

AN ADVISORY SERVICES PANEL REPORT

Little Saigon Westminster, California



Urban Land
Institute

Little Saigon Westminster, California

Strategies for Transforming Little Saigon

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An Advisory Services Panel Report

ULI—the Urban Land Institute
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About ULI—the Urban Land Institute

The mission of the Urban Land Institute is to provide leadership in the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide. ULI is committed to

- Bringing together leaders from across the fields of real estate and land use policy to exchange best practices and serve community needs;
- Fostering collaboration within and beyond ULI's membership through mentoring, dialogue, and problem solving;
- Exploring issues of urbanization, conservation, regeneration, land use, capital formation, and sustainable development;
- Advancing land use policies and design practices that respect the uniqueness of both built and natural environments;
- Sharing knowledge through education, applied research, publishing, and electronic media; and

- Sustaining a diverse global network of local practice and advisory efforts that address current and future challenges.

Established in 1936, the Institute today has more than 40,000 members worldwide, 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, academics, 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 the world's most respected and widely quoted sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development.

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About ULI Advisory Services

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 assembled well over 400 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for issues such as downtown redevelopment, land management strategies, evaluation of development potential, growth management, community revitalization, brownfields redevelopment, military base reuse, provision of low-cost and affordable housing, and asset management strategies, among other matters. A wide variety of public, private, and nonprofit organizations have contracted for ULI's Advisory Services.

Each panel team is composed of highly qualified professionals who volunteer their time to ULI. They are chosen for their knowledge of the panel topic and screened to ensure their objectivity. ULI's interdisciplinary panel teams provide a holistic look at development problems. A respected ULI member who has previous panel experience chairs each panel.

The agenda for a three-day panel assignment is intensive. It includes an in-depth briefing composed of a tour of the site and meetings with sponsor representatives; interviews with community representatives; and a day for formulating recommendations. On the final day on site, the panel makes an oral presentation of its findings and conclusions to the sponsor. At the request of the sponsor, a written report is prepared and published.

Because the sponsoring entities are responsible for significant preparation before the panel's visit, including sending extensive briefing materials to each member and arranging for the panel to meet with key local community members and stakeholders in the project under consideration, participants in ULI's three-day panel assignments are able to make accurate assessments of a sponsor's

issues and to provide recommendations in a compressed amount of time.

A major strength of the program is ULI's unique ability to draw on the knowledge and expertise of its members, including land developers and owners, public officials, academics, representatives of financial institutions, and others. In fulfillment of the mission of the Urban Land Institute, this Advisory Services panel report is intended to provide objective advice that will promote the responsible use of land to enhance the environment.

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The panel gleaned significant insights from the city's thorough briefing materials as well as from the guided tour expertly provided by Westminster Police Lieutenant Bill Collins. The panel would also like to thank Chief of Police Andrew

Hall, as well as Tami Piscotty and Rosemary Valdivinos in the city manager's office, for their insights and assistance.

While only on site for three days, the panel had the opportunity to collect useful information from more than 30 area stakeholders. The individual perspectives of these Little Saigon business owners, residents, and public officials were crucial to the panel process. These stakeholders are major assets in advancing the interests of their community.

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Foreword: The Panel's Assignment

Growing from a modest clustering of restaurants and small shops geographically centered at the intersection of Bolsa Avenue and Magnolia Street in the late 1970s, to over a million square feet of commercial space distributed over a mile and a half corridor today, the area of the city of Westminster known as Little Saigon has evolved as the de facto capital of the refugee and exile community of the former Republic of South Vietnam.

Little Saigon has emerged within the city of Westminster without direct city involvement in shaping the physical contours or composition of the area. To date, the city has supported the Vietnamese-American community's desire to grow through the exercise of its traditional municipal functions and services. However, for over a decade the city and various stakeholders within the Vietnamese-American community have been actively discussing issues of mutual concern regarding the growth of Little Saigon.

As part of its long-term economic development strategy, the city has raised a number of questions regarding the outlook for continued growth and development in Little Saigon. In order to help frame an overall strategy, the city commissioned the ULI Advisory Services program to address a series of specific planning and development issues in Little Saigon.

Little Saigon is generally recognized as the oldest, largest, and most prominent concentration of Vietnamese commercial activity in the United States. There has been minimal redevelopment or revitalization of properties within the area, although some transitions from industrial to retail uses are now occurring with warehouse and light industrial properties. Fragmented ownership patterns, dated architectural design, traffic congestion, lack of adherence to city codes, and a lack of pedestrian



environment are all well-articulated concerns of the city.

Although the area is presently thriving, the city recognizes twin, competing challenges for Little Saigon. On one hand, Little Saigon has not reached its full potential as a cultural epicenter for the Vietnamese-American community; at present, it is less than the sum of its parts. On the other hand, its very success to date could undermine its

The city of Westminster is exploring ways to enhance and sustain the long-term viability of Little Saigon.

Revitalization is challenged by fragmented ownership patterns, dated architectural design, and inconsistent signage.



long term viability. As the Vietnamese-American community matures, the tastes, preferences, and cultural cohesiveness of the community have been changing and are expected to continue to evolve.

The city presented the panel with a series of questions framed by the following list of general goals and objectives for the study area.

- Improve and revitalize the commercial, cultural, and urban aspects of Little Saigon.
- Create a multi-cultural entertainment and retail destination.
- Establish physical connectivity within the potential market area to create a sense of place and determine if current vehicular and pedestrian circulation inhibit this goal.
- Improve the physical appearance of private property by creating new development and revitalizing existing businesses and buildings.
- Improve the physical appearance of private property by designing strong architectural standards and a landscape program.
- Determine an appropriate signage program to identify properties and businesses.
- Recommend implementation strategies to turn the vision into reality.

In total, the city posed twenty separate questions for the panel to address. During the study process, the panel synthesized information from the briefing materials, the stakeholder interviews, and the tour and then consolidated the city's concerns into a single question:

How can the city of Westminster and the citizens of Little Saigon sustain and enhance this unique cultural and commercial base?

The Study Area

Westminster is located in Orange County in Southern California, neighboring Anaheim, Garden Grove, and the oceanfront cities of Seal Beach and Huntington Beach. The city had an estimated population of 95,896 in 2006, and as a whole largely reflects the suburbanization patterns of Orange County within the larger Southern California Consolidated Metropolitan Area.

The study area, known as Little Saigon, is defined as the area within the city of Westminster starting just west of Magnolia Street and continuing along Bolsa Avenue for approximately one and a half miles until just east of Ward Street, and incorpo-

rates some parcels to the north extending as far as Sabre Lane. Little Saigon's spine is Bolsa Avenue, which runs through the center of the study area and connects with California SR-39 (Beach Boulevard), one of the city's major thoroughfares and commercial corridors. The area is also easily accessible by two highly-traveled freeways, SR-22 and I-405.

