

Century City May Be Looking Up

The latest makeover plans call for high-rise condos. Some Westside residents, although weary of construction and traffic, say the idea is smarter growth. But not everyone is sold.

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Century City, created four decades ago as a second downtown catering to Westside entertainment firms and lawyers, is undergoing a makeover involving the demolition of some buildings and the possible addition of new high-rise luxury condos.

The district has been a nonstop construction zone for several years, as office spires, including the MGM Tower, have risen on empty lots or in place of razed structures. Now developers are in the early stages of planning two residential projects that would create the first condos in the commercial core.

The constant construction and growing density have riled residents in nearby communities. Many homeowners groups have put developers on notice that they would vigorously resist any further office development because of fears that it would worsen the Westside's already heavy congestion.

They have yet to weigh in officially on the two condominium projects. But some residents acknowledge that condos might signify smart growth.

"People who are going to move to these [condos] want to drive less and walk to the mall and the movies," said Gretchen Lewotsky, who heads the Westside Neighborhood Council's land use committee and works in the area. "It's a great idea. If I had the money, I'd do it myself."

Developers, who have seen the success of high-rise living along the Wilshire Corridor in Westwood, say they hope construction of the condo towers will satisfy some of the pent-up demand for a commodity in short supply on the Westside.

Related Cos., based in Los Angeles, plans to tear down the 32-story St. Regis Hotel, long considered an eyesore, on Avenue of the Stars and replace it with a 39-story tower containing 145 condominiums.

Just down the avenue, at the corner of Constellation Boulevard, Century City Realty Co., a division of JMB Realty, has proposed erecting 483 condos in two 47-story towers and a 12-story loft building. The new buildings would replace City National Bank and the Century Club on a 5.5-acre plot.

Across the street at 2000 Avenue of the Stars, the Shubert Theatre and ABC Entertainment complex have already been dismantled, and a new mixed-use office building is rising in their place.

Los Angeles City Councilman Jack Weiss, who represents the area, said the new condos could help reinvigorate Century City. Nearing completion is an upgrade of the Westfield Century City shopping center, where the aging AMC multiplex is being replaced with new movie theaters. The redevelopment project at 2000 Avenue of the Stars, Weiss added, will include a cultural facility.

"Adding residential units to the heart of Century City may be enlightened urban planning, because if those people work and shop in Century City, they will get into their cars much less often," Weiss said. "With all such projects, of course, the devil is in the details."

In the 1960s, developers began building Century City on what had been the back lot of 20th Century Fox Film Studios. The studio had sold the land to developers in 1961 after the budget for "Cleopatra," its epic film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, spiraled out of control.

The area quickly emerged as "downtown west," part of a continuum of office towers stretching from Beverly Hills to Westwood. Hundreds of condos, most in low- or medium-rise buildings, sprang up in the community's southern portion, while office buildings and hotels sprouted along Avenue of the Stars and Century Park East.

Century City's 21 sleek office towers are filled with lawyers, investment bankers and entertainment industry types who crowd the sidewalks at lunchtime. Ronald Reagan had an office there after leaving the White House.

By evening, however, the place is barren. Century City has lacked enough residents to keep things buzzing at all hours.

The condo projects, developers say, would change that. They aim to lure an army of urbanists, many of them empty-nesters, who will pay multimillions to live in the midst of offices, hotels, shopping and entertainment — or, rather, right above them all. Loft dwellers have similarly been lured to downtown Los Angeles.

The condos are expected to fetch \$1,000 to \$1,500 per square foot, with average-size units going for \$3 million to \$4 million. The condos will range from 1,800 square feet to the 12,000-square-foot penthouse in the as-yet-unnamed building that would replace the St. Regis.

Both developers are carefully courting traffic-weary neighborhood groups.

When the district was originally planned, officials expected the Beverly Hills Freeway would be built along Santa Monica Boulevard. But the freeway was scrapped, as was a long-promised subway or rail line through the Westside. Residents complain that traffic on surface streets increases with each new construction project.

Although many resident groups acknowledge that condos create less traffic than office buildings do, they remain concerned.

"We are ... simply tired of having major construction in our immediate area," said Mike Eveloff, president of Tract No. 7260 Assn., a homeowners group that borders Century City. "The area has faced construction for years. [The condo projects] would extend our experiences with 'temporary construction impacts' to more than 10 years."

Residents and office workers have contended with a battery of projects, including MGM Tower, 2000 Avenue of the Stars, expansions of 20th Century Fox and the Westfield shopping center, and the "transit parkway project" that is reconfiguring Santa Monica Boulevard. Most of those projects are still underway.

Tract 7260 sued the city of Los Angeles last year seeking to compel it to provide an accurate accounting of development rights in Century City. Such rights, which relate to the amount of traffic a particular use generates, are supposed to be tracked by the city planning department.

Eveloff said Tract 7260 has uncovered several instances in which development-rights lists appear to be incorrect or incomplete.

These lists, he said, are the only ways the community has to know whether adequate development rights exist for a particular project. Eveloff said he believes Century City is approaching the development cap contained in the area's specific plan. Eveloff said the environmental impact report for the Santa Monica Boulevard transit project suggested that no more large projects would be forthcoming because development rights had been used.

"It's our position there should be no [further] development until the infrastructure exists to support it," Eveloff said. At issue are police and fire protection, schools, water, power and, especially, roads and traffic systems.

Eveloff said he fears that condos could contribute to traffic. Many residents, he said, would have support staffs and the buildings would have employees to support the amenities.

With Century City's office vacancy rate at an unusually high 12%, developers see

condos as the way to go.

"They're easier to push through the [city's] entitlement process," said Gunter Prentner, an associate at CB Richard Ellis, a real estate brokerage. "If you tried to put another commercial office building there, you'd have anybody and everybody fighting against it."

Representatives of Related and JMB talk spiritedly of the luxury units they intend to build to complement Century City's 9.5 million square feet of commercial space.

"This will be a fully staffed, full-service building," said Bryan Cho, a Related senior vice president based in New York.

Although most of the four-acre property now housing the St. Regis would remain as landscaped open space, it would not be open to the public.

The project architect is Robert A.M. Stern Architects, which designed Walt Disney Co.'s Feature Animation Building — with the wizard's hat — in Burbank.

The two 570-foot towers of JMB's Constellation Park would feature a fitness center with pool, floor-to-ceiling glass and glass balcony railings.

A companion 12-story building would feature 95 contemporary loft units aimed at young executives "looking for a home that is more modern," said Bob Nowak, a vice president with Century City Realty. The project would feature three public parks. Units are expected to sell for \$900 to \$1,000 per square foot.

Johnson Fain Partners, the architect of Fox Plaza, AIG Sun America and MGM Tower, is designing the project.

Some office workers found the plans puzzling.

"I'm quite surprised they'd be putting up condos, because it's a business district, not a living district," said Dana Bauer, who has worked in Century City for 18 years. "This is not downtown.... It shuts down at 8 o'clock."