

A Clarion Call for Responsible Stewardship of SDSU West

Design framework needs further articulation

Since asking for San Diego voters' support in Fall 2018, and months before, San Diego State University leaders have promised to redevelop Mission Valley's prize stadium site with a vision nothing short of magnificent: to serve higher education, the public good *and* the community's goals and aspirations – a vibrant, mixed-use, medium density, transit-oriented development. The C-3 Mission Valley Committee couldn't agree more. Having a strong vision for this important public asset is key to its success. In the words of the past influential city planner Max Schmidt, "whatever we do on this site, we ought to do it as an example of the highest possible architectural and landscaping standards, so that when we come to rebuilding Mission Valley and addressing some of the older uses which are becoming obsolescent, that we have a model for that development."

With the release of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) – a possibly premature move but one that should be watched carefully – it is clear there is much work to be done to ensure delivery of the special project promised. A DEIR is a document that attempts to quantify how significant and unavoidable project impacts can be mitigated, but many times it becomes an exercise on how many angles fit on the head of a pin. To be clear, it is going to be very difficult for San Diego, without a strong vision, to actually develop this land differently from any other development.

The proposed concept design on which the DEIR is based was quickly done as a preliminary concept to showcase during the ballot campaign. It was always accompanied by promises for further discussion on development details of the Master Plan. Workshops promised as part of the ballot campaign to develop the plan have been held, but the concept has not been developed sufficiently for this critical project to be "real."

Real issues that still need addressing are the overall design; how the project is connected and integrated into the Mission Valley community; details on affordable housing. and how the project will meet the City's well documented Climate Action Plan goals.

Ideally, before comments on the DEIR can be submitted, there would be a fully developed project for a meaningful environmental review to be conducted. And that plan needs to acknowledge that SDSU has a responsibility as the steward of public lands to look beyond the parcel lines since their large footprint will impact greater Mission Valley and even the San Diego region. Knowing that a return to the drawing board on the DEIR is politically impossible, C-3's Mission Valley Committee is strongly recommending a design framework with four overarching principles outlined below:

1. Ensure effective, human-scale connections between people and places. Special attention needs to be designed and integrated into the site for multi-modal transportation, including walking and bicycling and improved roadway access, as well as connections to the overall community of Mission Valley.
2. Promote human well-being through sustainable design, environmental stewardship and green infrastructure. SDSU West will become a state-owned campus; it must comply with State of California's climate goals.
3. Create a mixed-income inclusive community that provides housing for students, faculty and service workers with a cap on housing affordability at 120% AMI.

4. Fully implement the San Diego River Park Master Plan, which has been vetted and thoroughly approved by stakeholders.

Before any meaningful comments can be made about the DEIR, there must be a meaningful project to review. The SDSU West proposal is not yet at that point. There are plans that were developed by some of our region's top architects and land use professionals from New School of Architecture + Design, Urban Land Institute and American Institute of Architects - we invite the SDSU West team to review those and to integrate these bold concepts.

SDSU West is not a typical real estate deal. It is a major investment in the future of San Diego State University, an investment in San Diego's future economy and a public asset that will require the highest level of stewardship.

Mike Stepner, FAICP, FAIA and Mary Lydon are members of the C-3 Mission Valley Committee. C-3 is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and improving the San Diego region's built and natural environments. Its objective is to influence critical policy, planning and design through education, empowerment and advocacy. Since approval of Measure G, C-3 has convened local organizations to advocate for transparency and strong design with the site development. With the release of the DEIR, we formed the SDSU West Subcommittee to monitor the progress of this important San Diego asset. Participants in the C-3 Mission Valley Committee can be found on C3's website at <http://www.c3sandiego.org/mission-valley/>.