

Forget the 'Vision.' Just Fix the Potholes.

By Joel Kotkin-Los Angeles Times

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In my middle-class North Hollywood neighborhood, none of the candidates in the mayor's race has generated wild enthusiasm. I spotted only two yard signs — one for Bob Hertzberg and another for Bernard Parks — on a recent 1 1/2 -hour bike ride. At the local farmers' market, the only campaigners were supporters of Walter Moore.

This wasn't that surprising. When it can take more than an hour to travel the 14 miles to downtown, you stop thinking about City Hall and look for local alternatives. "We have achieved our own kind of secession. It's called traffic," says attorney David Fleming, a prominent leader in the failed Valley secession drive.

Under such circumstances, neighborhoods like mine tend to be inward-looking, which is not necessarily bad. People take care of their lawns; many are remodeling their homes, a sign they intend to stay a while. Local churches and synagogues are flourishing. "People like it here," says Valerie Olive, mother of two, self-employed mortgage broker and my representative on the Greater Valley Glen Neighborhood Council. "The quality of life is pretty good, so it's hard to get [the neighbors] involved most of the time."

Yet we have our share of complaints — crummy schools, homeless people who rifle through trash on collection days, potholes and, of course, traffic. We'd like our city's elected leaders to pay attention to them.

Our local councilwoman, Wendy Greuel, is popular precisely because she attends to these complaints. Her nickname, "Queen Pothole," makes her proud.

Sadly, mayoral candidates rarely deign to run primarily as "Mayor Pothole" or even "Mr. Fix-It." They'd rather bloviate about grand "visions," like bankrolling a billionaire's fantasies about a downtown many don't care much about. Others imagine the city as a petri dish for social engineering or income-redistribution schemes.

They neglect some serious long-term issues, particularly for those of us with young children. If you live within the borders of Los Angeles, you basically have two choices — log long hours "working the system" in the public schools or pay a sizable ransom to private or parochial schools.

This has two negative effects. First, the widely perceived failure of L.A. schools works against a shared civic culture. Many of the people moving into my neighborhood — Orthodox Jews, Armenians, gays and young affluents of all races — either have no

children or plan to send their kids to a private school. They also have much stronger ties to their spiritual, ethnic or artistic communities than to the city.

The second effect of lousy schools is that talent, families and businesses go to places, mostly on the periphery, where schools work well. Even our neighborhood booster, Olive, admits she might feel better off moving to Agoura despite the many wonderful things about this neighborhood. My family has also weighed such a move.

Changing the schools is not our mayor's prerogative, though former Mayor Richard Riordan certainly tried. But the mayors of New York and Chicago did secure control of their cities' schools. Hertzberg's call to break up L.A. Unified resonates in my neighborhood, though it is impractical if not impossible.

Yet a lot of what we want is simple and straightforward. Fix the potholes so you can drive something other than a Humvee down Burbank Boulevard. Get us more cops so the gangsters don't even think of showing their faces here. Make dealing with the city less like a Kafka experience and more like a Costco one.

In short, more efficiency and less big picture — please.

Nothing less will help preserve what the British call the "middle landscape," a place with ethnic diversity, shops at a walkable distance and farmers' markets, and secure enough that our 10-year-old can ride her scooter without getting flattened in traffic or razed by gangsters.

In many ways, this is what L.A. was supposed to be about. It was never designed to be a dense, East Coast or European-style city dominated by a strong central core. Its organizing principle was to plant single-family homes and low-rise development across an expanse of well-watered land.

Of course, the city has become denser and more urbanized over the years. Yet an attachment to a small-town lifestyle has made something of a comeback throughout the city recently. Neighborhoods around me used to be considered parts of a vaguely defined North Hollywood or Van Nuys. Now they adopt more intimate names like Valley Glen and Valley Village.

The mayoral candidates don't pay enough attention to the need to preserve the city's neighborhoods. If such neglect continues after our next mayor is elected, the city will be in further danger of devolving into an unhealthy amalgam of rich and poor. The essence of great cities — a strong middle class — will have been lost.