The emergence and growth of Little Saigon is solely attributable to geopolitical events that culminated in April 1975 with the fall of the former Republic of South Vietnam and the commencement of the on-going displacement of its citizens. Founded in 1870 as a Presbyterian Temperance Colony, Westminster was a bedroom community with a white majority who benefited from the World War II defense industry boom.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, anti-communist Vietnamese fled the now former Republic of South Vietnam and many were relocated to military bases around the United States, including Camp Pendleton, in Southern California. Some Vietnamese resettled in Westminster and opened businesses along Bolsa Avenue, which had begun to decline since the opening of the Westminster Mall. Others settled in the neighboring communities of Santa Ana and Garden Grove.

A second wave of immigration occurred in the 1980s, with many immigrants of Chinese-Vietnamese ancestry settling in this area of Orange County. According to the 2000 Census, Westminster has a Vietnamese-American population of just over thirty percent. Little Saigon's population is primarily made up of Vietnamese and Chinese, but Hispanics, Whites, Laotians, and Cambodians also populate the area.

Over the following decades, the Vietnamese businesses grew and soon Vietnamese business owners began building shopping malls in the area, including the Asian Garden Mall and Little Saigon Plaza, along with smaller mom-and-pop shops. There are numerous restaurants and services geared to the Vietnamese community, including multi-lingual banks. The area is home to several newspapers, radio and television stations, and a burgeoning music industry that serves a worldwide Vietnamese community.



Location map.



Regional map.

Single-family homes and several trailer parks surround the commercial district, many of which are walled off from the shopping areas and the street. The area has a mainly suburban, low density character, with strip shopping centers, low-density uses, six lanes of traffic on Bolsa Avenue, and very limited pedestrian activity.

While Little Saigon caters mostly to the Vietnamese-American community, the city and local business owners are interested in expanding its customer draw, including attracting tourists visit-

Asian Garden Mall is one of the few examples of a medium-density shopping mall in Westminster.



The area is dominated by low-density strip malls.



ing Southern California and nearby attractions such as Disneyland. In 1996 a local business owner designed a pedestrian-friendly bridge that would connect several of the shopping centers. However, the community rejected the bridge as being too heavily Chinese in its design and the project was dropped. The city has recently approved the construction of two decorative arches at the community's Ward and Magnolia Street entrance points. The cast iron arches, which will depict the journey of Vietnamese-Americans since the end of the Vietnam War, are viewed as a first step in developing Little Saigon into a destination.

Study Area Development Issues

The panel recognizes that Little Saigon is important not only to the city of Westminster, but also to Vietnamese-Americans at large. Since its unplanned inception over thirty years ago, Little

Saigon has grown to over one million square feet of private commercial infill development. Although it may at first seem like a typical sprawling suburban commercial strip, Little Saigon stands as a unique place where Vietnamese-Americans can find not only uncommon goods and services, but also a cultural reference point. Little Saigon is similar in the American cultural mosaic to Brooklyn, New York at the turn of the last century. While physically unremarkable, both areas provide an important ethnic enclave inside a large city. Immigrants join together to pursue an improved standard of living, while at the same time preserve their cultural roots and practices. In Little Saigon, as also happened in Brooklyn, the later generations are moving away from the old neighborhood and maintain minimal ties to the area. Little Saigon would therefore benefit by broadening its appeal to both local residents and the national Vietnamese community.

During the panel process, the members concluded that there are several opportunities that Little Saigon could leverage to coalesce their neighborhood into a complete place and draw an expanded customer base to the area. These opportunities include:

- Enlarging its retail/commercial mix and scope of activity;

- Increasing and diversifying its housing inventory to include housing for seniors, live/work units, affordable- and market-rate multi-family housing, rental units, and for sale products;
- Promoting and expanding entertainment uses by constructing cinemas, live music venues, and outdoor cultural events; and
- Providing more cultural and educational activities such as museums and art programs.

The panel also concluded that there is no clear, coherent, and consolidated vision for what Little Saigon may be over the coming years. Many plans and suggestions have been advanced that have no clear commonality or consistency between them. None of these development plans offer strategies for unifying the area.

To date, development in Little Saigon has favored an incremental, project-driven approach. In the panelists' experiences, this type of approach is relatively easy to execute and the attendant publicity generates some positive, short-term momentum for other development. However, this incremental approach will not produce a long-term, sustainable development base for Little Saigon. Specifically, in the absence of a guiding framework, a strategy that is dependent on unknown variables such as land availability, public sentiment, and ever-changing market conditions is not likely to create a complete foundation for the area. Furthermore, the lack of a framework creates uncertainties for investors and uses, and generally results in uses that do not compliment each other.

The panel observed that Little Saigon is at or near a critical and timely opportunity. The city and the stakeholders of Little Saigon have the opportunity to shift the development paradigm from incremental to transformational. This would involve a joint effort to create a complete vision for the area. While this may be daunting at first, the panel believes that such an approach will create significant long-term potential, considerably greater than an ongoing incremental approach. A transformational approach that includes a fully realized visioning process will require participation and engagement from the city, civic and cultural

organizations, property owners, businesses, and developers.

In recommending a transformational approach for the near- and long-term development in the Little Saigon area, the panel is mindful that the following specific issues currently constrain redevelopment of the study area.

- Code violations and enforcement matters continue to plague commercial businesses and properties in the Little Saigon area. The city reports an on-going challenge in code compliance in the area. During the panel's stakeholder interview process, the panel was repeatedly advised that many businesses and property owners do not speak English, and do not understand the necessity for, or complexities of, code compliance. To the panel, the issue of code compliance, including payment of state-mandated sales taxes, is a problem that could dissuade the city from investing significant time and resources in Little Saigon.
- Current land use patterns, parcelization patterns, and zoning all impede concentrated development and perpetuate the linear, low-density character of the area.
- Traffic patterns and volumes, parking issues, and pedestrian circulation conflicts abound. The city has installed medians and added some traffic signal improvements, yet these remain below the standard for high-density, urban development.
- City resources and policies do not provide for conventional redevelopment initiatives in Little Saigon. The entire city is currently designated a redevelopment area, and traditional funds for redevelopment are programmed into the city capital improvements budget. This renders tax increment financing—a major traditional tool of redevelopment—unavailable. Furthermore, the city has adopted a pay-as-you-go approach by specifically precluding itself from financing long-term facilities projects and participating in public-private ventures.

The panel addressed these development challenges in an overall framework of findings and recommendations.



A traffic-calming median installed by the city.

