

The Congress of the New Urbanism Facilitates a Bold Vision for Oxnard

By Dao Doan

Last year the City of Oxnard hired a traffic consultant to help it figure out what to do with Oxnard Boulevard now that the City has full possession of the thoroughfare after decades of use as a State Highway (part of PCH). Roy Prince, a local architect/activist friend, and I had numerous conversations about the Boulevard re-envisioning effort for several months after we both attended the early workshops on it. The conversations eventually grew to include several others most of whom were residents of Oxnard. The group coalesced into the Oxnard Community Planning Group (OCPG). Our recurring talks centered on the same questions:

- How do we add significantly more housing along the Boulevard or around Downtown Oxnard?
- Would the proposed solutions from the consultant encourage more walking and biking?
- What does it take to bring back robust commerce?
- Are six-story mixed use buildings appropriate there?



As the series of questions gnawed at me, the thought occurred to me to engaging a “shock troop” of urban designers, architects, planners, economists, traffic planners, engineers, and to drop them into the area to help us figure out what may be best for Oxnard.

In 2013 and 2014, I had participated in Design Charrettes in Livingston (a small town in the California central valley) and Newport Beach (the California version of the Riviera), led by the Congress of New Urbanism, California Chapter (CNU-CA). Both occurred over 5 days consisting of highly intense sessions of design, sketching, debating what should go where, and presentations.

Team members interviewed community people in a long series of meetings. Others tested some potential solutions through what is termed Tactical Urbanism, a fancy name for essentially trying something on a smaller scale before spending a lot of money on it. These tests may include building a temporary parklet, where a parking spot on the street may be commandeered for a small outdoor seating area where people can just “chill” out. Usually parklets are proposed in front of coffee shops or restaurants, thus becoming a quasi-extension of the outdoor eating experience.



In Livingston we also successfully tested the reversed angled parking, which is found to be safer for bicyclists,



and a roundabout (a circle at an intersection with no traffic light or stop signs) in the center of its downtown. Roundabouts are known to reduce emissions because there are no idling cars.

In both cities, by the end of the fifth day many good solutions emerged from consensus discussions with community stakeholders, from city officials to regular citizens. Strategies, concepts, and ideas were organized in a final document that the members of the CNU-CA delivered to the cities a few months later. This was an event I wanted to see repeated in Oxnard.



Generic roundabout

My “eureka” moment led to a conversation with CNU-CA in December of 2015. Once they gave the green light, a quickly arranged meeting with new Oxnard City Manager (CM) Greg Nyhoff just before the Christmas Holidays provided an immediate thumbs-up to move the process forward. Faced with putting the affairs of the City back in order after many years of “challenges,” the CM seemed eager for advice from professional designers and planners. Furthermore, the City had just received a judgment of about \$6 Million to spend in the Downtown area. The CM wanted to have a plan to help him decide where to allocate that money. CNU-CA could be just that vehicle.



A combination of small group meetings, one-on-one interviews, brain storming sessions around design ideas, a walking tour (yes, even when it rained), a pop-up art event, a New Urbanist film festival, and a “pin-up of ideas evening” brought the community together. The larger schedule events gathered between eighty and one hundred people, a very good turnout for the Charrette. The community spoke and CNU-CA was all ears.





The final presentation to the City Council received high praise from the public, culminating in the Mayor's saying he was "electrified" by the process. In my years of attending public hearings, rarely have I ever witness such a "love fest." It felt almost surreal. The series of recommendations by the CNU-CA are simple yet effective (see Kerry Roscoe article for more details), addressing both short term and long term objectives. Realistically the \$6 Million judgment cannot go very far, so leveraging it in a smart way to reap more money (such as pursuing matching grants) would be a wise strategy, giving real meaning to the term "seed" money. CNU-CA

believes if you start with small victories, they will help create bigger ones.

Some key take-aways:

- Downtown Oxnard has very good bones already. Now it is just a matter of adding back the "meat" that had been stripped from them over time when the City's focus had been more on the 101 corridor that drove the surrounding sprawl.
- Slowing traffic on Oxnard Boulevard without reducing the capacity would avoid congestion while making it safer and more pedestrian and bike friendly.
- High visuals can be achieved with both signage announcing Downtown and high profile buildings at key corners.
- Make development in Downtown as easy as, or easier than, projects proposed outside of it.
- Put more housing in Downtown for more young people, with a strong focus on the arts.
- While major projects such as new development of the old Social Security building can be catalytic, small projects are important to fill the existing gaps.

A long culture of distrust is hard to change overnight, and recent memories can bring back just too easily how many times people have felt cheated. However, the sense of hope the night of the presentation was palpable, and perhaps the hardcore skeptics, even if for only the couple hours, might have believed in a future for Oxnard full of possibilities.

A big thank you is owed to the following people of the OCPG, whose insistence in asking questions helped prompt the CNU event:

Roy Prince, Frank Nilsen, Aurelio and Claudia Campo, Roger Poirier, Lisa Toth, Cathi Comras, Stephen Nash, Oneita Hirata, Irene Rauschenberger, Gary Blum, Vince Behrens, and many others.

***Special note: Our thanks to the CNU-CA charrette team for providing the pictures and illustration for this article.**