

Crenshaw Revitalization

Host: Coby King
In-studio guests: Rick Conroy, Crenshaw Chamber of Commerce and Dwayne Wyatt, Planning Dept., City of Los Angeles
Insert/Video guest(s): Robin Strayhorn, local artist and other unidentified speakers

Coby: I am really excited today to talk about revitalization in the Crenshaw area. Revitalization is one of those words we have heard many times, but today we are going to actually see it in action by talking to our two guests. Direct from the Crenshaw Chamber of Commerce please welcome Rick Conroy. Also joining us is Dwayne Wyatt from the Planning Department. We are here to talk about the Crenshaw revitalization effort that is going on and is building up a lot of steam over the last number of years. Where is the Crenshaw area?

Rick: Let me explain where the Crenshaw Chamber of Commerce boundaries are. They're from I-10 Freeway going North to Florence Ave. on the Southside, Western Ave. on the Eastside, and La Cienega Blvd. on the Westside. Our primary focus is Crenshaw Blvd. from the I-10 Freeway down to Florence Ave. This is an incredible area that is very dynamic. A place I call home and where I work.

Coby: Crenshaw is kind of in the western part of the city, but is separated from the ocean by the Baldwin Hills. I know that it's a district that has quite a bit of history. It's known as the center of the African American community.

Dwayne: Absolutely, but certainly it's a rich history. In the 1920's the area was the entry of Los Angeles social life. There were people like the Lucky Baldwin's of Baldwin Hills and Walter Leimert. In fact, Olmstead and Olmstead's sons essentially created Leimert Village. They created the great landscapes and Olmstead's sons were the first ones to do a planned union development. They were the first ones in the country to do this. All this occurred in the 1920's, 30's, and 40's. This area actually had a large Japanese American community in the 1950's that unfortunately moved out after World War II. Then after the 1965 disturbance there was a large influx of African Americans to the area. With people moving out of the community it emerged as an African American predominant community at that time. Now it continues to be the major concentration of African Americans in the City of LA.

Coby: Certainly a center of particularly affluent African American.

Dwayne: Yes, it's probably one of the richest concentrations of African Americans in the country.

Coby: This is also a neighborhood that has seen, in its long history, ups and downs. Let us transition to the summit that occurred recently among different stakeholders in the community. Tell us a little about that.

Rick: The Crenshaw Summit was conceived about a year ago and again when we talk about this we refer to the expertise of my good colleague here. He approached me and said we need to have a Crenshaw Summit, which is essentially a one-day summit of major stakeholders and the community. When we say stakeholders we mean stakeholders, business owners, residents, people who have a general interest in the area coming together to really formulate their vision of how the Crenshaw corridor is going to look like in the next 10, 15, 25 years. It was on Saturday June 5 at West Angeles Church. It was about a year of planning in the making. So it was a lot of effort in itself. But we were so pleasantly surprised that 300 of our fellow neighbors came out that particular day on a Saturday to share their vision, and their ideas in such a way that was exciting and exuberant. Even at this point we are still working on coming up with the finalization of the guidelines, but in essence if you were a developer wanting to come into this community we're hoping you take what the community wants as opposed to what you think this community wants. We want it to be a win-win situation.

Coby: When you have a community perspective you can get projects built more quickly.

Rick: There's an element of certainty when you know someone is going to buy it.

Dwayne: Buying is absolutely the idea when you bring all the stakeholders in together to create a common community vision in terms of projecting what people's aspirations for the future of that community development would be. As a result of the summit, we are creating guidelines or a framework document that will provide guidelines for any new proposed developments along the Crenshaw Corridor. What it does is it provides an element of certainty. The developer will know what exactly a community wants, what it supports, and what it would be behind in pushing for it.

Coby: Besides the Chamber and residents who are the other stakeholders in the community that came to your summit and who have continuing influence as to how things go?

Rick: There were many. The West Los Angeles CDC is a major stakeholder. The Crenshaw Family YMCA, the Local Automobile Club in Southern California, and of course all the Neighborhood Councils in the surrounding areas also played a pivotal role. The Neighborhood Councils were: the West Adams Neighborhood Council, Empowerment Congress West Area Neighborhood Development Council, Park Mesa Heights Community Council, and the United Neighbors of the Historic Arlington Heights, West Adams, and Jefferson Park Communities. Those four Neighborhood Councils really came together, not only with their bodies, but they provided a lot of financial support and valuable input, which was great to see. The Chamber of Commerce works with them and I attend their monthly meetings on a regular basis. They're important because they're representing a community. Building that trust with all the Neighborhood Councils builds camaraderie. They are our best advocates out there for business development.

