

# West Washington Boulevard Area



## Market and Planning Analysis for the Community Visioning Process



Culver City, California

May 2001



A ULI Advisory Services Technical Assistance Panel Report

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ULI Los Angeles

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# Acknowledgements

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# About ULI

the Urban Land Institute

ULI - the Urban Land Institute is a nonprofit research and education organization that promotes responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.

The Institute maintains a membership representing a broad spectrum of interests and sponsors a wide variety of educational programs and forums to encourage an open exchange of ideas and sharing of experience. ULI initiates research that anticipates emerging land use trends and issues and proposes creative solutions based on that research; provides advisory services; and publishes a wide variety of materials to disseminate information on land use and development.

Established in 1936, the Institute today has more than 17,000 members and associates from over 60 countries, representing the entire spectrum of the land use and development disciplines. Professionals represented include developers, builders, property owners, investors, architects, public officials, planners, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, academicians, students, and librarians. ULI relies heavily on the experience of its members. It is through member involvement and information resources that ULI has been able to set standards of excellence in development practice. The Institute has long been recognized as one of America's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

This ULI Advisory Services Technical Assistance Report, produced by ULI Los Angeles, a district council of the Urban Land Institute, is intended to further the objectives of the Institute and to make authoritative information generally available to those seeking knowledge in the field of urban land use.

Richard M. Rosan  
*President*

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# About ULI Advisory Services

## and the Technical Assistance Panel Program

The goal of ULI's Advisory Services Program is to bring the finest expertise in the real estate field to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 1947, this program has been assisting communities by bringing nationally-recognized real estate, planning, and development experts together to provide unbiased pragmatic advice for addressing complex land use and development issues. Various types of assistance are offered through the Advisory Services Program from two-hour sessions at ULI's Spring and Fall Meetings designed to provide an "over the shoulder" look at a project to five-day panels that assist sponsors by evaluating the market, developing conceptual land use plans, recommending project phasing, and detailing actions to implement the project.

One of the Advisory Services offered is the Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) Program, organized by the District Councils of the Urban Land Institute. ULI Los Angeles has been at the forefront of creating the TAP program, offering the expertise of local ULI members to local government and non-profit entities in one-day panels.

The TAP program guidelines are the same as those which govern the Advisory Services Program:

- All panel assignments promote ULI's mission of providing responsible leadership in the use of the land to enhance the total environment.
- The panel's recommendations are unbiased and cannot be modified substantively once given to the sponsor.
- Each panel team is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI. Panel members are chosen for their knowledge of the panel topic and are selected to provide a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective at development issues.
- A ULI member who has served on a previous assignment chairs the panel.
- No member of the panel has a conflict of interest, real or perceived, by serving on the panel.

To date, ULI Los Angeles has also conducted a technical assistance panel for the Los Angeles Conservancy.

# About ULI Advisory Services

## and the Technical Assistance Panel Program

For more information about how a ULI Los Angeles Technical Assistance panel could benefit your city or non-profit organization, contact James P. Regan at “jregan@waldrealtyadvisors.com” or Jonathan C. Curtis at “jcurtis@sheppardmullin.com”.

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# Introduction

The West Washington Boulevard Area (the “Boulevard”) is within a Project Area of the Culver City Redevelopment Agency (“City” and “Agency”). The Boulevard is an approximate 2.3-mile segment that begins at Walnut/Del Rey Avenues on the west close to the Marina del Rey area and ends at the 405 Freeway on the east. The properties along the Boulevard that are within the City boundaries are for the most part approximately 100 feet on both sides of the Boulevard. The Boulevard plays an important role as the western gateway to the City and was added to the Agency’s Project Area in 1998. Developing a revitalization program for the Boulevard is a major priority of the Agency’s Work Program for 2000-2001.

The initial step in developing a strategy for revitalization of the Boulevard was a facilitated Community Visioning Workshop held March 17, 2001. That meeting focused on (i) developing observations of the present and views of the desired future for the Boulevard; (ii) listing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the Boulevard; (iii) and developing a Vision Statement for the area and key strategies to help future revitalization efforts. A report prepared by Keith Kjelstrom, facilitator of the

Workshop, summarized the results of the Workshop.

