

BUSINESS

San Diego finalizes plans to transform Hillcrest, University City with high-rises, transit

But big changes won't happen unless developers embrace the new opportunities created by both proposals.



People walk near the intersection of Fifth and University Avenues in the Hillcrest neighborhood on Tuesday, July 30, 2024. (Meg McLaughlin / The San Diego Union-Tribune)



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Plans that could double the populations of Hillcrest and University City — and make those neighborhoods look and feel more similar to downtown — received final approval Tuesday from the San Diego City Council.

The new growth blueprints approved for the two neighborhoods aim to fight climate change and solve the local housing crisis by encouraging high-rise buildings near transit.

The blueprints, which the council approved unanimously after many hours of public testimony both for and against, also aim to fight segregation by adding affordable housing in wealthy areas.

But big changes won't happen unless developers embrace the new opportunities created by both proposals.

City officials say they chose Hillcrest and University City for significant growth because they are high-resource areas where good jobs, schools and transit are accompanied by low poverty and low exposure to pollution.

San Diego has approved significantly higher population and density in recent years for Mission Valley, Kearny Mesa and Mira Mesa. But city officials say none of those areas match Hillcrest and University City for neighborhood resources.



For new parks to serve all the new residents the plans allow, both blueprints rely on public promenades and linear parks that would be created amid the high-rise and mid-rise buildings the plans allow.

The Normal Street Promenade is part of the Hillcrest plan, while a promenade slated for Executive Drive is part of the University City plan.

Critics say promenades and linear parks are not adequate, stressing that both neighborhoods already lack enough parks to serve their existing populations.

City officials note that the plans also include policies requiring the addition of new parks and public spaces when development occurs, not just promenades.

Locations for those new parks and public spaces will be determined based on what land is available for redevelopment at the time, said city planning director Heidi Vonblum.

Other critics say the two neighborhoods lack the infrastructure to support so much new development.

Vonblum said developers must pay fees to fund infrastructure and that a new city policy prioritizes infrastructure spending in neighborhoods that experience significant growth.

On segregation, the plans seek to help reverse decades of racial and ethnic segregation that began with redlining and got reinforced by single-family zoning policies that remain mostly in place today.

They would do so by encouraging more housing, much of it subsidized for low-income people, in areas with high resources where the majority of the population has historically been White and high-income.

A group that consistently fights against such plans, Neighbors for a Better San Diego, said the biggest risk created by the two plans is developers using the new zoning in the plans in conjunction with a city program called Complete Communities.

The group says it's overkill to allow developers to use both options and that it could encourage development farther from bus and trolley lines than city officials want.

A group that consistently supports such plans, the Yes in My Backyard Democrats of San Diego County, said both plans would shift city priorities away from cars toward more vibrant communities and affordable housing.

The proposal for University City would add more than 64,200 residents, nearly doubling the neighborhood's current population of 65,400. It would do that by adding just over 30,000 housing units.

It would also aim to add about 72,000 new jobs by changing zoning in many places to allow developers to build 20 million more square feet of commercial projects.

The proposal for Hillcrest would add 17,000 new homes, some of them in buildings with 20 stories or more. It would swell the population of Uptown – a wider area that also includes University Heights, Mission Hills and Bankers Hill – from about 40,000 to more than 100,000 by 2050.

Both plans leave areas now zoned mostly for single-family homes alone, concentrating the new density away from those areas.

Councilmember Stephen Whitburn, whose district includes Hillcrest, praised many aspects of the plan, including special districts it would create honoring the area's history and its legacy as the center of San Diego gay culture.

The LGBTQ+ cultural district would include much of University Avenue, Fifth Avenue south of Washington Street and bits of Normal and Harvey Milk streets.

"I think we have a lot to look forward to in Hillcrest," he said.

The Hillcrest plan also provides protections for businesses that have been operating for more than 30 years. They must get significant advance notice of plans to tear a building down and replace it, and they must be offered a spot in whatever new development is built.

The plan also includes a proposed freeway lid park over state Route 163 and a pair of streets redesigned to make cycling safer and reduce traffic congestion.

Robinson and University avenues would become one-way streets between First Avenue and 10th Avenue, with Robinson traffic moving east and University traffic moving west.

While both neighborhoods are ideal for growth, Vonblum said University City is particularly so because of the \$2 billion extension of the Blue Line trolley that began running in late 2021.

"We often hear we should put the transit in first, and this is an instance where the transit is in place and running first," she said. "This is an ideal planning circumstance."

Councilmember Kent Lee, whose district includes University City, said he understands why residents are apprehensive.

"Change is never easy," Lee said.

But he said the new housing is crucial to local businesses and local residents who need a place to live.

"We are in a housing crisis," he said.

The University City plan calls for studying the possibility of narrowing Governor Drive — the main east-west route in the southern part of the neighborhood — from four car lanes to two in order to make way for bicycle lanes.

For details on the Hillcrest proposal, visit planhillcrest.org.

For details on the University City proposal, visit planuniversity.org.

The new growth blueprints come just one week after the council approved the first new big-picture vision for San Diego since the anti-sprawl City of Villages plan in 2008.

Meanwhile, city planners are working on three additional neighborhood growth blueprint updates for Clairemont, the College Area and the Mid-City area.

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