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Critics question Anaheim's planning

By Dave Mckibben

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Anaheim city leaders envision the Platinum Triangle as the county's new downtown, with enough commercial office space to rival the Miracle Mile in Los Angeles.

But City Council approval last week of expansion plans has drawn criticism from urban experts who say the project is seriously flawed because of an unhealthy jobs-to-housing imbalance – and the glaring lack of planned low-cost housing among the 18,363 permitted units.

The expansion will create four times more jobs than homes, which urban planners say could overwhelm the city's fledgling transportation system – even assuming that people would leave their cars behind, which they have been unwilling to do.

"I know this is supposed to represent the new downtown," said Ezequiel Gutierrez, an attorney with the Public Law Center. "But given the housing-jobs imbalance, I'm afraid it's also going to bring us the 'new congestion' for Orange County."

Despite protests by housing advocates, who quoted the city's own environmental study as a reason to oppose the project, the council signed off on the massive expansion just hours after the Planning Commission recommended its approval.

"I urge you to take a breath, a pause and get some more input from the community," said Eric Altman, a community activist, at the council meeting. "Come back in six months, nine months, 12 months, whatever it takes, with a stronger and better project. After all, we're talking about Orange County's new downtown."

The latest revision of the 820-acre Platinum Triangle comes just three years after the council rezoned a tired industrial district east of the Santa Ana Freeway in hopes of creating an urban village of high-rise residences and offices, lofts, shops and restaurants.

Anaheim Mayor Curt Pringle said Anaheim officials didn't plan well enough for the future in the 1990s when only 6,400 residences were built while the population increased by 67,000.

"We didn't increase supply," he said. "And if you don't increase supply, the cost goes up."

Pringle defended the pace of the expansion, saying city officials had already responded to community concerns.

Pringle answered harsh criticism at the public hearing over the expansion's jobs-to-housing imbalance – some

additional 33,445 jobs would be generated, compared with 8,097 additional housing units – by emphasizing Anaheim's "connectivity" of transit facilities to residential and office development as being the "greatest in all of Southern California."

Pringle and other city officials contend that a major transportation hub – still on the drawing board – will provide enough buses and Metrolink and Amtrak train seats to whisk Platinum Triangle workers to and from their homes.

"The connectivity is being mentioned as insignificant to the overall scheme and plan," he said. "But that's why this level of density works."

But some urban planners and transportation experts aren't so sure. Scott Bollens, a professor of urban planning at UC Irvine, said he agreed with the city's environmental report, which stated the expansion would substantially contribute to "the jobs-housing imbalance in the region" and that there were no measures available to alleviate the pressure. "Due to the actions of the city, the Platinum Triangle is now more out of balance with jobs and housing than before," he said. "It's now less a blended residential and non-residential environment and more of a suburban downtown where jobs will dominate housing."

"It's good that they've created a lot of jobs near mass transit, but you're putting all this pressure on the regional transportation system," Bollens said. "This is Southern California and it's yet to be proven that people will not use their cars."

The environmental study forecasts that many of the jobs created in the Platinum Triangle will be of the "highly educated technical" variety and will require "a greater proportion of moderate and upper-income housing."

But Councilwoman Lorri Galloway, who cast the lone dissenting vote on the expansion, and housing advocates such as Altman contend that there will be many more service-sector jobs than predicted and not enough affordable housing for those workers.

"What about the janitors, the cashiers, food-servers, grounds-keeping workers and retail salespeople?" Altman asked. "They will be among the most common occupations in the Platinum Triangle, and they all pay less than \$10 an hour.

"This project benefits the real estate development industry, but to the detriment of the community at large," he said. "There's got to be a more equitable way to do it."

Bollens said he believes affordable housing should be an "integral part of the Platinum Triangle."

Pringle counters that there are no restrictions against building low-income units in the Platinum Triangle, but with land values so high there, it's unlikely. "There are other places in the city where we could use the money for affordable housing to the betterment of a lot more folks," he said.

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Times staff writer David Reyes contributed to this report.

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(BEGIN TEXT OF INFOBOX)

- – Approved Proposed – Land use in 2004 update Increase Office space, sq ft 5.0 million 16.8 million
11.8 million Commercial, sq ft 2.3 million 5.7 million 3.4 million Transit center, sq ft 0 1.5 million 1.5 million
Residential units, number 10,266 18,363 8,097 *-*

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