The Panel's Framework

After reviewing the substantial market studies available in the briefing materials and visiting the Little Saigon area over a three-day period, the panel chose to organize its responses to the city's questions in terms of three framing elements. These elements will guide the policies that are needed to support Little Saigon's reinvestment and revitalization for the immediate future and beyond. The three framing elements are:

- A Physical Framework for Transformation
- The Substance of Transformation
- Roles and Responsibilities in the Transformation

These framing elements convey the essence of a successful revitalization program for Little Saigon. For the most part, the panel's findings and recommendations are directed to the near and intermediate term.

Summary of Findings

From a purely physical point of view, Little Saigon is not a classic redevelopment or revitalization project area. Although it has major physical and design challenges to its continued expansion and evolution, its businesses appear vibrant and thriving today. Additionally, the name Little Saigon covers a larger geographic area than was defined for the purpose of the panel. This name does not communicate that the defined study area is the world-wide center of the Vietnamese community that was displaced from the former Republic of South Vietnam, and their descendants. A stronger, more compact physical identity, together with a more appropriate name could better represent the unique commercial and cultural importance of the area.

A coherent, consistent vision for the future build-out of the study area is a prerequisite for a cohesive place to emerge out of what has been a largely unplanned evolution of over 1 million square feet of development. An agreed-upon vision by all the stakeholders will make it possible for private and public interests to make informed land use and development decisions. Such a vision will also help these decision-makers balance the trade-offs required to introduce public and civic space that will complement and reinforce ongoing private development.

An array of place-making tools can be customized to support and facilitate ongoing development and revitalization. The panel's specific suggestions in applying these tools are meant to be illustrative only. A visioning process involving all major stakeholders should specifically examine and adopt more definitive guidelines on such matters as districts and their land use character, density, composition, and agreed-upon boundaries.

A Physical Framework for Transformation

As it stands now, Little Saigon is viewed as an amorphous entity, with no clear starting and ending point and no center. The panel sees a need to define the broader area generally perceived to be Little Saigon, to distinguish the area from other Little Saigons in the United States, and to capture the opportunity for a more concentrated urban core as the central focal point of the larger area.

The area is made up of a unique set of discrete, strongly interconnected commercial districts that together could become Downtown Saigon USA. The area along Bolsa Avenue should be divided into specialized districts, each with their own draw and purpose that would be more compact than the current mile and a half, ribbon-like study area.

The districts suggested by the panel in the balance of this report are illustrative of the differentiation that could be achieved. The specific character and geographic boundaries of these districts should emerge from a development and revitalization visioning process in which all community stakeholders participate.

Planning for Special Districts

An overall physical and functional plan will be necessary to create a well-defined series of districts that are interconnected visually and physically in order to support new business, culture, recreation, and entertainment opportunities. To assist the city and community stakeholders in creating the districts, the panel has created a series of illustrative districts that endeavor to strengthen and improve what exists, provide new opportunities for future growth, and create anchors that diversify the market base and character of Little Saigon.

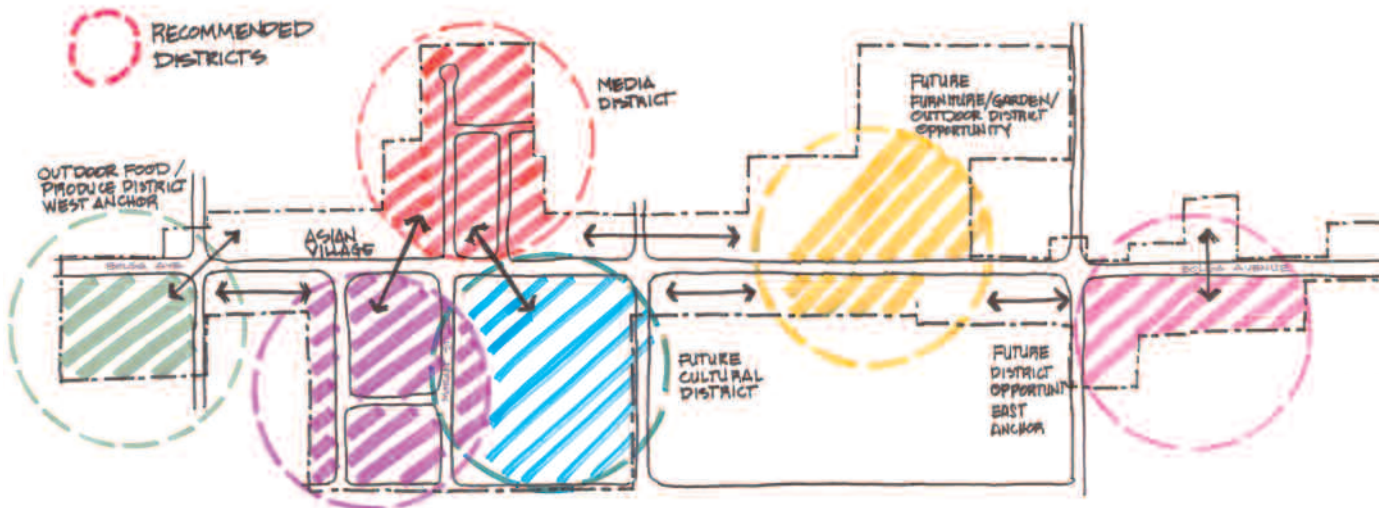
Outdoor Food/Produce District

The Outdoor Food/Produce District would form the western gateway into Little Saigon with an Asian-themed food market. This district would include both indoor and outdoor produce and food sales, such as ornamental plants, flowers, and vegetables.

Asian Village District

The Asian Village District would create a dense, traditional, Asian retail center that would expand

Recommended specialized districts along Bolsa Avenue.



and include Moran and West State streets. This district would add infill commercial and residential uses while creating parking behind the buildings. The centerpiece of this district should be a plaza and open space on Bolsa Avenue and Moran Street.

Cultural District

A Cultural District would reinforce Little Saigon as the cultural heart of Vietnamese-America with a National Vietnamese Cultural and Language Center, a hotel and conference center, and an arts center and galleries. This district would also include a Vietnamese Center for Entrepreneurship that would encourage and guide the development of locally-owned businesses and be a central voice for local business leaders.

Media District

Little Saigon is already the national and international center of Vietnamese information and entertainment. The Media District would further focus on radio, film, television, music, print media, and advertising production to enhance this role. The district should engage the community with glass-walled, street-front studios, similar to NBC's *Today Show* and should also create an outdoor venue for live productions.

Furniture/Garden/Outdoor District

The Furniture/Garden/Outdoor District would strengthen the existing market in Asian furniture and garden and outdoor furnishings, and would concentrate new products and services such as architects, interior designers, landscape contractors, building contractors, kitchens, and housewares.

