

PLANNING FOR VENTURA, CALIFORNIA:

A COMMUNITY PLAN FOR THE WESTSIDE AND NORTH AVENUE DISTRICTS

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Elaine Kabala is a senior of the BCRP program, and participated in the planning lab for Ventura.

In the 2006-07 academic year, CRP's undergraduate fourth-year Community Planning Lab was invited to collaborate with the City of Ventura. The class developed a community plan for the city's Westside and North Avenue districts, focusing on new urbanism and smart growth principles. Elaine Kabala, one of the seniors in the class, writes about the experience.

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The two upper division community planning laboratories are designed to provide a bridge between the theoretical knowledge about the principles and techniques of urban planning and the application of this knowledge in "real-life" situations. This is accomplished by engaging students in a community-based project which offers opportunities for creative problem solving through cooperative work with the community. To provide an added dimension of reality, the work scope is structured to simulate the process of preparing a general/community plan following procedures and guidelines established by the laws of California. This is obtained by dedicating the first lab (fall quarter) to information gathering and analysis, and the second one (winter quarter) to plan development.

The pedagogy involves three major phases: (1) developing an understanding of the community's social, physical and environmental characteristic and identifying key issues facing the community, (2) developing and evaluating alternative approaches to addressing the issues and selecting a preferred alternative which reflects community vision and the realities posed by the constraints and opportunities for development, and (3) formulating a draft general/community plan together with specific design proposals and, when possible, providing appropriate mechanisms needed to implement the proposed plan or its elements.

These labs have been very successful in community outreach projects, and many of them have received awards from the American Planning Association. In 2003-04, for instance, professor Zelkja Howard's class received the "best student award" from both the APA and the AICP for the *San Miguel Community Plan*.¹ In 2005 the same lab collaborated with the City of Ventura to create a community plan for the Saticoy and Wells districts of the city. The *Saticoy-Wells Community Plan* presented a unique opportunity for CRP students to explore community planning through smart growth principles and form-based code -the first such project in the CRP program. The student collaboration with the City of Ventura also represented the first opportunity to work with professional consultants in addition to city staff and residents.²

In the 2006-2007 academic year, professor Zelkja Howard's Community Planning Lab was invited for another opportunity to collaborate with the City of Ventura. The class developed a community plan for the Westside and North Avenue districts of the city, focusing on new urbanism and smart growth principles. The *Final Draft Community Plan* incorporated alternatives which best responded to the needs of the community. As an amendment to the Ventura General Plan, the community plan chapters are structured to reflect the general plan and address the natural environment and open space, land use and housing, circulation, infrastructure, civic involvement, and the arts.

The Community

The Westside and North Avenue districts are located in the northwest of the City of Ventura. The

¹ See Jordan, C. "Learning by Doing", in FOCUS 2005.

² See Pelton, K. & Shuppert, J. "Creating a Vision for East Ventura, CA", in FOCUS 2006.

Westside is located within the city's jurisdiction, while North Avenue is outside city limits, but within its sphere of influence. The study area comprises approximately 2,000 acres; 1,200 acre in the Westside and 800 acres in North Avenue. There are approximately 14,000 residents, mostly concentrated in the Westside with 13,000 residents, with an additional 1,000 residents in North Avenue.

The study area was originally settled by Chumash Indian tribes, and later settled by Spanish missionaries in the 1700s. There was little economic or population growth until a rail connection and port were established in the 1880s. In 1910, oil reserves were discovered in the area, resulting in a growth boom which doubled the population. Most of the existing housing in the Westside was developed as workforce housing during the intense oil industry boom. Although the oil industry began to decline during the 1970s, taking many support industries out of the area, the oil fields and derricks remain the defining feature of the community.

The decline of the oil industry in the area has had lasting impacts on the character of the community. Since the oil industry comprised the base economic feature there, its decline was manifested in a corresponding dilapidation of properties. The area is in transition as the community seeks a new economic staple for growth. In addition to the economic transition, other challenges included a large homeless population, crime, blight and environmental constraints.

Much of the Ventura Avenue Corridor, which comprises the commercial district of the community, is haphazardly developed with discount retailers, industrial supply stores, storage yards, auto-repair shops and some mixed-use; however, the predominant massing and architecture of Ventura Avenue makes the corridor prime for revitalization. Since the planning area is located in a valley, it is susceptible to landslides and liquefaction in the hills to the east and west, while the valley floor is susceptible to flooding from the Ventura River.