The Agency asked ULI Los Angeles district council of the Urban Land Institute (“ULI LA”) to convene a Technical Assistance Panel (“Panel”) to respond to various questions raised by the Agency in response to the Visioning Workshop. The questions dealt with a variety of broad market, planning, and implementation issues. The intent was to receive the Panel members’ thoughts about major issues related to the future of the Boulevard, the Community’s express desires for future land uses and development, and the Agency’s approach to implementing a revitalization effort. The questions posed are listed at the end of this report. The Panel’s deliberations were not constrained by the specific questions raised, and in fact focused more on some issues than others.

Four professionals with expertise in market and redevelopment planning, economics, design, and physical planning, and development served on the Panel. The Panel members reviewed various materials assembled by the Agency, including the Community Workshop Briefing Book, a report summarizing the Community Workshop, and background economic data. The Panel convened on May 14, 2001 for a tour of the



Boulevard and a working session at City Hall. Preliminary observations were shared with Agency staff at the conclusion of this session. The Panel outlined its observations and presented them in an interactive session with community members on the evening of May 17, 2001.

This report does not include all of the Panel member responses to the many questions and issues raised by members of the community at the May 17 meeting. Rather, Panel member observations are incorporated where appropriate in this report.



# Summary

## Panel Observations

### Strengths and Weaknesses strengths

Most Panel members first noted that they saw limited evidence of economic dysfunction in the area. Businesses, land use, and ownership are fragmented and the pattern of land boundaries limit certain development alternatives, but the Boulevard is similar to many older commercial streets and seems to be functioning reasonably well. Therefore, the panel members perceived that isn't as much a question of "where is it broken" as it is "where does this area go in the future."

#### **Apparent healthy economic conditions.**

The Boulevard seems to be an economically healthy area. There are not a lot of vacancies in existing buildings; many buildings seem functionally useful; the demographics and household income levels in surrounding communities are strong; and commercial rent levels are not so high as to squeeze out small businesses, yet are low enough to support reinvestment in the area.

#### **Physical characteristics of the land areas.**

The physical characteristics of the Boulevard, particularly the limited lot depths that are no more than 100 feet in most areas, can be considered a strength as well as a weakness. On the positive side, this pattern encourages lower-density redevelopment solutions that are consistent with community comments from Workshop #1, including mixed-use opportunities (for example, housing above retail).

#### **Existing affordable housing stock.**

The Panel members observed significant affordable housing stock on the Boulevard. This stock is a strong community resource that should be retained and preserved for the area.

#### **Alignment of private and public interests.**

Based on the results of the Workshop #1, the public and private interests seem to be aligned, which is a major strength of this community process. The current pattern of land use and the physical characteristics of the Boulevard indicate that dramatic wholesale changes are unlikely in the



future. The public/private cooperation evident from the planning process to date will need to continue to provide the sort of upgrading and improvements this area will require.

### **Segmented non-linear street with low traffic volume.**

The Panel agreed that certain characteristics of the street itself, such as the non-linear character of the Boulevard and the relatively low volume of traffic, were planning strengths of the area. The character of the Boulevard affords the opportunity to treat it as multiple boulevards for planning purposes, eliminating the difficult task of planning a 2.3-mile long straight street frontage.

## **weaknesses**

The Panel was unanimous in its conclusion that weaknesses can only be defined in the context of goals. Some of the factors identified by the Panel as weaknesses may in fact be strengths depending on the goal of redevelopment, particularly those factors related to the characteristics of the land areas along the Boulevard. For example, if the goal

is to stimulate a high level of new development on a community-based level, then the narrow lot widths and depths create a problem. If, however, the goal is to ensure the long-term viability of the street with local-serving uses, including the continuation of many existing uses, then the lot configuration pattern may not be a weakness, and the streetscape and fragmented ownership may be weaknesses.

