

Imagine Getting Compacted: A Call-to-Action for Midtown Neighborhoods

by Ruth Beeker Fall 2012

Imagine Greater Tucson (IGT) has released the results of its 2 years study, *Looking Forward: A Vision for a Greater Tucson Region*. **PlanTucson** is winding up its citizen participation phase of the City's writing of a new General Plan for the coming ten-year period. I would expect that City staff will be looking at the IGT document as one source of data to consider. One of IGT's nine principles is Quality Neighborhoods. On p. 19, eight values for them are listed. The three I find most relevant to mid-town, and, therefore, most in need of specific clarification, are:

- Appropriate infill development or redevelopment that is sensitive to protecting existing neighborhoods
- Reduced sprawl and increased mixed use, compact development in many key areas
- Well-planned and managed land use and growth

I have attended a number of IGT and PlanTucson sessions where data was gathered by electronic key pads or mapping exercises. In all cases, the exercises did not encourage respondents to think of the impact on any existing uses already on the ground; it was as if the entire area was vacant. As I looked around the rooms, I saw few mid-town neighbors. However, I did see survey results, which IGT summarizes in the catchy phrase, "people want change, and people want choices", as putting the greatest burden on the center of Tucson.

Those of us who have chosen to live in the mid-town area have our own change and choices to make: we can ignore the IGT vision, hoping it will never be realized; we can move away before or after it impacts our area; we can accept that the City will continue its disregard for neighborhood interests as seen in West University; or we can be proactive to develop reasonable, thoughtful, and necessary City policy guidelines which we as voters insist be put in place to protect our homes and neighborhoods.

IGT profiles three types of neighborhoods: compact, traditional, and rural. It is clear that the increased density for those million more people IGT is projecting to come are to be most concentrated where we live. I see no evidence that those residents living on large traditional lots or small rural ranches are to snuggle up with additional living units on their property for the sake of preventing sprawl! When you read the description of compact neighborhoods (p. 34), it is clearly us:

Compact neighborhoods are the densest neighborhoods. They contain a mix of housing types, including low and mid-rise apartments and condos, duplexes, townhouses, small-lot single-family homes, and some single-family homes on slightly larger lots.

In established neighborhoods, elements of compact neighborhoods can be integrated into the community by maximizing the use of vacant lots, adapting existing buildings to new and flexible uses, and by creating a redevelopment strategy that is sensitive to neighborhood context and character.

Having worked on land use issues the past decade, I find that the text of these two paragraphs raise many questions in my mind, including:

- How massive are “low and mid-rise apartments”?
- How “small” or “slightly larger” are the proposed lots?
- What kind of zoning and code changes will be introduced to allow this?
- What happens to existing homes which are on lots more than “slightly larger”?
- What is the numerical limit of “maximizing” lot coverage and setbacks?
- Within a neighborhood, what “new and flexible uses” would be acceptable adaptations?
- **What are the necessary elements of a “redevelopment strategy”? Who develops it and insures that it is carried out?**

In addition, there are larger issues, such as:

- How many neighborhoods could end up being candidates for compacting?
- How would such changes impact historic designations?
- How much increased density can the mid-town infra-structure support (sewers, water, streets)?
- What happens to trees and plant growth which help mitigate heat-island effort? How will open space be reserved?
- How will the borders of the neighborhoods be developed when they are targets for mixed-use? What height and mass of buildings are appropriate? What uses are appropriate? What buffering/ transitions areas are needed to preserve quality of life within the neighborhood?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Late spring, Don Ijams and I asked Mayor and Council to address “Infill Done Right” in a holistic manner, rather than the piece-meal approach we have been seeing; we have generated no interest. Given the Mayor/Council 4-3 vote on August 7, 2012, to disregard a recommendation from Main Gate District stakeholders’ committee (which they themselves had initiated) and instead catered to a developer’s last minute request, we cannot assume that the majority of that body of elected officials care about us. On Oct. 9, 2012, Chris Ganz once again went to the Call-to-the Audience to remind Mayor and Council what problems WUNA faces and I again reminded them during my testimony at the Unified Development Code public hearing of the need to address infill and to establish a climate worthy of public trust.

Now is the time for a united voice. It is time for us to develop a well-reasoned, comprehensive plan of action to present to Mayor and Council, one that mandates that neighbors’ rights are respected while acknowledging infill realities. Who should determine the future of our core neighborhoods? Not IGT, not City staff, not developers. It’s us!!