The panel encourages the city and community to identify additional future district opportunities that strengthen existing connections and enhance Little Saigon's unique sense of place by filling in gaps in the commercial fabric. Districts would include compatible uses that logically expand market opportunities such as cinemas, theaters, art, and galleries. In addition, land use policy and plans should create new opportunities for urban, mixed-use residential, office, and retail spaces.

The Substance of Transformation

Place-making is the core physical strategy for a substantive transformation of Little Saigon. The building blocks of place-making include changing zoning practices, changing land uses, using design ordinances, and introducing public and civic spaces into the commercial fabric.

During its time in the study area, the panel observed several strengths and weaknesses that could, respectively, help or hinder the area's future development. One of the most obvious advantages is the area's high traffic counts. Traffic counts along Little Saigon's major spine, Bolsa Avenue, range from 35,000 to 40,000 vehicles per day. Although this creates a conflicted pedestrian environment, it does demonstrate that the area is well traveled and points to a potentially higher customer base.

Secondly, market demand for available space in the area is high and reflected in a low area-wide space vacancy rate. Most buildings within the study area are occupied, contributing to a vibrant area with high market growth. Another advantage is the presence of a well-established ethnic community. The community provides a built-in, loyal client base. Vietnamese-Americans and other groups from Westminster and surrounding areas regularly visit Little Saigon. In addition, the ethnic base has a strong entrepreneurial ethic.

Little Saigon also has several limitations to place-making. One of the most formidable limitations is the absence of vacant land. To grow, the area will need to intensify existing developed properties through design or expand linearly at its current density.

Zoning is another major challenge for Little Saigon. The panel strongly encourages the city to consider new zoning tools such as form-based codes that would bring a sense of compatibility and scale to the area. Current, Euclidean zoning as it stands

now does not promote an identifiable vision and creates incompatible uses, such as industrial next to residential, reducing the resident's quality of life. In addition, the corridor is not pedestrian-friendly; the lack of parking compounds this problem and constrains additional development.

In weighing the strengths and limitations of Little Saigon, the panel concluded that the study area does not need to be revitalized per se, as it is a successful area in terms of traffic and commercial uses. The panel also concluded that the fundamental challenges are transitioning older and conflicting uses, such as low density warehouses and antiquated strip shopping centers, unlocking land for further private development, and introducing public and civic spaces.

To approach this challenge via place-making, three tools are discussed in detail on the following pages: a change in zoning through a means such as form-based codes, an improvement of architectural design standards and signage, and a specific use for each district within the panel's illustrative framework.

Form-Based Codes

The panel believes that a new approach to zoning is needed to entice developers and property owners to consider redevelopment. Form-based zoning should be applied and tailored to the specific districts of Little Saigon to encourage redevelopment and improve the area's physical appearance. While the existing zoning would remain and existing businesses could operate without change, the form-based overlays would help businesses or developers maximize development opportunities consistent with the character of the particular district.

Form-based codes are relatively new and evolving planning tools. Rather than concentrate on type of use, they regulate the key aspects of urban form,

Bolsa Avenue, the main artery in Little Saigon, is characterized by high traffic counts and very few pedestrians.



such as a building's scale, its proximity to the street, and its public facade. Different sections of an area can be coded for varying densities, minimum and maximum building heights, and percentages of frontage types.

Form-based codes make streets and buildings work together to create a desirable public realm, while subsequently adding value to surrounding properties. For example, form-based overlay zones have been successfully used in Fort Worth, Texas, and West Palm Beach, Florida. These zones provide incentives to developers by allowing bonus density in exchange for incorporating certain uses, providing public open space, and agreeing to other project-related attributes deemed in the public interest.

Form-based codes are not to be confused with design guidelines; they have a separate purpose. In most cases form-based codes regulate the general footprint of a building, not its architectural vernacular or use. Moreover, developers and the public are put at ease with the certainty provided by form-based codes, and in turn, certainty provides less opposition, increases investment, and helps expedite the review and approval process. See www.formbasedcodes.org for additional information.

Adoption of form-based codes would be one of the end results of an overall visioning process for the area. Once the shared vision has been reached, it will need to be converted into an objective code that replaces contradictory provisions in other ordinances. Form-based codes can be optional, not mandatory, but developers are encouraged to follow the codes in return for such rewards as expedited review, tax increment financing, and tax credits. Places such as Petaluma, California, and Arlington County, Virginia, have used form-based codes to encourage economic development and to create visually-appealing, pedestrian-friendly communities.

Form-based codes would be especially helpful in diminishing the variety of building shapes and heights in Little Saigon. The buildings could still retain a distinct style, but form-based codes bring an underlying uniformity that would create visual rhythm along the street (e.g., no large setbacks, no blank facades, parking in rear).

Form-based codes could also be employed to strengthen pedestrian connections between the street and buildings and between buildings by requiring pathways, landscaping, and wider sidewalks as well as by introducing public places into the privately-developed fabric of Little Saigon.

Properties that do not currently contribute to the long-term plan could be encouraged to redevelop through the use of a form-based overlay zone. For example, the surrounding mobile home parks could be placed in an overlay zone to allow for more height and density, in return for a development that meets stated public community objectives and standards.

The panel recognizes that the potential redevelopment of such a property is a highly sensitive issue and clearly understands the city's position against using eminent domain. Therefore, such an initiative would need to come from the owners of the mobile home parks, or other property interest. Any plan that involves a form-based overlay would in all likelihood need to incorporate the replacement of affordable units, such as a bonus density tied to the provision of affordable housing within the development.

The panel emphasizes that new zoning tools would not require an owner to close a business or redevelop a property, but would provide incentives to do so. Furthermore, the panel strongly advises the city against pushing for redevelopment by up-zoning properties. Form-based overlay zones that incorporate specific public design and space requirements will ensure that the city receives an appropriate quid pro quo for increasing land value through increased intensity of uses.

Architectural Design Standards and Signage

For an area to have a sense of place, it should be immediately evident to visitors and residents that they have arrived at a unique destination. This is an important tool in place-making. In addition to improved signage, this place-making can be accomplished through strong architectural and landscaping design.

Comments made to the panel during the interview process made it clear that the current architectural regulations are not working. They promote a canned version of Asian architecture that is not authentically Vietnamese. Furthermore, the panel was advised that some projects have either not been required to comply with current design guidelines or the results have not been successful.