Major weaknesses of the area in the opinion of the Panel included the following:

### **Lot pattern.**

Narrow lots and lot depths and the surrounding residential neighborhoods constrain development and inevitably will create conflicts with residents. This limits the scope of land use change that can occur on the Boulevard and will require creative approaches to providing parking for new development. This pattern also limits dramatic, larger-scale development (that may not be a weakness relative to neighborhood stability and lower-density commercial redevelopment).

The limited lot depth in most areas represents the boundary of the cities of Culver City and Los Angeles. The jurisdictional

boundaries present an obstacle for future development by owners with property in both cities and for certain developments.

**Traffic speeds.**

High traffic speeds are a problem for future street front retail development.

**Visual character and level of streetscape improvements.**

The Boulevard lacks amenities and shows a lack of investment in public space. The streetscape is both inconsistent between areas along the Boulevard and virtually non-existent in some areas. The street looks “worn” in many areas.

**Fragmented property ownership.**

This characteristic, which is not atypical of an older commercial area, presents a potential problem if redevelopment focuses on uses which require a certain critical mass to be successful.

**Adjacent residential neighborhoods**

This proximity of commercial uses to the local residential neighborhood is a weakness to the extent that the market parameters of potential development may conflict with adjacent residential uses.

**Existing land use pattern.**

The mix of commercial, industrial, institutional and residential land uses along the Boulevard is a “fact of life.” Although a weakness for major redevelopment projects along

the Boulevard, it does indicate that the Boulevard cannot be planned as a single entity area.

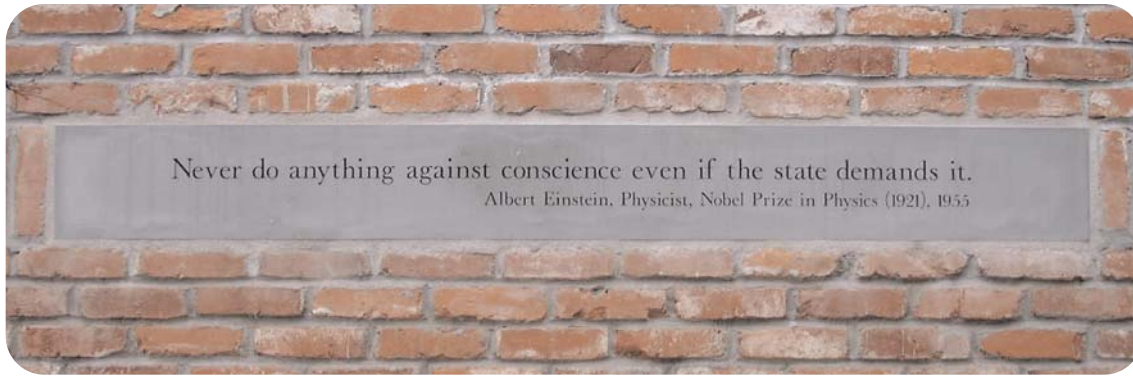
## Economic and Market Considerations

**Regional-serving development.**

The Panel focused on retail and service development uses, with the obvious conclusion that the land areas and lot patterns preclude development of typical larger-scale regional outlets. The largest land holdings are devoted to institutional uses that in all likelihood will not be demolished for consumer-serving development. However, a regional market with a significant above-average income population exists in reasonable proximity to the Boulevard, and uses that attract patrons from beyond the immediate neighborhoods already exist on the Boulevard. This market can be attracted in the future.

**General economics of area.**

The Boulevard is close to major affluent markets in West Los Angeles County. The area seems to enjoy a stable business environment and neighborhoods, with over 30,000 people residing within one mile of the center of the Boulevard corridor. Area economics in the context of supporting new development is not an issue.



**Land cost and land utility.**

The cost of existing improved sites (land and improvements) on the Boulevard is a constraint to new development in two ways: (i) the absolute cost is high, since in most cases it includes existing improvements that have an economic value; and (ii) new development will be most likely be at a lower density than existing development because of standards for setbacks and parking. The Panel sees little demand for major demolition of existing buildings, but rather incremental changes in buildings and tenancy. The implication is that the focus should be on incremental change through enhancements to existing buildings/businesses and introduction of new desired businesses.

