

Where City Government Ends, Neighborhoods Can Begin

As a native San Diegan, as well as someone who has the privilege of working in cities throughout the country, I have thought long and hard on how to make this city more livable. As years pass by, it seems clear that the era of inexpensive land, housing, water, transportation, energy, health care and government, are over -- permanently.

Cities historically have been responsible for public safety, infrastructure construction and maintenance, parks, libraries, code enforcement and other services that create a reasonable and desirable standard of living. Increasingly, and this can be seen in San Diego with our growing pension crisis, the services that made this city livable, will be the services that are the first to go.

The Little Italy Association, a public benefit corporation with 34 members which is under contract to administer the property based "Community Benefit District" and "Business Improvement District," is the model for how neighborhoods should operate in the future. With our nearly \$1 million per year, the board members and staff have worked hard to make this a model neighborhood.

Over the past 10 years, we have worked in the Little Italy Association to attempt to create a 21st century urban neighborhood. What exactly does that mean? It means that we acknowledge that the city is generally responsible for curb to curb, but we are responsible for the curb to property line. It means that we don't expect the city general fund to provide and create great public spaces, create special events, build district identity, to cut and maintain our 800 trees, to empty our 250 trash cans, to water and weed our hanging plants and flowers, to maintain our beloved Piazza Basilone. It means that we, the residents, employees, businesses and property owners of Little Italy are responsible for the

Behind the Counter

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Hosting Café San Diego is Marco Li Mandri, president, New City America, Inc. Send him your thoughts and comments with an e-mail to marco@newcityamerica.com.

maintenance of order and calm in our 48 square blocks of downtown San Diego.

We in Little Italy expect the city of San Diego and CCDC to support our efforts by giving us the capital improvements, (trees, trash cans, new sidewalks, infrastructure repair), and then we use our own community based revenues to enhance those capital improvements. We manage our neighborhood with our own funds. The city of San Diego should do everything to foster and strengthen that model.

San Diego's biggest areas of concern in the future will be what I call the third ring suburbs in San Diego. Areas once considered most desirable due to easy access, large parcels and affordable family style housing, are entering their fifth and sixth decade, devoid of town centers and community amenities.

By and large, the first ring suburbs in San Diego were built in east downtown, Sherman Heights, Golden Hill and Little Italy, or those areas on the periphery of downtown.

The second ring suburbs were those built south of Mission Valley: Point Loma, Mission Hills, Ocean Beach, Kensington, Talmadge, each with a town center and street grid that promoted walkable communities. The third ring was built post World War II, when original town planning concepts were thrown out the window and mass produced housing dominated the way our city was developed. The third ring suburbs -- our areas of greatest concern -- are the communities of Allied Gardens, Linda Vista, Serra Mesas and Clairemont. How will they be revitalized, how will they become more desirable with declining city resources?

In conclusion, San Diego neighborhoods have the golden opportunity to use the model of the Little Italy Community Benefit District/Little Italy Association and examples from other cities to reinvent themselves, to strive for greatness and understand that the era of an inexpensive urban living is permanently over.

Community Benefit Districts, self-assessment districts operated at the community level, are the tools that will make this into a great city. We need to understand what we want and how to achieve it, and the rest will follow.

-- [MARCO LI MANDRI](#)