

## Huge Projects Planned for Downtown Santa Monica

POSTED DEC. 20, 2010, 8:13:00 AM  
SUSAN CLOKE / MIRROR COLUMNIST

Big changes are coming to Santa Monica's Downtown District.

The Exposition Light Rail (Expo) is on schedule to open 2015. The City has just completed a deal to secure the property between Fourth and Fifth streets on Arizona Avenue, taking over the current sites of both Bank of America and Chase Bank. The Civic Center Parks are on a fast track and are now in the public planning process. Plans are being made for freeway capping adjacent to the planned Civic Center Parks. The California incline is scheduled for infrastructure improvement. The Santa Monica Pier Bridge is scheduled for infrastructure improvement. Santa Monica Place reopened August 2010 and is still evolving. A new AMC Cineplex is planned for Fourth Street. The City is about to start work on the Downtown Specific Plan, the document that will set the guidelines for the future of the downtown.



SANTA MONICA MIRROR ARCHIVES  
Susan Cloke, Columnist

Expo is expected to bring thousands of people into Santa Monica's downtown to shop, to eat, and play. It is both hoped and expected that people who currently drive to Santa Monica will decide it is more convenient and more fun to take Expo and leave their cars at home.

"Moving people in, through and around downtown, accommodating pedestrians, and encouraging bike riders are key concerns for downtown," according to Kathleen Rawson, CEO of the Bayside District Corporation. "Responding to issues of homelessness and taking care of homeless people used to be the highest ranked issue in the downtown community. Now it's parking and traffic."

Downtown Santa Monica is a local, regional, and international destination. More than 60,000 people will come just to skate at the ICE, Santa Monica's outdoor skating rink and thousands more will come to watch the skaters and admire the decorative art at the rink. Portraits of Hope, an internationally acclaimed non-profit that helps children deal with trauma through participation in public art, decorated the ice rink.

Events in the downtown are the responsibility of the Bayside District and the Ambassadors program. Ambassadors, wearing logo shirts, greet visitors, answer questions about where to eat, give directions, escort employees to cars on late work nights, connect lost objects and owners, remove graffiti, and keep a record of all their interactions – more than 170,000 in the past year.

Santa Monica's Police Chief Timothy Jackman said, "Much credit goes to the Ambassadors for the decrease in the downtown homeless population. Santa Monica's homeless population is down about 23 percent citywide and over 27 percent in the downtown area. The Ambassadors have done a good job of connecting homeless people to City services."

Santa Monica City Council member Bobby Shriver, a nationally recognized thinker and problem solver in the movement to end homelessness agreed, saying, “When it comes to addressing homelessness, Santa Monica is the regional leader.”

Bayside District is the public-private company responsible for planning and managing the downtown. They are funded by a downtown property assessment, a portion of the business license fees, and revenues from special events, such as filming. Bayside’s total annual budget is now approximately \$5 million.

“Bayside gets \$200,000 from the City for services through the Public Landscape Division for Promenade maintenance,” said Elaine Polachek, Santa Monica’s assistant city manager, when asked about City support for Bayside. “Although the Ambassadors may report problems more quickly than in other parts of the City, when it comes to ‘fixing potholes’ they go into the regular queue with the rest of the City. The City benefits directly from business license fees, parking revenues and sales tax dollars. We also benefit because the Promenade is a draw for tourists and the City relies on tourism for revenue.”

Given the importance of downtown and the scale of the planned new projects, City staff is preparing for a City Council study session to present an overview of all projects, recommendations on how to coordinate and manage the proposed projects, and recommendations for a process for public participation. The study session will be held late January or early February.

The number and scale of the proposed projects bring us back to how are we going to move people in, through, and around downtown. But it’s not people that create the slow moving traffic and the lack of parking spaces, it’s the cars they drive. Doing Expo right will get people from the Los Angeles region out of their cars and into Santa Monica by light rail. Bayside District, working with the City, will need to create a welcoming environment, with fun and easy options for getting around town to change how everyone, visitors and locals, get through and around downtown.

“It will take time to create an infrastructure for bicycles and time to change a general mind set,” Chief Jackman noted. “But, during the City Manager’s talks with neighborhood groups, biking was a top issue and so our direction to create the infrastructure for bicyclists is clear.”

The goal is to make the downtown work in a way that is good for the downtown, for our neighborhood business districts, and for the whole city. The achievement of our goals will be measured by the number of visitors, the ease of getting around town, financial benefits and even-handedness, and the use of planning and architecture to define the character of Santa Monica.

With thanks to the Bayside District for starting Santa Monica’s Buy Local program, let us remember the Buy Local slogan, “Santa Monica First” and guide the changes to come without changing our core values.