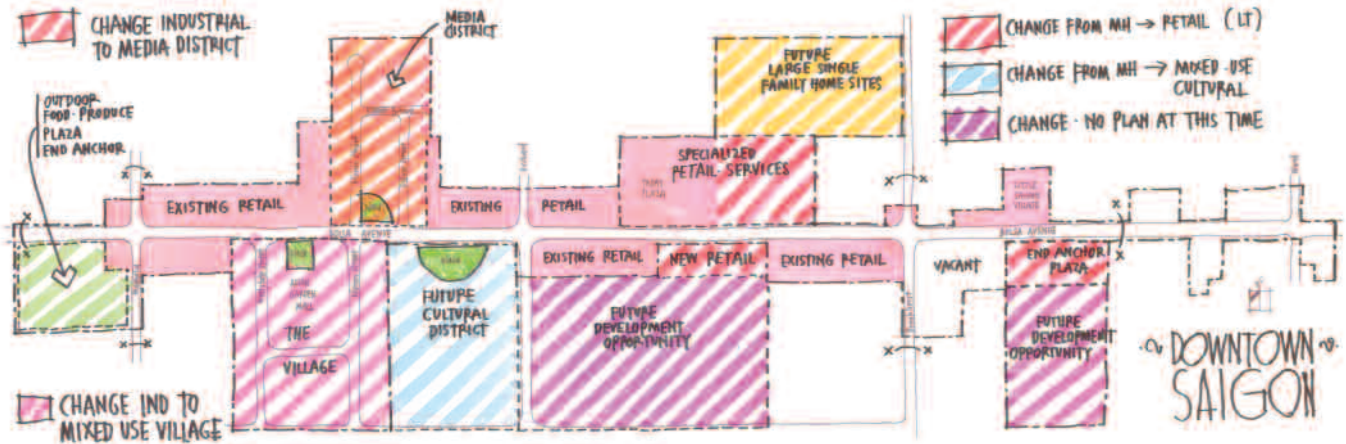
Vietnamese signage discourages potential non-Vietnamese customers.

The panel recommends that the city revisit the subject of design guidelines and consider retaining one of the many firms that specialize in this type of practice. This process would include creating a pattern book of agreeable design standards. Many Vietnamese relate to the French-Vietnamese style that includes interpretations of Beaux Artes to Art Deco. There should be an opportunity to include these styles within the districts.

The existing signage in Little Saigon is a constrained suburban style that does not add to its visual appeal. Moreover, the business signs seem to serve the needs of local residents as they are written most prominently in Vietnamese (with some English translation). If the city wishes to draw non-Asians and tourists, a comprehensive sign program is needed that would include:

- Special thematic gateway signs (such as the arches that are presently being considered),
- Signs that indicate the location of parking areas, and
- Directional signs that indicate the locations of districts, businesses, and areas of note.

While the panel believes that signage design would need to have some basic consistency, it



Land use changes along Bolsa Avenue.

does not have to be uniform across Little Saigon. Different districts could have their own style of signage. For example, the Media District could have a modern motif, while the Cultural District could use traditional designs.

The panel also suggests livening up the signage through the use of color and form. Culturally-appropriate, animated, or neon signs could invigorate a retail, restaurant, or entertainment destination. In Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown, local Chinese artists designed lighted artwork that now hangs over the Metro station entrances. While not only attractive, these pieces also serve as beacons for those looking to enter the subway.

Land Use Changes in the Proposed Districts

The district concept can be further refined by looking at specific development clusters within each district. Little Saigon has several successful projects that can anchor and spur future development. However, new development must consider zoning, design guidelines, district themes, and adjoining uses. This approach ensures the development of complimentary uses and encourages connections among specific projects. Defining these clusters will also help the city concentrate on areas of development rather than on single projects.

In order to accomplish specific goals for each district, the city should consider changing specific zoning for land uses. The panel offered the fol-

lowing specific suggestions for some of the proposed districts.

The Asian Village District

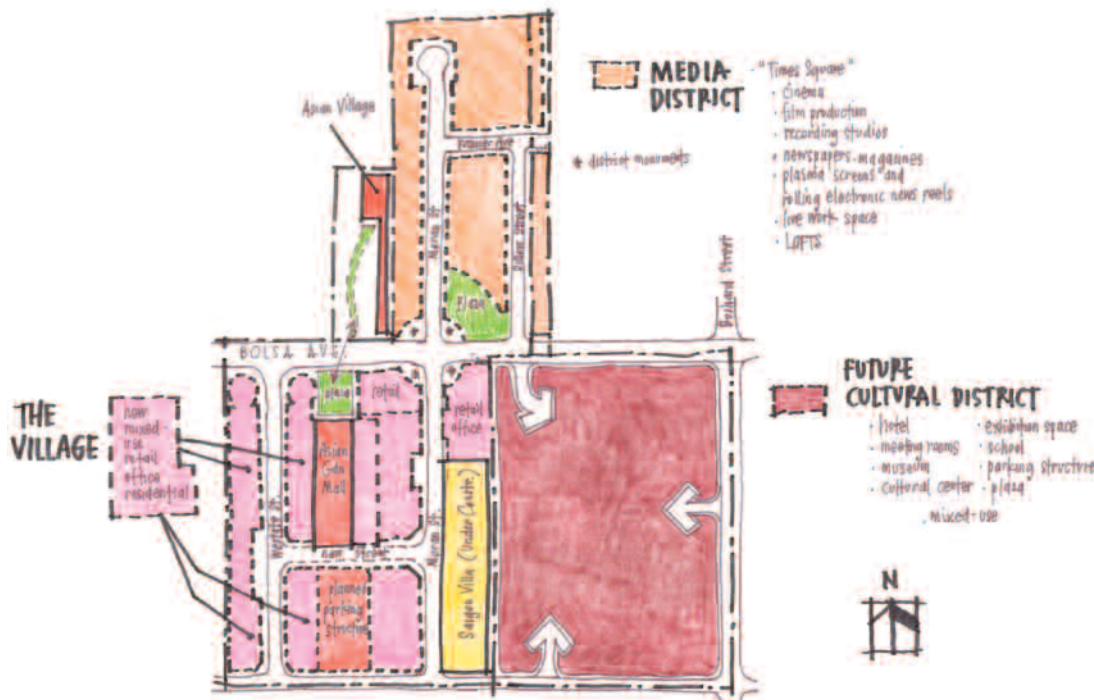
Changing the industrial zoning to mixed-use village zoning would dramatically improve the feel of the Asian Village District by eliminating incompatible uses and encouraging residential development. This change would build upon the area's new housing for seniors, the Asian Garden Mall, the planned parking structure, and the continuous street network.

Side streets could accommodate pedestrian-friendly street retail uses and sidewalk cafes. Any new development should address its own parking demands and help correct the parking problem. Infill development in this district could take the form of linear buildings that would be adjacent to the proposed parking structure and the sides of the mall. In addition, the opportunity for a plaza and gathering space in front of the mall should be explored.

