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L.A.'s Grand illusion

EIR: Project to worsen traffic, deluge police

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The \$1.8 billion Grand Avenue downtown redevelopment effort would exacerbate traffic congestion, overwhelm police and could widen the gap between rich and poor, according to the most recent environmental report released this week.

The report comes as the county launches a series of public hearings on whether to proceed with the highly touted project, which would require an estimated \$37 million in government subsidies.

If approved, construction is expected to begin next year and conclude in 2015.

But the report by the Grand Avenue Authority questions whether the project would increase the ratio of crimes per Los Angeles police officer from 20 to 57 - nearly three times more than they handle now.

Among the dozens of concerns included in the document are questions about traffic, noise pollution and the habitat of migratory birds, and whether local residents would be priced out of the residential units.

Ben Beach, an attorney with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, said a coalition of community groups representing low-income residents downtown are concerned the project would not provide broad community benefits.

"We have a well-established precedent in L.A. that major projects involve developers and public officials working with the community to create meaningful public benefits," Beach said. "It's a view widely shared by community groups that this hasn't happened with this project.

"And having reviewed their final EIR, it continues to assume that luxury housing and low-wage jobs means people will be able to live where they work. The community knows this is just not true."

The final EIR outlines two options for Grand Avenue.

One would allow the county to construct a new administrative complex, along with up to 2,060 residential units, 449,000 square feet of retail space, a 275-room hotel and a 50-story iconic tower designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry.

The other option would omit a new county hall, but would include 600 additional residential units. The options would include 412 to 532 below-market housing units.

"I think our office felt that this project had to have something for everybody and that's why we included the affordable-housing component," said Roxane Marquez, spokeswoman for Supervisor Gloria Molina.

The project, constructed on four county- and city-owned parcels, would add 2,925 to 3,777 residents downtown, including 560 students. It also would worsen traffic and parking problems and add to school overcrowding, according to the report.

The heart of the project would feature a 16-acre park between the Music Center and City Hall, paid for with \$50 million provided by developer The Related Cos.

Tony Bell, spokesman for Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, said the supervisor remains concerned about the ultimate bill for taxpayers.

"Evidence suggests that the taxpayer is getting a raw deal," Bell said. "The land is going for a lot cheaper than it should. We're concerned that the out-of-state developer is getting a better deal than the county taxpayer."

In the EIR, various organizations also raised concerns about the project, ranging from the removal of mature landscaping and historical artifacts to the effect on the homeless and poor in the area.

"The low-income downtown have been largely ignored in this downtown renaissance," said Becky Dennison, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network.

Authority officials counter that the project would improve the jobs-housing balance and its location near the subway and bus lines would

encourage use of public transportation.

In another letter to the authority, the state Department of Fish and Game raised concerns that the project could disturb migratory birds that nest in large trees in the area from February through August. The birds are protected by international treaty.

Officials said that if construction takes place during the breeding season, a qualified biologist would be hired to conduct weekly surveys to determine whether protected birds are present within 500 feet of the park.

Meanwhile, the environmental report also noted that residential and employment increases generated by the project and 60 others downtown would reduce the police officer-per-resident ratio and increase the crime-per-officer ratio.

"This level of increased demand would substantially exceed the LAPD's capacity to provide services from the Central Area station," the report's authors wrote.

The department is in the process of hiring 1,000 new officers over the next five years, but is hampered by a tight job market and strong competition from other departments.

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GRAND AVENUE HEARINGS

The Grand Avenue Authority will hold a public hearing at 10 a.m. Nov. 20 in Room 374A of the Hall of Administration, 500 W. Temple St. The Board of Supervisors hearing will be at 9:30 a.m. Dec. 5 in the hall's Room 381B. The Community Redevelopment Agency will hold its hearing at 10 a.m. Dec. 7 in the sixth-floor boardroom of its headquarters, 354 S. Spring St.