**Focus of development.**

The Boulevard is too long to be considered a single market area (next section for discussion on Boulevard segments). Retail development in particular will have to be focused in specific areas since there is not sufficient demand to create major retail areas along the length of the Boulevard, even if the land use pattern encouraged it. In addition, the character and function of the

Boulevard do not indicate any need for dramatic wholesale change of land uses.

**Limited pressure for high-density development.**

Even if the land pattern would permit it, the Panel members do not see significant market demand for high-density development of commercial facilities.

**Parking considerations.**

The provision of adequate off-street parking is a consideration for any new development activity, especially retail uses. Parking is a major economic consideration for any new development or even certain changes in use to existing buildings. The private and public sectors will need to creatively consider including more on-street parking with angled spaces, and the provision of pooled convenient parking to support nodes of development in selected areas

# Segmentation of the Boulevard

The Panel endorsed the Agency staff's segmentation of the Boulevard in Workshop #1.

Washington Boulevard runs through the entire length of the City and this area of the Boulevard is characterized by a wide variety of land uses and low-rise development, with the exception of certain institutional uses with adjacent residential neighborhoods.

The Boulevard breaks into three, and possibly four, major segments that are distinguished by location, character of development, adjacent land use patterns, and development focus. The following comments relate the Panel's observations on these segments.

**Del Rey/Walnut to Wade Street** - This western most segment of the Boulevard is virtually a straight line to the intersection of the Boulevard and Washington Place to the east. The area is characterized by a major regional use (Costco center) and a mixture of commercial and auto-related uses, with limited residential use. Development opportunities immediately west of Walnut on the south side are limited by very small lot depth. In this segment, one has no sense of being in Culver City - the monument sign for Culver City is at Washington Place. This area is the "entry to Culver City" and should focus on small retail/café development uses

that spin off from proximity to Marina del Rey.

## **Wade Street to Centinela** -

The Panel believes that this area in the middle of the Boulevard with the strongest ties to the residential areas has potential for retail/restaurant/service uses, including mixed-use residential over retail. This area could function as a bridge to residential neighborhoods and create a traditional Main Street "sense of place" feel. This area presents the opportunity for incremental change, including methods to slow down the traffic such as with angled parking. The Panel recommended studying the feasibility of limiting traffic to two lanes in this area. High speed, not high volume traffic, is a problem for streetfront retail businesses. Streetscape in this area is important, and small boutique businesses should be encouraged.

The Centinela corner is a significant parcel and a key location anchoring one end of this segment. The Panel believes that the proposed development of a Walgreens drug store at the Centinela corner should be carefully examined in the context of the Panel's recommendations and the community's vision for this area.

## **Centinela to the 405**

**Freeway** - The Panel thought that this segment might be better treated as two areas: (i)



Centinela to McLaughlin, which is a linear extension of Area 2; and (ii) McLaughlin to the 405 Freeway. Both of these areas have a mixture of uses, with a higher proportion of health care/institutional uses from Centinela to McLaughlin and more of a residential character also with institutional uses east of McLaughlin. The easternmost segment adjoins residential neighborhoods and has more of a parkway character. The Boulevard in this area could be heavily planted and residential uses encouraged with supporting commercial.

## Principles to Guide Redevelopment Strategy

The redevelopment approach should (i) create an image/promotion program to define the vision; (ii) inform owners, tenants, the development community and the general public of the City's vision for the Boulevard; (iii) be flexible and proactive, not preventative, with planning and zoning; and (iv) be proactive as opportunities arise for property acquisition and tenant changes.

Redevelopment should focus on incremental change given the character of the Boulevard and existing conditions. The Plan must deal with "fine-grain" issues and identify how to intensify or facilitate development and tenancy changes to encourage changes in uses. This does not imply development of new buildings in all cases, but rather a mixture of new development; services and support facilities such as parking to upgrade tenancy; and the attraction of new types of tenants.

