowners]. Not true, there wasn't one neighborhood group that knew about it!"

Now meet Gail Goldberg, Blumenfeld's boss and philosophical cousin, and the other object of Yaroslavsky's discontent. On a Friday at 8:20 a.m., I step out of a City Hall elevator on the fifth floor, walking down an imposing corridor. There stand the double doors to the offices of the director of the Planning Department, Goldberg.

More than 30 feet back from the unattended public counter sits Goldberg's assistant, Lily Quan, the only person in the vast reception area at that hour. She looks up. "May I help you?"

"I'm with the *L.A. Weekly*, and I just got stood up by the planning director for an 8 a.m. meeting at Starbucks."

Quan offers an expression of withering condescension. "I think you're confused," she says slowly, as if to a mentally impaired person. "Your meeting is scheduled for next Friday."

"I have a copy of the e-mail, sent by you, confirming the meeting for this morning."

Quan consults her computer, tapping buttons.

"Looks like we made a mistake," she concedes. "Sorry ... She's got a 9 a.m. appointment, so you'd only have half an hour."

"That," I say, "would be a good start," pondering how the Planning Department could have so much trouble planning a cup of coffee.

At 8:35, Quan ushers me down a small hallway. Goldberg graciously rises from the seat behind her desk to apologize, greeting me in a manner that is both warm and — since we are in City Hall — imperious.

"So what have I read of yours lately?" she asks.

"You would probably have a better idea of that than me."

"What I mean is, what have you written that might have annoyed me?"

In fact, I had recently authored a piece on the city's "Parking Reduction Ordinance," which lets developers of apartments and condos near train stations and bus stops get a waiver from the city's minimum parking-space requirements. In a radical departure, the city could allow big apartments to be constructed without parking spaces. The developer need only prove he is providing a vaguely imagined "alternative means" of transportation — potentially, anything from carpool programs to bicycle racks to walking canes and foot balm — that a local city-zoning administrator feels is a "viable alternative" to driving.

The "public-transit promoting" Parking Reduction Ordinance is not going over well with some of the very few Los Angeles residents who have heard of it.

The Silver Lake Neighborhood Council says that, among other things, the reduced-parking ordinance will eventually punish the working poor (who actually use public transit), helping to prod them out of neighborhoods where hipster, "transit-oriented" projects lacking parking would almost inevitably be paired with luxury rentals.

Developer Gilmore insists the parking-reduction waiver isn't aimed at "what's happening in Silver Lake today, but what it will look like in 20 to 30 years." Yaroslavsky responds, "I don't think Gail [Goldberg] has a clue as to the impact of what these 'incentives' will be."

When residents of Los Angeles hammered out 35 Community Plans to direct what should happen in the city's loosely connected villages, those plans did not include luxury apartments without parking or skyscraper apartments looming over neighborhoods.

"Good planning has to lead, not follow," Goldberg explains, of City Hall's quiet push to amend those Community Plans, a process she insists will emphasize the need to work together. "We need to get in front of the process with Community Plans, which we're creating right now."

Twenty years ago, Robin Kramer, then chief of staff to Eastside City Councilman Richard Alatorre, told *The New York Times*, in an almost identical comment, that the key question was how City Hall could "best manage the growth and lead it." Now Kramer is back, again as a chief of staff — but this time to Villaraigosa.

At 9 a.m., as Goldberg is preparing to greet members of the Downtown Planning Commission, she advises me of my civic responsibility as a journalist regarding the density debate:

"All I ask is that you don't scare people into paralysis."

The apartment-construction binge began in 2002 but dates to 1993, when the Planning Department, under newly elected Mayor Richard Riordan, rolled out the new-housing component of its General Plan. Although dozens of Community Plans attempted to mute its more dire effects, the General Plan claimed that two-thirds of the city — already the fourth most densely populated in the nation — was "underutilized."

Many found the General Plan laughable and unlikely to ever unfold. But then demographers from California's State Department of Finance and the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) prophesied that an inevitable county population increase of 2.5 million people by 2025 had to be met in Los Angeles by the building of far more housing.

That's when city planners started redesigning the very DNA of Los Angeles.

