

THE SPECIAL FLAVOR OF THOUSAND OAKS BOULEVARD

by Linda Parks, Ventura County Supervisor August 2007

What is the special flavor of Thousand Oaks' downtown? This is one of the questions raised by a consultant hired to put together a Specific Plan for Thousand Oaks Boulevard. The Plan's goal is to increase density, with an eye towards four and five story buildings and merging smaller lots to allow for larger buildings. I think we can all agree that isn't Thousand Oaks' flavor.

We're really not talking 31 different flavors here. The quaint older buildings that are home to Thousand Oaks' mom and pop businesses are no match for the big chains that will occupy the conjoined lots and loom above Thousand Oaks Boulevard if the Plan is approved. You can't have it both ways because once you agree to greater building heights and larger buildings, you lose the small buildings and smaller lots.

Right now there is a building under construction just east of Hampshire Road on Thousand Oaks Boulevard that was approved without having to go to the City's Planning Commission or City Council. The 10,000 square foot building is approximately 35' high, and is considered a one story building. The building exceeds the scale of the smaller stand alone buildings near it, such as a cigar store, JC Plumbing, and Romio's Pizza, to name a few of the hundreds of small, one-story retail shops on the Boulevard. Now imagine the new 35' high building next to one twice its height with four or five stories. Think Ventura Boulevard in Encino if you're looking for a flavor, think smog if you're looking for an aroma, and think traffic if you're looking for a taste of what's to come.

While it was stated that high-rise buildings that increase the city's density are desirable to developers and City Hall because they benefit both the city's coffers and developers' pocketbooks, what's in it for residents and local business people? It's a great question and not one being asked enough.

Is there another choice? Could money instead be invested into beautifying areas that look run down? Could landscaping be added to bring some color and greenery and make the area look more inviting? Can the small buildings be saved? According to the City's Municipal Code, it is worth saving buildings that show a special aesthetic character and remind the citizens and visitors what Thousand Oaks is all about. The Code calls for protecting buildings that embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction. As citizens, we have to ask ourselves if it is worth saving the small one-story buildings that make up Thousand Oaks Boulevard.

Thousand Oaks is a forty-four year old city and it has been constantly evolving since its incorporation, when it was as a bedroom community for workers in Los Angeles County.

We have now achieved a balance of jobs and housing, and a vibrant retail core with major regional shopping centers at the Janss Marketplace, the Oaks Mall and the Promenade. The small businesses along Thousand Oak Boulevard have held their own in sales tax generation and they too need our city's support.

The pressure for Thousand Oaks to grow is as strong as it ever was. We define a city by how its citizens choose for it to grow. By abandoning the small businesses and human scaled buildings that offer a feeling of community on Thousand Oaks Boulevard and instead encouraging large buildings for chain stores, we lose a part of our town's character. If we leave the decision on how to grow to those who are narrowly focused on what will bring the most money, we will surely lose that special flavor that makes Thousand Oaks Boulevard different from any other main street in the world.