The Media District

Changing the industrial zoning to media district zoning in this area would eliminate incompatible uses, encourage pedestrian activity, and support 24-hour use. This change would build upon the area's concentration of print media, radio, music studios, and film industry uses. The area could be the hipper, younger, edgier part of the neighborhood and could include coffee shops and gathering places, Vietnamese cinema, and a new home for the Vietnamese film festival.

Specific development clusters within the specialized districts.



The district should encourage exhibition space for visual arts and entertainment production visible to the street. Such lively expression of media could be enhanced by a scrolling electronic message board with news headlines, as in New York City's Times Square. A contemporary architecture style with live/work space and lofts would be appropriate for this district. The district's uses, appeal, and energy would keep younger generations in the area.

The Cultural District

An area should be designated for creating a Cultural District that would expand upon the Asian Garden Village mixed-use area. This area would include more retail and affordable residential uses, as well as public plazas for the Tet Festival activities or other events. This district could also include a hotel, meeting rooms, cultural center, exhibition space, language school, city services substation,

business assistance center, sculpture garden, or other uses that would reinforce the non-commercial cultural aspects of the community. The plan for this area should include structured parking.

In the panel's opinion, these three areas together—the Asian Village District, the Media District and the Cultural District—are the core of a downtown area for Little Saigon. This geographic center of activity will support the highest density of development, integrate public and civic spaces with commercial and residential uses, and facilitate pedestrian activity and connections between districts.

Roles and Responsibilities in the Transformation

The panel was surprised to discover that there are few civic organizations that are focused on the betterment of Little Saigon. Most of the interplay on the development of Little Saigon occurs between the city and individual property owners. Further, the panel was equally surprised that property owners in the Little Saigon area do not have an organization to represent themselves as a whole before the city.

Civic organizations, private sector interests, and the city are all equally important participants in arriving at a complete vision for Little Saigon. Each of these parties also has a role in the realization of the vision. The recommended roles and responsibilities of each are addressed in the balance of this section.

Civic Organizations

The panel observed that civic organizations are notably not active in the evolving development of Little Saigon. Further, their lack of presence within the Little Saigon area is equally notable. Without the participation and presence of such organizations, it is unlikely that a complete place is achievable for Little Saigon.

A cursory review of the current landscape indicates that there are over ninety organizations serving the Asian and Vietnamese communities in Orange County. Of these, approximately two dozen are located in Westminster. Generally, these organizations are national and international in affiliation and cover a broad scope of interests, including arts and culture, seniors, students, politics, religion, mutual assistance, and media. There is much breadth in these civic organizations, yet there appears to be limited capacity in terms of staff and resources.

The appropriate role of civic organizations is twofold. The first is to provide mutual assistance where there is none now. The second is to sponsor

traditional civic functions and facilities in the areas of arts, culture, and education.

Technical Assistance Center

Little Saigon's business community is founded on a strong entrepreneurial spirit, yet the panel found a lack of Vietnamese-specific business assistance centers that could advise community members on how to start and maintain their businesses. Despite Orange County's large Vietnamese population, its U.S. Small Business Association branch office has only one Vietnamese-speaking staff member, and neither the city of Westminster nor the Chamber of Commerce appear to have any capacity in this area.

A survey of merchants in Seattle's Little Saigon found that most businesses had a strong desire to expand to serve a wider customer base, but few had the capacity, resources, or knowledge to do so. The survey also found that Vietnamese-American business owners often had little knowledge of marketing techniques, especially to those outside the community, and wanted to know more about merchandising and storefront appeal. This type of training for merchants could be especially valuable in attracting tourists to Little Saigon.

To this end, the panel recommends that the city establish a Vietnamese Business Technical Assistance Center (VBTAC) or Center for Entrepreneurship that would offer targeted, culturally-specific technical assistance with:

- Business planning and business operations;
- Market assessment, marketing, and merchandising;
- Local regulation, permitting, and licensing compliance; and
- Accounting systems, tax compliance, and inventory control.

The VBTAC could serve as a culturally specific conduit for community members to access information about development initiatives and for the city to access feedback from community members. The city could partner with a community organization such as a business group, community college, or media outlets, or an existing technical assistance provider like the Orange County Small Business Development Center (SBDC). Possible sources of funding include public sources such as the Small Business Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grants, sliding scale fees from clients, and private sources such as local Vietnamese-American property owners.

Civic and Cultural Initiatives

As outlined in the preceding sections, there is an acute opportunity to enhance civic, cultural, and community activities in Little Saigon. If this concept is endorsed by a vision process and its associated physical plan, then there is a clear role for civic and cultural organizations. This role is principally in the location of desired facilities within Little Saigon and the sponsorship of their funding and operation. Examples of such facilities include cultural centers, museums, language schools, and senior centers. City leadership in enabling such civic and cultural organizations through assistance in land assembly and non-monetary support of facility development and program mission will be essential.

Private Interests: Property Owners and Area Businesses

The panel observed the need for a common, centralized voice to address the whole of Little Saigon, not just individual property concerns. After considering several options to accomplish this unified voice, the panel suggests that the city encourage property owners and businesses to sponsor a Business Improvement District (BID) for Little Saigon. A BID would provide the strongest demonstration of support by private interests to fully participate in the revitalization of Little Saigon. In contrast to a business interest lobbying association, a BID would clearly signal that property owners and area businesses are fi-

nancially committed to the long-term development and operation of Little Saigon.

A BID is a public-private partnership in which property and business owners of a defined area elect to make a collective contribution to the maintenance, development, and promotion of their commercial district. It is, in some ways, similar to the management of a suburban shopping mall or a residential community association. BIDs are funded through special assessments collected from the property owners in the defined boundaries of the district and the proceeds are used to improve, promote, and maintain the area. The scope of activities would include:

- Operating and maintaining common public areas;
- Establishing uniformity of operations, such as hours, signage, landscaping and lighting, and marketing between and among existing businesses;
- Coordinating and facilitating public events and promotional activities;
- Providing a liaison between businesses and the city regarding regulatory and code matters;
- Serving as the conduit for shared parking solutions;
- Serving as the centralized voice of property owners and businesses in dealing with the city on operations, planning, and development matters; and
- Advertising, marketing, and promoting Little Saigon as a destination.

The panel strongly believes that the BID should be sponsored by the private interests in Little Saigon in order to express their commitment to the long-term operation and viability of the area as a significant commercial and retail destination. The city, as described in the following section, has a role in facilitating the formation and start-up of a BID.

The City's Role

The panel has specifically not endorsed a traditional redevelopment process, nor does it view one as feasible under current city policies and resources. Therefore, the panel views the city's role as blended between a leader/facilitator, an enlightened, steady-handed regulator, and a public sector entrepreneur. The panel does not believe there is a clear road map for this type of blended role. However, a guiding principle for such a role states that if private interests and civic groups do not engage after the city initiates, then the city should redeploy its time and resources elsewhere. In other words, the panel is not confident that a solely city-sponsored effort will yield long-term results in Little Saigon.