Goldberg says that SCAG bureaucrats want to see 16,000 new housing units per year — in a city many residents view as already overbuilt and grossly congested. (City Hall listens to SCAG, but some cities are sick of SCAG's density drumbeat. Irvine is involved in a bitter lawsuit against SCAG; Palmdale and La Mirada tried to stop SCAG and lost in court.)

SCAG "population projections" of massive, inevitable growth in L.A. are notoriously unreliable, says demographer James Allen, professor emeritus of geography at California State University Northridge.

"I personally don't put any stake in the accuracy of projections from SCAG or anyone else," Allen says. In his college classes, Allen assigns his students to make such projections — showing them how easy it is to manipulate theoretical circumstances to get whatever "population growth" results they desire.

It's a game, Allen explains, with outcomes "all based on assumptions that can't be known." A crash in the local economy, the subprime mortgage debacle, a flood or earthquake, major job growth in the U.S. South — all can send hundreds of thousands of people to other regions.

"But let's say they're accurate," Yaroslavsky conjectures. "Are we being told that we need to rebuild the entire city to facilitate another 2.5 million people in the next 17 years? Good luck. It's not going to happen — economically or politically ... It's preposterous. The deal is that there are a number of developers who see an opportunity here to make a killing."

The actual growth statistics fly in the face of the luxury-apartment future envisioned by the Villaraigosa administration. The U.S. Census says that between 1990 and 2000, 400,000 more residents fled Los Angeles County than moved in from other states and California counties. And significantly, the people who moved here earn an average of \$3,000 less per year than the 400,000 who fled.

Yet the population is expanding, and the two key causes are illegal immigration and the high birth rate among the poor and working poor. Local Latino birth rates are driving it, and in Los Angeles, that means families with a median annual income circling \$25,000.

Who is going to snap up thousands of luxury apartments on the drawing boards, at \$2,500 a month? A few foreign nationals from Stuttgart and London, Dubai and Moscow? Even if Villaraigosa's team comes up with 16,000 new units per year in order to please land speculators, developers and bureaucrats at SCAG, it's highly unlikely that L.A.'s new residents — not hipsters but low-income families — could afford them.

"There's never been the market to support what they've been building," says Joel Kotkin, who notes that L.A. planners mistakenly believe they are creating the next New York or Chicago, when, Kotkin believes, it's more likely they are erecting a dense new Third World city.

There are, to be sure, arguments supporting high-density cities. Peter Gleick, director of Pacific Institute, an ecology-research foundation in San Francisco, says, "In single-family suburban homes, more than half the tap-water supply is spent on lawns and gardens. ... With

the expected radical decline in the Sierra Nevada snowpacks, cities like Los Angeles and Las Vegas cannot continue to grow in the 21st century the way they did in the 20th."

But density also breeds much more crime — something "density hawks" never mention. A report by the National Center for Policy Analysis says crime rates in dense cities outpace by up to 20 percent the crime in more sprawling, spacious cities. So-called "smart growth" Portland and Seattle lead the pack in property crime.

These colliding issues — of water usage, crime peaks, birth rates, developer greed (or hardship, according to Gilmore), statistical manipulation and City Hall transparency — could and should be the subject of public debate in Los Angeles.

But they're not.

Think of the current process as the urban-planning equivalent of termites gnawing away at the city's crossbeams. Each time a zoning-change application is considered, it must be heard in public in front of a volunteer committee of a regional Planning Commission — all political appointees of Villaraigosa.

The Planning Department is supposed to send notifications to the relevant "certified neighborhood council," and to all neighbors within 500 feet of the property at issue, or to post a notice in any local newspaper. And in addition, the agenda for all such hearings is posted at www.cityplanning.lacity.org.

That's how the Planning Department claims to be engaging the public. But a wall of silence between the public and the city is built into the incremental nature of the process.

Few residents know what to make of the strangely worded notifications they suddenly receive in the mail — just 10 days before a hearing. (Some notices, as in the Lake Balboa district in the Valley, arrived after a key hearing had occurred.) There's very rarely media interest, and in a city where few residents know the name of their city-council member (Los Angeles City Council districts contain about 280,000 people, the largest such districts — and many say the least responsive — in the U.S.), fighting City Hall is daunting.

