

## Planning Department to grow

*20 hires to help clear backlog, tackle new challenges*

By Dan Laidman, Staff Writer

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A plan to add 20 positions to the city Planning Department is designed to clear a long-standing project backlog and look at long-term challenges.

The new planners would work on housing, transportation, local community plans, the revitalization of the L.A. River and establishment of a new Office of Historic Preservation.

"Los Angeles is currently facing some incredibly tough challenges: a housing shortage, issues of sustainability, ever-worsening traffic," said Bud Ovrom, deputy mayor for economic development, in a prepared statement. "New planners are strengthening the department precisely to help craft solutions to these problems."

The new positions, which would bring the Planning Department's staffing to about 300 people - half of them planners - will be paid for with existing agency funds, said Jane Blumenfeld, head of the Citywide Planning Division.

The hiring is possible now because city officials cleared away bureaucratic impediments at the urging of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, Blumenfeld said.

The expansion comes during a period of transition as city leaders search for new directors for both the Planning and Transportation departments.

"The new director will have people to assign tasks to now; the more planners, the more the new director can accomplish," Blumenfeld said. "We're also trying to assign staff that aligns with the mayor's agenda for how the city's going and his interests in planning."

A critical audit by city Controller Laura Chick issued on Halloween also helped speed up the hiring, Blumenfeld said.

Chick's report scolded the agency for inefficient operations and for having dozens of unfilled positions at a time when the city is growing rapidly. But on Wednesday she praised the department's response to the audit.

"I am enthused by the Planning Department's swift response in implementing major recommendations from my October audit," Chick said. "It is particularly heartening that the interim director, Mark Winogrand, took immediate action. This is exactly how audits can be used by city managers as road maps in implementing positive and effective change."

Communities have felt the impacts, as they often have little time to learn about and offer input on significant developments, said Edwin Ramirez, president of the Pacoima Neighborhood Council.

Ramirez, one of the Neighborhood Council leaders working on a formal cooperative agreement with the Planning Department, said he hopes the new planners can help the agency look beyond individual projects.

"They allowed all these developments which are needed and good for the community, but they're not including the infrastructure for traffic and economic development," he said.

Valley Industry and Commerce Association Chairman Bob Scott echoed the sentiment, adding that if the expansion reduces the project backlog, it will be good for the local economy.

"The developers and the people who make the investments in the communities, they make investments in properties and projects and when these things drag out for years at a time, that can amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars or millions of dollars of added expense," he said.

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