

Designing for the future

By JENNIFER WHITELAW
Special to the Daily Transcript
May 15, 2003

Every once in a while, a person gets a chance to do something that might really make a difference, something he or she hopes will reach and inspire a lot of people. At the beginning of this year, a handful of people representing several different local organizations got together to find out whether they could do just that.

This coalition of organizations decided to make a television program demonstrating how smart growth principles could be applied to make blighted areas attractive again. The members from each of these organizations were concerned that although most San Diegans have now heard the term "smart growth," few can actually envision what it would mean to their neighborhoods. Increasing building density is often perceived as bad, but can actually be the key to better life via smart growth with the necessary amenities. The coalition includes the Urban Land Institute, San Diego/Tijuana Chapter (ULI); Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 (C-3); UCSD-TV; Council for Design Professionals; the county of San Diego planning department; and Quality of Life Coalition. Although these organizations pursue different agendas and activities, they determined that by joining forces, they could more effectively promote one goal they all share - keeping the San Diego region beautiful, livable and functional.

Funded by the County Television Network, UCSD-TV, ULI and C-3, the video production process is now under way, with completion expected in August of this year.

To get a fresh perspective and an endless supply of talent for the video, the organizations decided to approach Gil Cooke at the NewSchool of Architecture and enlist the design help

of his staff and students. Instructor and architect Francis Safie Brown stepped up to the plate and offered his fourth year studio class to take part in the project.

Each organization sent a representative into the class to speak to the students about the different aspects of smart growth. From walkability to development feasibility and from conservation to demographics, the students learned from experts in the fields of development and planning. They also supplemented this information with their own research.

The coalition identified four sites throughout the county of San Diego that are in need of redevelopment. The students will apply their knowledge of smart growth to design several concepts for each site. The four sites are located in the communities of San Ysidro, Spring Valley, Ramona and El Cerrito.

To help them become familiar with each site and the character of the surrounding community, the coalition arranged meetings with community representatives for the students at each site. The community representatives briefed the students about the community's concerns, hopes and characteristics. The students will attempt to interpret this input along with the information they collected through their class to create smart growth designs that would improve the site and the surrounding neighborhood. At each step in this process, UCSD-TV producer Shannon Bradley and her production crew have been filming. Ultimately, they will edit hours of footage into a 28-minute program on smart growth, demonstrating the viability and advantages of compact, transit-oriented, well-designed development.

With the working title "Designing for the Future," the video will be used to provide a visual representation of what smart growth can mean. Each site will

be transformed to demonstrate how designs created by the students could be superimposed on the blighted site to improve the neighborhood and build community pride.

The television show will be aired on County Television Network and UCSD-TV. Many involved in the production of this video, including Bradley, had a hand in creating and promoting the "Path to Paradise" land use and urban planning television series.

"Designing for the Future" is a grass-roots effort to create attractive neighborhoods that respond to the needs and characteristics of individual communities, while also addressing the need to change our planning paradigms in order to accommodate future growth in San Diego County.

While the designs created for these sites are purely conceptual, it is the hope of the coalition and all of the participants at the NewSchool of Architecture that this video will help people to imagine how blighted areas around San Diego could be transformed.

The diversity of groups involved in this video is reflective of the participation effort necessary to design great communities. Public input is the key to making America's Finest City even finer. The coalition hopes that this video will inspire people to speak up about how smart growth principles can be used to improve their communities. Whitelaw is principal of Whitelaw Marketing & Research and president of C-3. She is managing the "Designing for the Future" program production along with Shannon Bradley of UCSD-TV.

When completed, copies of "Designing for the Future" will be made available to local planning groups, membership organizations and educational institutions. Interested parties can contact UCSD-TV at (858) 534-3535 or Jennifer Whitelaw at Jennifer@whitelawmarketing.com after August 2003.