Planning Commission hearings are held during business hours, handy for developers but not for residents. When no residents appear to oppose a developer's plan, the regional commissioners — often local residents, theoretically more invested in the area's welfare than downtown planners — usually go along with the developer. Usually, after the developer completes an environmental report and addresses a few problems, the zoning change or variance is granted.

The Woodland Hills-Warner Neighborhood Council's chairperson, Joyce Pearson, wrote this warning in a recent newsletter to her Valley area: "The public often waits until it's too late to do anything to enhance major developments or to impact any potential problems that may be caused."

Yet the public isn't "waiting," as Pearson puts it. The public is out of the loop — often until the demolition fence is already up.

That seems fine with City Hall. With a few pockets of 1980s-style activism developing at the feistier monthly neighborhood-council meetings in Los Angeles, City Hall has begun responding — by attacking the locals.

For example, the often-clamoring North Hills West Neighborhood Council, in a far-flung Valley area that was a hotbed of secession-movement sentiment, is so distrustful of City Hall that its members attend city Planning Commission hearings en masse. The North Hills group has defeated a series of high-density housing proposals on its rustic fields and meadows.

For their trouble, City Hall came down hard on these citizens. According to homeowner Peggy Burgess, the Neighborhood Council was subjected to an official barrage of blistering, trumped-up charges — even including racism — that originated from a cadre of pro-growthers. The accusers were allowed to file complaints anonymously with the city's somewhat ironically named Department of Neighborhood Empowerment (DONE).

Burgess says that, during a vitriolic December meeting, Manuel Durazo, a city project coordinator for DONE, conceded that he simply forwarded the ugly charges to the Board of Neighborhood Commissioners, and official "decertification" proceedings of the Neighborhood Council got under way - with no city official bothering to investigate the accusations, or allowing the neighborhood council to refute them.

Durazo finally admitted the charges were unsubstantiated. He sent out a letter congratulating the Neighborhood Council on its victory - adding that he'd requested that the city transfer him to a different district.

Since 2005, Villaraigosa has been tirelessly cheerleading for a taller city. He has often pointed to the frenzied construction of mixed-use buildings (apartments, shops and offices) as proof that he is probusiness.

In fact, some counter that L.A. is antibusiness, a city that drives big and small companies to neighboring Pasadena, Calabasas, Glendale, Culver City and elsewhere, earning itself special attention each year in the Kosmont Report on urban areas with backward business policies.

Villaraigosa appears to believe that edifices equate with business, and that the buildings themselves will lure in an educated work force and quality companies. "If we're not creating wealth, if we're not bringing in investment, if the official bird of Los Angeles isn't the crane, then we won't be able to do all the good things we would like to do for our people," Villaraigosa told the *Los Angeles Business Journal* in 2006.

His narrow emphasis on high-density housing construction might cost L.A. if a recession has really arrived. "The burst housing bubble has hit us pretty hard," says Joseph Linton, policy associate for Livable Spaces, a nonprofit developer that's completed mixed-income, transit-oriented residences in Long Beach and Lincoln Heights. The affordable units are selling, "but our market-rate units are going very slowly." Adds Gary Toebben, president of the L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce, "New market-rate housing is just not moving."

Nonetheless, Blumenfeld imagines dense urban villages built around subway stations, populated by the young and old, neighbors who shop on the ground floor and use rail or buses to get about.

Gail Goldberg looks out across the city and imagines residents and developers working side by side, with her department's firm leadership dedicated to the integrity of neighborhoods.

But from his County Hall of Administration office just a few blocks away, Yaroslavsky, his voice rumbling in a basso profundo, waves off Blumenfeld's and Goldberg's utopian plans: "I watched the demolition derby in this town 20 years ago ... I have a platform. I have some credibility. I have something to say. [But] I shouldn't be the one to say it."

[Also read Julia Cooke's article on urban similarities between L.A. and Mexico City.](#)

[And What's Smart About Smart Growth? by David Zahniser](#)

***Editor's Note:** This story incorrectly stated that Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky fought federal funding for subways after a methane explosion in 1985. In fact, Yaroslavsky called for more study of methane gas dangers while Congressman Henry Waxman championed the federal ban. Later, Yaroslavsky led a ballot effort that prevented local sales taxes from being used on the subway being tunneled under Hollywood, allowing that tax money to go to other transit projects. This story was corrected Feb. 29.