

# Crowded Future Challenges Imaginations of Planners

**Los Angeles Times**

October 11, 2002

By Evan Halper, Times Staff Writer

The task seemed straightforward: Figure out where 6 million people whom forecasters project will be added to Southern California in the next quarter-century are going to live.

But the headaches it created were enormous.

The Great Park at El Toro became tens of thousands of housing units. Preserves at Ballona Wetlands were wiped out, and high-rises were placed in the heart of agriculture zones in Ventura County. And that was before the 200 civic leaders at the Reality Check on Growth held at USC on Thursday even had to make their toughest decisions, as they placed stickers representing thousands of homes or millions of square feet of commercial space on maps of the region.

By day's end they would be calling for tunnels through the mountains of the Cleveland National Forest, bullet trains to carry suburbanites home to Palmdale, and warehouses on biologically sensitive land at Rancho Mission Viejo.

The "visioning" process sponsored by **USC's Lusk Center for Real Estate** and the Urban Land Institute of Los Angeles flustered even the most experienced urban planners.

That, of course, was the point: to force local leaders to confront the reality the region is facing. Anyone who placed their stickers consistent with current growth patterns found it impossible to complete the game. There simply wasn't enough room.

"You are going to have to think outside the box," warned **Raphael Bostic, a professor of real estate at USC**, as the exercise got underway. "Things people said you couldn't do, you are going to have to do."

The participants worked in teams that were mixed with people from clashing backgrounds. Developers had to work with environmentalists. Low-income housing advocates stood alongside elected officials from wealthy suburbs. Consensus did not come easily.

The teams produced vastly different visions for how the region should grow. One

map had the 6 million newcomers living mostly among densely packed transit villages--some in areas that are built out and would have to be redeveloped. Existing rail lines were replaced with high-speed versions. There was even a bicycle freeway.

Across the room, the opposite approach was taken. A group proposed creating an entirely new master-planned community for hundreds of thousands of residents in the Antelope Valley. Their plan included building new infrastructure from scratch.

One concept that was not too popular with participants was low-density housing, defined by yellow stickers.

The groups started off with 582 of the stickers. They quickly found that it was nearly impossible to fit them all on the map. Most groups traded the bulk of their low-density stickers for much smaller ones that symbolized clustered and high-rise development.

Event organizers, many of whom have been supporters of building high-density clusters, say their intention is to engage civic leaders in a new type of planning that forces entire communities to work together in tackling the tough questions raised by growth issues.

That was particularly appealing to Los Angeles City Councilman Ed Reyes, who said his district already is overcrowded with 147 people per acre and doesn't have enough housing to go around.

"We've got to make sure that we consider what kind of quality of life these decisions would create for people," he said.

Yet during the exercise, Reyes resisted the temptation to steer all the new population toward low-density suburbs. Doing so, he said, would wreak havoc on environmental resources all of Southern California relies on.

The visioning process was first tried in Salt Lake City a few years ago, where it was wildly successful.

The process triggered a regional dialogue that ultimately changed many people's perceptions about alternatives to single-family residential sprawl. The city ultimately adopted a growth plan that linked many planned villages to alternative transportation.

The Utah process stretched out for several months. Planners are hoping the same thing will happen on both a local and regional level in the Los Angeles metropolitan area under the guidance of the Southern California Assn. of Governments.

Thursday's exercise offered a sampling of what that would involve.

"It's a remarkable process," said **Stuart Gabriel, director of the Lusk Center for Real Estate**. "How often do you get environmentalists and developers who usually moan about one another standing side by side and working on solutions?"