

Friday, November 16, 2007

Looking to the future of Little Saigon



ANH DO

ASIAN AFFAIRS
Register columnist
nvdailynews@gmail.com

In the back row of the City Council chambers, I listen as the experts tick their suggestions for improving the area where I grew up:

Stage an outdoors farmers market.

Stock more stores with Asian-inspired house wares.

Imagine an entertainment district. A cultural district. A media district engaging folks with

glass-walled street front studios like the Today show.

Add cluster, like other retailers. Fix the parking problem. Fix the signs, now only serving locals, ignoring the needs of non-Asians and tourists.

Build a hotel. Consider cinema, art galleries, a Vietnamese Center for Entrepreneurship.

Is Little Saigon ready for this?

Ready and willing, says Lam Nguyen, an architect who heads the DLA Design Center in Fountain Valley. When the Urban Land Institute came to town last month to study what they call "the emotional heart and commercial soul" of Vietnamese Americans overseas – right here in Westminster – they interviewed him, among several dozen others. I'm another. We both were eager to hear their presentation Wednesday, with Nguyen beaming just after.

"They show exactly what I want them to show," he tells me. "The Downtown Saigon they are envisioning will be a big economic boost."

In the late '80s, "when we created Little Saigon, there was no master plan," adds lawyer and planning commissioner Ha Son Tran, also in the audience. "They are right to stress the fact that we're the epicenter."

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® Ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

We're where everything happens for Vietnamese Americans. Yet what's going to be with us 20 years from now?"

That vision emerged from five men and women who spent three days exploring "a remarkable development of 1 million square feet" – their words – sprouting in a city where the average income is higher than in Fullerton. Granted, Little Saigon stretches beyond Westminster's borders, claiming large pockets of Garden Grove, Santa Ana and beyond. Still, it's land in this immigrant locale that costs \$4 million per acre, similar to the coast of Huntington Beach, according to city officials, and their challenge is how to keep of two financial jewels – the second is Westminster Mall – ever thriving.

"How do we get young Vietnamese to live, to come, to Little Saigon?" Ray Silver, city manager, asks over lunch. He prepped me for the ULI research, for which Westminster paid \$60,000. The findings now go to a team of consultants working to map the city's overall redevelopment. An economic strategy will be announced next summer, followed by talks with developers and property owners.

How does the ULI viewpoint jive with the viewpoints of members of the city council?

Being "from the experts, some of our

dreams will be easier to come by now," Frank Fry says.

Perhaps there could be an entertainment district; the city could get creative with zoning "to transform Little Saigon," Andy Quach says.

"We want to upgrade; at the same time, we want to maintain identity," Tri Ta says.

The researchers "may refer to it as 'Downtown Saigon' but my term is Wall Street Free Vietnam," Kermit Marsh says. "We have a Little Saigon mainly geared to people who are comfortable speaking Vietnamese, and we want to attract young Vietnamese comfortable speaking English who will shop here rather than spend money in West Los Angeles, Irvine or Newport Beach." He said he hopes Little Saigon will "not go the way of Chinatown" where succeeding generations left to settle in the suburbs.

Mayor Margie Rice sums it up: "They told us a lot we already know, but they also made me feel we have a treasure. To progress, we need the community's input to make it a high-end asset to the city."

Land-use expert Michael Maxwell refers to Little Saigon as "a diamond in the rough" looking for "a little more polishing." He advises: Go about it as you would when you remodel a home.

Advertisement

A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® Ads by Format Dynamics.

FormatDynamics

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

"Start with the kitchen, perhaps the area with the greatest demand." Then move on to the garage, the yard, the pool. For the area to shine deeper, a grassroots focus is required to broaden marketing and merchandising, while teaching business owners how to better comply with regulations and licensing.

There's no question the development will continue. In past decades, it's been organic {#x2015} random {#x2015} says researcher Kevin Lawler. But as it grows, "Do you want it to grow in your city {#x2015} or elsewhere?"

Contact the writer: This column on Asian cultures and communities appears twice a month in the local news section. Please contact Do at: nvdailynews@gmail.com .

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.
PrinterStitial® Ads by Format Dynamics.



FormatDynamics