The panel recommends that the city begin engaging private interest and civic groups through an organized and managed visioning process. This visioning process would involve all of Little Saigon's stakeholders, as well as the major Vietnamese-American civic organizations. The end goal would be to arrive at a common point of agreement on the physical form for Little Saigon, the configuration and composition of districts, and the introduction and location of public and civic space. The visioning process should also address development priorities and connections between districts.

In making this recommendation, the panel is cognizant of the time and level of commitment involved in such a visioning process. While it is time consuming and often frustrating to balance conflicting community interests, the panel's experience is that such a process will serve not only to set a decision framework for the years ahead, but also to serve as a forum to build good will and common understanding among all principal participants.

Arlington County, Virginia's experience with a form-based codes visioning project for its Columbia Pike area would be an appropriate example for the city to consider. More information about this project can be found on line at:

<http://www.columbiapikepartnership.com/FORM/92928.html>. After the visioning process is completed and the private sector has demonstrated an ongoing commitment, the planning, zoning, and other regulatory guidelines are to be drafted and adopted.

In summary, therefore, the primary recommendations of this panel are for the city to engage in a visioning process for Little Saigon and, upon its completion, to pursue an appropriate physical place-making strategy based on the particular vision that emerges. The panel offers the following additional recommendations to the city:

- Assign staff to specifically handle code enforcement education and economic and community development specifically for Little Saigon. Preferably this staff would be fluent in Vietnamese and maintain an office in the Little Saigon area.
- Serve as a source of start-up capital or service in lieu of essential civic activities such as a BID.
- Facilitate private land assembly for key consolidation parcels such as industrial uses in the mixed-use village district and the older shopping center with fractured ownership.
- Participate as a joint venture partner for projects of merit that would not occur without city involvement.

These additional recommendations, while not subordinate to the headline recommendation of the panel, are of a lower priority. The panel has included these recommendations as a guidepost to a more intensified role the city can play in revitalizing Little Saigon, provided the other stakeholders engage with the city during the visioning process.

Conclusion

It was not apparent to the panel until well into its second day in Westminster that Little Saigon is a truly unique place. The panel remains uncertain as to whether the stakeholders and residents of the city fully appreciate that Little Saigon, as presently constituted and as it may evolve over the years ahead, is a one-of-a-kind, authentic place that compares with the French Quarter in New Orleans, Charlestown in Boston, or Chinatown in San Francisco in its uniqueness, if not in its physical presence.

Parallel Story

The panel would like to share the results of a similar Advisory Services Panel with Little Saigon's stakeholders. In 2007, ULI conducted a panel in Annandale, Virginia. This suburb of Washington, D.C., is home to a strong ethnic community, enjoys easy access to two of the region's freeways, and is split by a significant commercial corridor that brings business to the area but also impedes pedestrian activity.

The sponsor asked the panel to recommend strategies for revitalizing the area as a more vibrant, pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use center compatible with adjacent residential areas. Just as in Little Saigon, the Annandale panel recommended a visioning process followed by a place-making strategy based on that vision.

Annandale, Virginia

Annandale, Virginia, is a suburban community near Washington, D.C., and is home to a significant collection of Korean, Hispanic, and other ethnic businesses. Beginning in the 1950s, Annandale grew from a rural crossroads into a major retail center. As major retailers moved away over time, immigrant entrepreneurs identified an opportunity and invested in Annandale. Today, Annandale contains more than 2 million square feet of com-

mercial space that houses a wide variety of ethnic businesses drawing customers from throughout the metropolitan area and beyond. Many residents perceive Annandale to be a declining commercial area despite retail rents, land prices, and vacancy rates competitive with the region's most successful retail areas.

Responding to community concern about Annandale's decline, Fairfax County invited a ULI Advisory Services panel to suggest strategies to revitalize Annandale as a thriving business center with strong urban design connections to adjacent neighborhoods. The panel recommended a consistent, long-term strategy that engages the entire Annandale community and encourages incremental development. Specific recommendations included:

- Build future development efforts on Annandale's diversity and regional prominence as an ethnic retail destination. Plans should recognize that national retailers are not likely to locate in Annandale due to the close proximity of other major retail centers. However, Annandale has a built-in strength as an ethnic retail hub that can serve as the foundation for a unique sense of place and thriving business community.
- Engage the entire Annandale community in revitalization efforts by adopting communication strategies that bridge cultural differences. Effective communication strategies should use a multi-lingual approach, engage established ethnic community institutions, including churches, and work with the leadership of the regional ethnic communities.
- Separate perception from reality. Many residents perceive Annandale to be in decline, although its retail rents and land values compete with affluent retail areas. Property and business owners have little incentive to change because their businesses are performing well.

Community perception of decline may be addressed by encouraging façade rehabilitation, promoting multi-lingual signage, and enhancing the streetscape environment. All efforts should be targeted at making the commercial area understandable and open to all ethnic groups represented in the community.

- Create a unified vision for Annandale’s future. Specifically define what words like town center, community, walkability, and density should mean for Annandale. Create working relationships between property owners, residents, businesses, and government to achieve the vision.
- Plan for an incremental, cumulative redevelopment process that builds strategically on public and private investments supported by the market. Remain focused on the vision and persistent on building on opportunities.

Transforming Little Saigon

Little Saigon has the potential to reach its full expression as a distinctive place, as well as to serve as a long-term economic asset to the city. It is now time for the stakeholders to consolidate their collective interest into a vision for achieving this potential, beginning with introducing public and civic spaces. A continued build-out of Little Saigon that incorporates, connects, and concentrates well-designed public spaces and appropriate civic places can provide enduring enrichment to the area’s commercial, cultural, and social fabric, as well as to the fiscal health of the city.

About the Panel

J. Kevin Lawler

Panel Chair

West Palm Beach, Florida

Lawler is the managing partner of the N-K Ventures LLC and has over thirty years of experience as a real estate finance and deal advisor. In 2001, he co-founded N-K Ventures LLC, a development company principally engaged in urban residential infill and mixed-use projects in Florida. The company's development activities reflect the philosophy of its founding principals—the creation of high-value urban places. In joint venture with Lennar and the Related Group of Florida in 2005, the company completed the Moorings—a mixed-use development of 378 units, 25,000 square feet of commercial space and marina in Palm Beach County. In joint venture with ZOM and RMC Properties, N-K Ventures LLC is developing the Paramount—a vertical, mixed-use project near downtown Orlando that includes an urban Publix supermarket, 22,000 square feet of additional commercial space, and 314 residential units, all on a two-acre site.

