

U-T EDITORIAL: CITY EDITION

Learning from the dispute over Kensington Terrace

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The understatement of the year so far – it's early yet – is that some residents of the Kensington neighborhood are roused to vociferous support of or opposition to the Kensington Terrace project. Some of them have duked it out in letters on this page, including today.

Neighborhoods other than Kensington will clash over development, too. Perhaps we can take a lesson or two from this one.

Kensington Terrace would thrill many a neighborhood. Proposed by a partnership that includes architect Allard Jansen, the project is mixed-use – residential, retail and office – on an entire block in Kensington's "downtown," an area of mostly small, locally owned businesses. It does boast a Starbucks, a tenant in Kensington Plaza, also an Allard Jansen project.

It will include underground parking for residents, retailers and customers; undergrounded utilities; a central, public courtyard; and extensive landscaping.

It will replace a boarded-up apartment house and a gas station whose product has leaked into the soil.

The Kensington-Talmadge Planning Committee, a group elected by residents of those adjacent neighborhoods, approved the project after considerable consultation with the architects.

The city's Planning Commission approved it Nov. 16, with a few recommended alterations.

On Nov. 17, the developers posted a letter to residents (below) advising their willingness to work with the community on traffic and other problems, despite city approval of their plans.

A Kensington resident then appealed that approval to the City Council, which approved the project in February, adding a list of conditions (also below) authored by Kensington's council member, Toni Atkins.

A suit has now been filed to block the project.

Opponents' main objections seem to be two.

First, by special (legal) dispensation from neighborhood height limits, some of the structures will be three stories high. At that height and a block wide, opponents say, Kensington Terrace would overwhelm its surroundings and destroy the "village" character of the neighborhood.

Other neighborhoods, too, would like to keep their single-family, unhurried, unsnarled character. But just as downtown has gentrified, residential neighborhoods are increasingly citified: The townhouse-office-retail combination is a slice of urban living – density and all – ever more common in built-out cities such as San Diego. And a neighborhood's ability to reject a legal development on land a developer owns is and should be limited. Dread "developers," after all, built Kensington.

The opponents' second objection is that they didn't know of the project's existence or its size until too late to affect either.

For sure, the city needs to require builders to notify all property owners within far more than the current 300 feet of their project's site, at least for sizable projects in a residential neighborhood that nobody can miss once built. But then the 300-foot range doesn't prevent a developer from exceeding it.

Also for sure, however, neighborhood planning committees, such as the Kensington/Talmadge Planning Committee, have considerable clout and pages on the city's Web site noting meeting dates, agendas and contact information. Win or lose, the best way – and the cheapest way – for property owners to learn of development in their community is to keep themselves apprised.

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