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## Oakwood neighborhood fights development

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2014-06-11 15:05:32



Walking down several streets in Venice's Oakwood neighborhood, you'll find a contrast between old Craftsman homes and new, modern houses with high fences and hedges that protrude onto the sidewalk.

These sleek, boxy houses are sprouting in Venice, but in the historically African American Oakwood, residents are concerned that affluence is encroaching too rapidly.

For years, minor development projects such as house replacements in Venice have been fast-tracked out of the city's planning department and approved instead by the California Coastal Commission, from which they can also apply for waivers that further expedite projects. Each project is reviewed, but the process doesn't allow for any public hearing or input. Residents are concerned that small projects, which are able to be fast-tracked because they have a low impact individually on the community, will cumulatively change Venice drastically.

Part of the change in the character of the Oakwood neighborhood is that it's starting to feel not-so-neighborly at all to some.

"Porches, yards and back yards are going away," said Rochelle Branch, an Oakwood resident. "They are being replaced with rooftop balconies and side balconies so people are literally looking down on their neighbors."

And demand for property appears to be growing. Many residents report seeing or having conversations with architects or developers who go door-to-door in the neighborhood, asking people to sell their homes for cash.

The Oakwood neighborhood, which is roughly bound in a pentagon shape by Hampton Drive, Lincoln Boulevard and Electric, California and Rose avenues, became a historically African American community before the 1950s, when restrictive land covenants in Los Angeles prevented African Americans from buying land in certain places. Over the years, more Latinos moved into the neighborhood, as well.

In 1978, the city and the commission entered into an agreement that the commission would grant coastal development permits in Venice.

"It was determined that single-family homes and duplexes didn't really need to go through that rigorous public-hearing process because they're considered minor developments," said Charles Posner, a coastal program analyst with the Coastal Commission.

This approval process is much quicker and cheaper than getting approved by Los Angeles. Unlike Los Angeles, however, it doesn't need to take affordable housing into consideration when making decisions.

"Primarily lower-cost rental units (are) being demolished and replaced with houses that only higher-income people would be able to afford," said Posner. "And now that has really picked up steam in the inland part of Venice where Oakwood is, based on a demand for realty there. ... In every case I've seen, the city allowed for affordable housing to be removed and replaced with more expensive housing."

Laddie Williams has lived in the Oakwood neighborhood for most of her life, and her parents moved there in 1946. She is concerned that many small projects in Venice have no public hearings. "It's really hurting the poor and low-income families because they've been here over 60 years, and now it's prime real estate," she

said.

Now, after residents voiced their concerns to city officials and at public meetings, the city and the commission are working together to revise the process. In the meantime, the commission is no longer accepting applications for permits.

Shana Bonstin, a senior planner in the Los Angeles Department of City Planning, said her department isn't sure how the permitting process is working right now.

"That's a terrific question ... and we here in the city don't know, either," she said. "We are awaiting more information from the coastal commission. We're in sort of an uncomfortable position, knowing that there's an interim period, not knowing what a revised process would look like."

If home developments in Venice return to the purview of the city, it could be a problem for homeowners who don't want to spend the time and money on a lengthy process, complete with public hearings.

"That's fine for people who have major projects, but it doesn't work well for people who are just trying to build a new house," said Posner.

Venice has a higher rate of development that replaces single-family homes than anywhere else on the California coast, Posner said. In 2000, 1,284 African Americans lived in Oakwood, and in 2010 that number dropped to 848, according to U.S. Census data. For whites, the number increased from 4,283 to 4,653 during that same period.

And it's not just gentrification or rising property values that residents are concerned about. People don't believe new developments, most of which are small lot subdivisions, conform to the Venice Coastal Zone Specific Plan, which requires developments to adhere to the scale and character of the area. But that's hard to enforce.

"It's kind of an age-old question that comes up in Venice, and I think some of the complexity is that the (specific plan's) language is very subjective," said Bonstin.

Local residents are trying to stop the developments but have little ability to do so; the Venice Neighborhood Council voted to approve a moratorium on small lot subdivisions, but the council has no authority to enforce the moratorium. Citizens also formed a group called the Venice Coalition to Preserve Unique Community Character, which has spoken up at coastal commission meetings about the cumulative impact of small developments in Oakwood and the rest of the community.

"Change is always going to happen. We're not against change," said Williams. "What we're against is the small lot subdivisions that are coming in and you take away a single-family dwelling and you put three expensive units on the property that are three-stories high and looking down on their neighbors."

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