Another key is to approach new development/uses with a creative approach, particularly in the Wade Street-Centinela area. The community should avoid stifling creativity by placing strict restrictions on uses and appearance, but rather establish flexible ground rules for development, signage, and appearance that allow for imaginative ways to establish the area's identity. The



intent should not be to develop an appearance that looks like another new shopping area, but rather a unique identity in Culver City.

Encourage reinvestment in the existing housing stock. This stock is a valuable resource of the City and should not be allowed to deteriorate. The housing resource needs to be carefully monitored and rehabilitated so that it does not decline physically and functionally.

Traffic and parking must be dealt with thoughtfully, especially in the retail-focus area. The need to slow down traffic through a retail development area has been discussed previously. Convenient, pooled parking is needed to support any pockets of retail development. The issue of how to provide such parking (surface vs. structured) and whether parking places limits on the total scope of development needs to be discussed and planned. All retail development is “visitor-serving” by definition, and additional parking will be required with any expansion of retail development in the area. It is not realistic to assume that local neighborhoods by themselves can generate sufficient support for any additional retail development on the Boulevard.

Flexibility is required because of the lack of uniformity in character, land use, economic health, and other factors along the Boulevard. The solution for one area may not be indicated in another. The brick-and-mortar approach to development may be less effective than a creative approach to encouraging new tenants in existing buildings.

## Implications for Redevelopment Focus

The Panel indicated that one Agency implementation focus should be on streetscape - lighting, landscape, and some theme that ties the street together but needn't be the same throughout the entire length of the Boulevard. Some elements of the streetscape and landscape can be continuous and some elements can occur only at specific segments of the Boulevard.

The potential for formation of Business Improvement Districts to help fund certain improvements and programs should be investigated.

The Panel also indicated that, unless Agency resources permit, the Agency not commit all of or even a high percentage of its resources to a streetscape plan. To do so would hamstring the Agency in seizing opportunities that may present themselves to fund improvements for key tenants or to purchase key parcels of property.

The suggested incremental approach to land use changes suggests that some “model projects” may be a valuable approach to integrating land uses on small site. A proactive approach to creating an image that mirrors the vision for the Boulevard is indicated, taking advantage of opportunities as they arise to implement the vision.

# COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

WEST WASHINGTON BOULEVARD COMMUNITY WORKSHOP #2

## List of Questions for ULI Los Angeles May 17, 2001

1. ■ What is your view of the West Washington Boulevard area? What are the key positive attributes and challenges or strengths and weaknesses?
2. ■ Given that view and what you have read and seen of the Boulevard, what are the physical and market barriers to and opportunities for achieving the Community Stakeholders' Vision Statements for the Boulevard?
3. ■ What is your view of the realistic opportunities for attracting both neighborhood-serving uses and regional-serving uses along the Boulevard? Where would these uses be best situated? Given the location of the Boulevard and its physical characteristics, what are the opportunities for tapping regional markets?
4. ■ What is your view of the realistic opportunities and desirability for mixed-use developments (residential units above commercial uses) and for residential uses on the Boulevard?
5. ■ Given your views regarding the opportunities for attracting neighborhood-serving uses and/or regional-serving uses and/or other uses along the Boulevard, what types of streetscape amenities and improvements would best support those uses?
6. ■ Are there any portions of the Boulevard that present better development opportunities than others?

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7. ■ Community stakeholders have expressed the desire to create stronger partnerships to address problems and capitalize on opportunities. Businesses, property owners, residents, the City, and others would like to explore ways that they can work more effectively within and between their groups. Please discuss organizational tools and frameworks that can build communication and partnerships among stakeholders to achieve the vision for revitalizing the Boulevard.

8. ■ One of the characteristics of the corridor is that the commercial lots are narrow and residential development abuts the commercial property. In today's world, what is the best way for a community to ensure that new retail development is "neighborhood friendly", particularly to the adjacent residential neighborhood? How flexible are national retailers in modifying their "corporate image" or prototype to accommodate a particular community's concerns, such as willingness to modify facility requirements, signage, color, or logo design?



# ULI Los Angeles

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