Despite the numerous challenges posed by environmental, economic and land use characteristics of the study area, the community presents a wealth of opportunities and assets. The community is located close to the Pacific Ocean, which can be accessed via an existing regional bike trail that runs along the scenic Ventura River to the picturesque Ojai Valley, and the hills to the east and west of Westside and North Avenue are strikingly beautiful. The community is also rich in cultural assets, including the Brooks Institute of Photography, numerous local artisans and copious public art displays. The area is rich in historical assets as well, such as the Simpson Historical Tract, which consists of the earliest developed neighborhood in the area, and the Casa de Anza Building, a beautiful brick structure now housing the community library.

Planning Process

Phase I

This phase entailed gathering background information regarding environmental resources and hazards, population and housing, land use and urban form, circulation and noise, and public services and utilities. The class started by studying the information gathered by the city in previous studies and workshops, and added a lot of new information and data gathered from the class own field work. This initial research led to the compilation of community profile which the students presented to the community at a public workshop to gather residents' comments and information.

Figure 1
Workshop photo
Students held three workshops, which were fundamental for gathering community input.



By participating directly with residents, students were able to obtain additional information about the study area that could not be determined through secondary sources, such as the community sentiment on safety and services. The students also used this opportunity to perform a visual preference survey to gather residents' preferences on the Ventura Avenue Corridor, neighborhoods, civic places, open spaces, thoroughfares and streetscapes and districts. Results of the visual preference survey also aided students in visualizing the community's image of its future built environment.

Phase II

After students drafted several concept plans reflecting the needs and wishes of the community obtained from the first community workshop and the information contained in the background report, a second community workshop was held. Students took advantage of this opportunity by creating several different concepts that addressed industrial expansion, environmental conservation, density alternatives, height alternatives and new and infill residential development. At the second community workshop, residents were able to comment on alternatives that most aligned with their vision for the community. This community workshop was invaluable in helping students develop a community plan which best responded to the needs of the citizenry.

The Plan

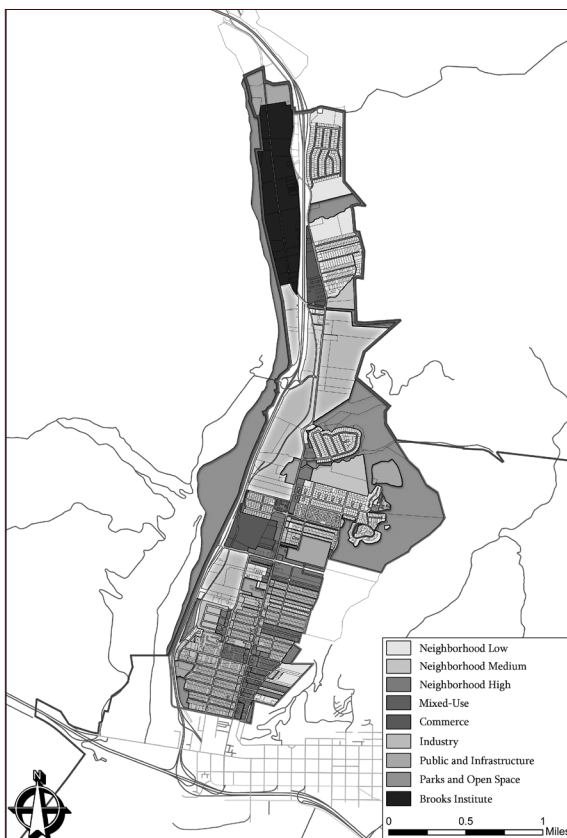
Figure 2
*Proposed Planning
Designations Map*

The Final Draft Community Plan incorporated alternatives which best responded to the needs of the community. As an amendment to the Ventura General Plan, the community plan chapters are structured to reflect the general plan, which address natural environment and open space, land use and housing, circulation, infrastructure, and civic involvement and arts.

The community plan seeks to preserve and enhance open space around the developed core of Westside and North Avenue. A key feature of the environmental element is the Ventura River, which both the students and residents identified as a foremost opportunity for restoration and enhancement. The land use and housing chapter focuses on concentrating industrial uses away from the Ventura Avenue commercial corridor and residential neighborhoods, while maintaining the appropriate amount of land for industrial economic growth. In particular, this chapter seeks to provide a balance in housing and jobs, and allow for a variety of housing types. The community plan also encourages the incorporation of sustainable infrastructure including solar farms, green roofs and bioswails for storm water runoff.

In addition to the topics addressed by the general plan, the community plan addresses key opportunity areas within the Westside and North Avenue Communities, which are identified as Ventura Avenue Corridor, Stanley Gateway District, Selby Special District, Olive Street Corridor, Simpson Historical Tract and the Kellogg Art Colony.