Dwayne: I also attend the Neighborhood Council meetings in the areas. Neighborhood Councils tell me what specifically they want in their area. For example, the Mid City Neighborhood Council wants to plan something similar in their area along Washington Blvd. and United Neighborhoods, mentioned earlier, also wants something similar. What I'm seeing is that more and more these Neighborhood Councils are coming together and finding solutions together. They're coming up with plans that overlap their boundaries and including other neighboring Neighborhood Councils.

Coby: How do the City Council Member or Members office help in these situations and in the Crenshaw Summit?

Dwayne: In this particular case both Council Members, Council Member Ludlow and Council Member Parks, attended the event and were very supportive. We also had Diane Watson who is a Member of Congress attend, and we also had support from Kevin Murray's office. In terms of political participation it was a pretty broad base.

Coby: Are there any kinds of specifics that you can give me about the framework that was developed or tell me, how is the Crenshaw Summit outcome different from any other things that are being developed in parts of the city?

Dwayne: In a certain sense, I don't think the Crenshaw Summit is much different than other community forums. People who live in any communities always have greater aspirations and desires for their communities. What makes us unique, which makes any other community unique, as well, is that Crenshaw has a united African American community and the diversity of other ethnicities that are continuously growing, like the Latino population. We also have a small, but important Japanese American community. We definitely feel that diversity is a strength for the community.

The idea of the framework is to empower the community in real way. The framework itself will be taken to the advisory groups mentioned above. Those groups will then adopt a framework that is a policy document, so when subsequent projects come to them they will refer to the framework to evaluate the proposal. That means that all the advisory groups, along the Crenshaw Corridor, will be looking at the same document and making a recommendation for a potential proposal relative to the recommendations that are in the document. We will all be on the same page.

Coby: Dwayne, as a member of Planning Department you're cognitive of the fact that in order to build a vibrant community you need a balance of different kinds of residential projects and different kinds of businesses. Are you running into any of those kinds of tensions in the development of this document?

Dwayne: I understand that many people tend to feel that density issues mean that a community is poverty stricken, however, density doesn't necessarily have to mean that an area is impoverished. People can live in more condensed areas and at the same time with a higher quality of life. We have convinced people of that. They just need to see that there is going to be some kind of requisite planning that will go along with it, and that we will ensure them that we will have mixed income developments. Also, the development that we are looking at is to encourage new professional families to come into an area. I think people are more accepting of it now. I'll give you an example. Park La Brea is a dense community, however, it doesn't necessarily mean that people don't want to live there because it's dense. Quality of life is a more important issue.

Coby: Something that we should always mention when it comes to redevelopment, especially in a main thoroughfare us transit. What are the transit resources like in the Crenshaw area and how did or is the Crenshaw Summit addressing those issues?

Dwayne: When developing the framework, we broke it down into districts or clusters. There is in fact a proposal right now of a light rail going up along Exposition Blvd. If you're not familiar with Exposition Blvd. it's the street that already has existing train tracks laid on it. It runs between

USC and Exposition Park. Exposition also runs on Crenshaw Blvd. We are looking at that corridor as potential transit orientated district development around that light rail.

Coby: What other development are you looking at? Mixed use over with retail?

Dwayne: Absolutely. We are looking at some areas that will be primarily be commercial, but mixed use is very part of our strategy. We are also discussing a Hyde Park Pedestrian District. The Hyde Park Initiative is something that is headed up by an organization called Hope in the kind of southern end of the corridor. It's basically a multi-discipline, multi-approach, community revitalization that includes housing, youth services, and other things. The main aspect that I've been involved in is the commercial end of the pedestrian district. It's a very ambitious project. It's taking four blocks to create a mixed pedestrian orientated project including housing. It's going to be like dropping "The Grove" or "Paseo Colorado" on Crenshaw Blvd. and 52nd St., the area known as Hyde Park. What we have been doing for the past years is identifying potential financial resources and developing community support. I think we are pretty much have everything in place, except there are a few things that we need to do. This is, conceivably, a \$100 million dollar project. What's going to make this project unique is the ownership aspect of it. This is going to be community redevelopment. The stakeholders are going to be community members and business owners. We are not creating anything new. This is not a new trend in property development.

