

Downtown is the wrong spot for new stadium

Downtown San Diego has many of the same buildings it did 100 years ago. (K.C. Alfred)

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September 28, 2016

This fall, San Diego voters will be asked to approve of a mega sports complex — San Diego Chargers’ football stadium and combined convention annex (“convadium”) — to be built in the heart of the center-city East Village community. This project is a textbook example of how not to plan for redevelopment in urban downtowns in the 21st century.

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The Measure C “convadium” proposal brings to mind the fatal flaw that finally toppled the first federally funded downtown redevelopment program in the U.S.: the Urban Renewal program (1960s and 1970s). It ran for more than two decades, bulldozing valuable buildings, destroying neighborhoods and displacing hundreds of thousands of residents, before it was finally dismantled.

It was a different moment in history, of course, but in one very important way the Charger development team has borrowed from the playbook of urban renewal. The gaping flaw in the proposed stadium project is quite simple: its location.

Urban renewal programs failed because they underestimated the power of community, its social capital, networks and valuable buildings. Superstar architecture critic and author [Robert Hughes](#) once summed

up this wrongheaded view of urban redevelopment as the “ugly testimony to when men think of abstract space rather than real place ... and of political aspirations, instead of human needs.”

Fast-forward a half-century and into the heart of downtown San Diego — the East Village community. Like their urban renewal predecessors, the Chargers and their backers have made the mistake of thinking of East Village as an abstract space where they can simply plunk down a football stadium, end of story.

But they are proposing to build the convadium in the wrong location, in the heart of an emerging, dense, street-friendly center of small-scale, high-tech entrepreneurs, startups and thousands of young millennial and Gen-X residents who want to live and work in the grid of a 21st-century urban innovation community. Putting a walled-in football stadium, with acres of parking lots around it, would be like dropping Sea World into the center of Hillcrest.

East Village embodies a national trend termed “creative placemaking.” This cutting-edge downtown redevelopment boom zone is built around high-density, mixed-uses (offices, condos, shops, schools) and a cluster of businesses — technology, software, incubators and startups — that have relocated as predicted by high-profile authors like Richard Florida. Taken together, this explosion of technology businesses in East Village represents what a recent USCD Extension/Downtown San Diego Partnership study of downtown terms the “innovation economy’s next frontier.”

The UCSD report points to the multiplier effects of street-scale businesses (restaurants, cafes, museums, galleries, printing companies, computer design firms, etc.) that feed off both the arts/culture “hot spots” and innovation/technology companies, and are transforming downtown San Diego into a dynamic center of economic development

and innovation, along with a growing residential population. The numbers don't lie: 35,000 downtown residents, 80,000 workers and businesses that produce another 137,000 jobs. By 2050, the number of downtown residents will double, and jobs will probably triple.

Downtown is a booming grid of street-smart business, residence, innovation. East Village is truly the next frontier. It already has a critical mass of education sites, the Central Library, technology development projects (including IDEA and Makers Quarter), and new housing under construction, with more to come.

East Village also has what are probably the last large tracts of public land needed to house this innovation and technology job boom. But those parcels of land are also where the Chargers propose to build their mega stadium, in effect, trying to cram an oval shape, inward-looking mega-structure into the hustle-bustle, dynamic, street grid of a future billion-dollar innovation neighborhood.

The two visions don't mix. Other cities on the West Coast agree. In Portland, a baseball stadium sits across the river from downtown; in Seattle, the football stadium lies nearly a mile south, and in San Francisco, football is played in far-off Santa Clara. There are no football stadiums proposed for downtown L.A.

The proposed site in East Village is the wrong place for a mega-football stadium/stadium. It would be downtown's architectural albatross. Football stadiums, no matter how you package them, are simply not designed for the high-density, thriving, urban mixed-use central business districts emerging around the country. That's why very few downtowns have them. Football venues deserve their own more adequately proportioned sites outside of the downtown core in zones that can absorb their larger footprint. Most cities understand that. Let's hope San Diego does too.

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