The Ventura Avenue Corridor is envisioned as becoming a vibrant mixed-use corridor, with increased retail and housing opportunities which offer a multitude of activities for residents. The community plan outlines



enhancements to guide development of the Ventura Avenue Corridor including building massing and height to encourage pedestrian activity, view corridors and a sense of place; streetscaping improvements; improved crosswalks at critical intersections; parking meters in critical areas; and enhanced public transit.

The Stanley Gateway District is located between the intersection of state Route 33 and Ventura Avenue. This district was identified as a primary gateway into the community, with high potential for revitalization and creation of a neighborhood center. The community plan suggests several enhancements that will maximize the potential of the Stanley Street area to help define it as a central node for Westside and North Avenue. Key enhancements include creating gateway features for Westside and North Avenue; encouraging inviting facades and comfortable building heights and setbacks; allowing space for commercial, office and industrial activity; and providing on and off street parking to allow for vital pedestrian activity.

The Selby Special District is currently an underutilized area east of Ventura Avenue and adjacent to the Stanley District. The community plan identifies this area as a potential catalyst district for Westside and North Avenue, which will compliment creation of a neighborhood center at the Stanley Street District. The community plan suggests that revitalization of this area should include creation of a transit-oriented development which incorporates housing, and mixed-use space for retail and offices. The community plan also suggests extending Stanley Street to the extension of Cedar Street, which will allow for improved circulation throughout the Westside area.

The Olive Street Corridor encompasses land south of Stanley and between Route 33 and the Ventura Avenue Corridor. This district also includes land under the Simpson Historic Tract. The community plan suggests revitalizing Olive Street as a secondary commercial corridor, including a commercial node for small corner businesses, streetscape enhancements along Olive Street, and creation of bike lanes.

The community plan suggests continuing the preservation and enhancement of the Simpson Historic Tract. Suggested enhancements include creation of a neighborhood center adjacent to Casa de Anza building and complementing streetscape improvements. The plan also recognizes the Kellogg District (an undeveloped two-acre site located adjacent to Ventura Avenue and Cedar Street) as a catalyst for development for its potential for creation of a live-work artist colony which will celebrate the vibrant art community in Westside and North Avenue. The plan encourages vibrancy through creation of pocket parks, ground floor retail, infill development and a variety of housing types.

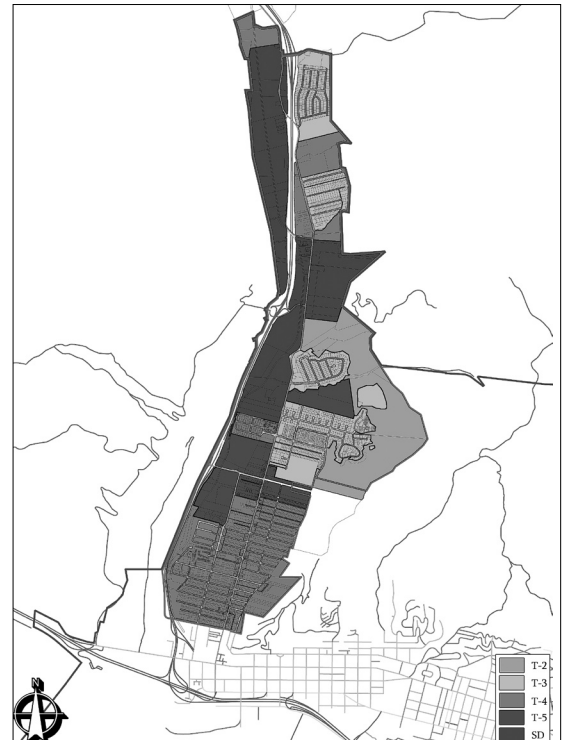
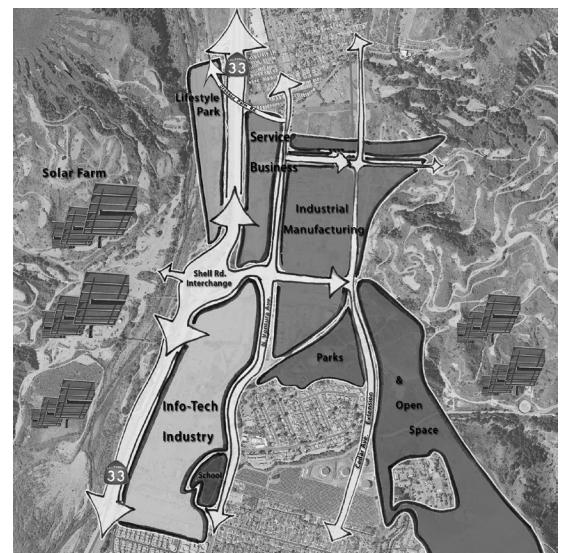


Figure 3
Proposed Transect Designation Map.