For N-K Ventures, Lawler underwrites all new development projects, maintains investor and capital relationships, and manages all transactional aspects of the company's ventures and investments. He also manages subcontractor relationships, and he identifies and qualifies new business opportunities.

Lawler's real estate career has involved over five billion dollars of development, financing, and investment transactions throughout the United States. Prior to starting in the development business, he was a partner in the real estate advisory services practice of a major financial services firm in its Washington, D.C., and Miami offices. Lawler had a national practice in advising developers, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and public entities on their financing and large-scale develop-

ment transactions. This practice included REIT formations, commercial property portfolio structuring and recapitalizations, corporate real estate ventures and leasing, large-scale development projects, public-private development, and financing transactions. Lawler has also assisted a number of Florida cities in the creating, evaluating, and negotiating public-private transactions, including West Palm Beach, Daytona Beach, Miami Beach, Miramar, and Temple Terrace.

Lawler is an active member of ULI and has served in its leadership group and also in numerous committees and councils. He has participated on numerous ULI Advisory Services panels and project analysis teams, and served as a vice-chair of the SE Florida Council and chair of Treasure Coast Annual Real Estate Conference in 2006. In October 2000, ULI recognized his service with the Robert O'Donnell Award.

Lawler has lectured extensively on real estate development and financing, including lectures at the Harvard Business School, the Wharton School, the Georgetown University Business School, the George Washington University Business School, the University of Maryland, and the Miami Law School. Prior to relocating to south Florida, he served on the Economic Development Committee of the Washington Board of Trade for several years. He is a graduate of Michigan State University and received a MCP degree from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where he was a Mellon and Ford Foundation Fellow.

John Hixenbaugh

St. Petersburg, Florida

Hixenbaugh is a land use planner for the law firm of Trenam Kemker. With over twenty years of experience in municipal planning, Hixenbaugh has been responsible for the approving over 2,000 public and private projects, including mixed-use,

commercial, office, residential, hotel, and institutional developments. His areas of specialization include urban and commercial redevelopment, historic preservation, ordinance preparation, architectural design, and master land use planning.

Prior to joining Trenam Kemker, Hixenbaugh served as the zoning official for the city of St. Petersburg, Florida. He has also worked as a city planner for the Village of Schaumburg, Illinois, and the cities of Port Orange and Ormond Beach, Florida. Since 1990, Hixenbaugh has been a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP). He has been a member of ULI since 1996 and has served on two other Advisory Services panel assignments. Hixenbaugh has been a speaker at several programs on architectural design and community redevelopment sponsored by the American Planning Association, and his work in these areas has garnered a number of professional awards.

Hixenbaugh holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Master of Arts in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Florida. Since 2005, he has been a student at the Stetson University College of Law in St. Petersburg where he is pursuing his juris doctor. Upon graduation, Hixenbaugh intends to practice land use and real estate law.

Michael J. Maxwell

Miami Shores, Florida

Maxwell is founder and managing partner of MAXWELL+Partners LLC, a real estate development, project management, and investment advisory firm. Over the course of his career he has successfully led real estate organizations in planning and developing land, homes, retail, office, industrial, and resort properties. As an advisor and project manager, he has worked out, restructured, and strategically repositioned over \$500 million in real estate assets for corporate, private, and institutional investors.

Involved in real estate development for over thirty years, Maxwell founded MAXWELL+Partners in 1992 to assist lenders and investors in restructuring loans and assets through strategic planning,

due diligence, asset management, marketing, financial planning, capitalization, and mergers and acquisition services. Clients include investment bankers, banks, savings and loans, life insurance companies, brokers, private investors, and governments. His work includes negotiating complex environmental issues, establishing and leading successful real estate development and financial service firms, restructuring companies and assets, and leading mergers and acquisitions. Maxwell is an expert witness in real estate and development issues in state and federal courts.

Maxwell has built MAXWELL+Partners into a niche developer, project manager, and advisor. His most recent work includes developing and repositioning medical offices, clinics, and residential care facilities, and leading the development of luxury homes on in-fill sites in Miami's upper east side. His work has been honored throughout his career with awards for historic preservation, innovative industrial buildings, and outstanding renovation projects.

Maxwell holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin, where he studied architecture and city planning, and a Master of Planning degree from the University of Virginia, with specializations in real estate and urban design. Maxwell began his career with a Texas home builder, has held positions in government, was vice president of Codina Development leading the initial development of the award-winning \$400 million Beacon Center in Miami, advised institutions and governments, worked-out loan portfolios, and partnered in developing Caribbean hotels and luxury homes. A skilled and effective communicator, he is known for his organizational and leadership expertise.

As a member of ULI, Maxwell serves on the Executive Committee of the Florida/Caribbean District Council as vice-chair of Membership. He is a Florida licensed real estate and mortgage broker and holds the AICP designation from the American Institute of Certified Planners. He is a board and executive committee member of the Greater Miami Urban League and is founding chairman of New Urban Development LLC, the affordable housing development arm of the Urban League. A graduate of Leadership Miami and former

executive committee member, he has served on numerous community boards in various capacities including Miami County Day School, past chairman of Bonnet House, past chairman of the Dade Heritage Trust, the Florida Trust, co-chair of Gusman Theater and president of the University of Virginia South Florida Alumni association. He served as an adjunct professor in the Florida International University Graduate School of Business in real estate development and management and is a guest speaker on issues of urban development.

Trang D. Tu

Seattle, Washington

Tu has been working in community-based development, urban planning, and public policy for the past fifteen years. Currently, she is the principal of her own consulting practice based in Seattle. In this capacity she has completed a diverse range of projects including economic revitalization of Seattle's Little Saigon, recovery and rebuilding in New Orleans including organizing and advocacy with the Vietnamese community, economic revitalization in Seattle's underinvested and ethnically diverse communities, affordable housing financing, civic engagement of underserved communities, farm worker housing, and tribal economic development.

Prior to establishing her consultancy, Tu was a senior associate at Cedar River Group, a public policy consulting firm, and served as special assistant for housing and community development to former Seattle Mayor Paul Schell. She also worked in the city's strategic planning office as a station area development planner for Seattle's light rail system, focusing on the segment to be constructed through the Rainier Valley, an ethnically diverse and historically underinvested community. Prior to her roles with the city of Seattle, Tu was a neighborhood planner with Interim Community Development Association, a nonprofit organization in Seattle's Chinatown/International District.

As a first-generation Vietnamese-American, Tu has community, professional, and personal experience with numerous diaspora Vietnamese communities and business districts including those in Seattle, Boston, New Orleans, San Jose, Westminster, and overseas. She holds a Master in Urban Planning degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design and a Bachelor in Economics degree from Harvard College.



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