Figure 4
Shell District concept plan. Integration of clean technologies, open space, and solar farms to replace the declining oil industry.



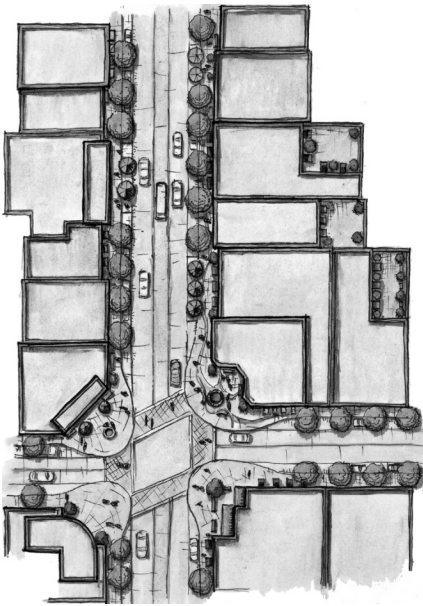


Figure 5
Proposal for Ventura Avenue. This commercial corridor was designated a key opportunity for infill, mixed use, public transit enhancement and economic revitalization.

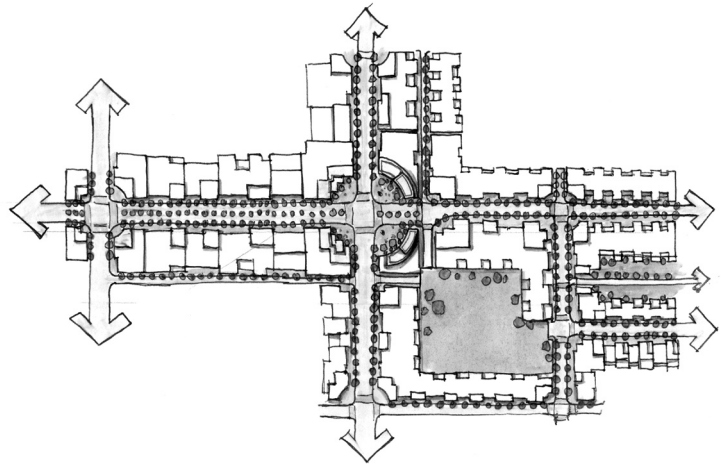
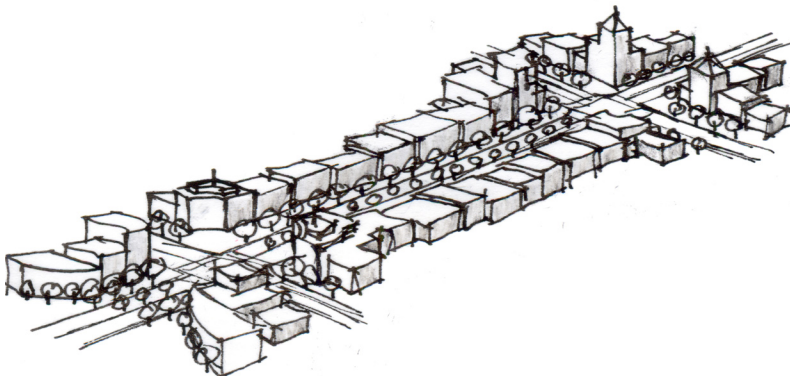


Figure 6
Stanley Street Gateway Plan. The class recognized Stanley Street as a key opportunity for revitalization as a gateway into Westside and North Avenue, as well as a neighborhood center for the community. Massing and landmark buildings would enhance the street as a central node.



Lessons Learned

Both the students and the community greatly benefited from this class effort. Exposure to community settings and “real-life” planning problems helps to enrich students’ experiential learning, stimulates development of the cognitive problem solving skills, and instills a sense of social responsibility. In addition, this approach emphasizes student collaborative work with each other as well as with the members of the community. Citizens are often more willing to participate in discussions at community meetings and public opinion surveys run by students. They seem to be less constrained in expressing their views and are more receptive to the suggestions coming from the students who have no vested interests in the outcomes of particular decisions. This type of attitude expedites the planning process and assists in the final selection and agreement on the proposed development plan. The community gained useful information about itself, its opportunities and the constraints it has to address in accomplishing its long and short-range goals, and the students were given practical experience on the complexities of their chosen profession.