Coby: That brings a new meaning to the word stakeholder.

Dwayne: Absolutely and another thing we are going to try to do is to ensure that local people have participation. We intend to create a Friendship Capital Fund. This is a \$2 to 3 million dollar fund that will essentially invest in local people having business in this development. We are looking at franchises as the strategy. Hypothetically speaking, let's say that California Pizza Kitchen will open up a franchise. What we will do is find a couple of local stakeholders and businesses that venture to invest \$2 to 3 million dollars into that California Pizza Kitchen into our development. Therefore, local people have some sort of ownership. It gives us a kind of corporate profile, but at the same time we have substantial local ownership. This is called a Venture Fund. What's also good about the Venture Fund is that it will provide technical assistance as well.

Coby: It sounds like a very exciting project and if it works in the Crenshaw area, there is probably a number of other places where it will work. A domino effect of some sort.

Dwayne: Yeah the idea is to have creative model that we can replicate.

Coby: Let's take a look at a tape of highlights in the Crenshaw area.

<Video clip>

Unidentified Female Speaker 1: This is the Hyde Park Branch Library, which will be named the Hyde Park Marion Matthew Library. We hope this library will open in October 2004. We are proud to have this 10,500 foot library that is approximately three times the size of our current branch, which is a little over 3,000 feet. We were unable to build it on the current site because it wasn't big enough, so the library had to be relocated. The community actually came together and chose this site. As a community we also decided the design and the art work that will go on the library. The artist that was chosen was Robin Strayhorn.

Robin Strayhorn: This ceramic tile mural allows us all to live, grow, and transform together through knowledge and understanding. This piece is made of ceramic tile mosaic.

Unidentified Male Speaker 1: What we're building here are 150 units of affordable senior housing called the West Los Angeles Villas. What used to be here was a run-down graffiti-coated building that had been vacant, had homeless individuals, and gangs. Overall, it was having a negative impact to the community. We purchased it two years ago and developed the senior housings. At the end of 2004 we are going to move in seniors from the community that will come in and be able to participate in arts, crafts, computer training, and other things that are going to be more beneficial to the community versus the individuals that were causing a lot of problems.

The Neighborhood Council was involved in building this. We also used local consultants that are familiar with our area, when it came to the landscaping. We wanted to make sure that the landscaping and the design of the building was something that is inviting for the community. What you find a lot of times with new development in South Los Angeles is that it is fenced off and no greenery exists. What we wanted to do, as the West Los Angeles Community Development Corporation and the Neighborhood Council was to make sure that they had a more inviting type of atmosphere. Once this green area is completed, we will have benches and BBQ's all around. We want to encourage the seniors to congregate and spend time with each other.

By having the Neighborhood Council assist in the decision-making process, at the end of the day we get something that the community can buy into, because it is something that the community developed. You know it's not just something that fulfills the wants of a developer or something that only fulfills the Neighborhood Council. We are trying to make this more of a collaborative type of development.

<End of video clip>

Rick: Both of those projects really showed the enhancement of the quality of life. The library is primarily for the youth. It's a resource they can utilize. The design, the architecture, and the pedestrian friendliness looks very appealing to the eyes. In terms of the Crenshaw area development we are trying not to build the typical development that you see in South LA, like the rod iron fencing around a building. Greenery is very important.

Coby: Besides the Hyde Park Initiative, what other developments are going on in the Crenshaw area?

Rick: There already is a development going on in the corner of Crenshaw Blvd. and Coliseum. It used to be the old Holiday Bowl location. There is going to be a Denny's, a Walgreen's, and a Starbucks. We are excited about that. We do hope that this is going to make it a little more appealing to the eyes. Parking will be in the rear as opposed to that strip-mall look that we've had so prevalent in our community. Again, our goal is to have it very pedestrian friendly.

In addition, we also have the West Angeles Church, which was built on the corner of Exposition Blvd. and Crenshaw Blvd. It's architecturally beautiful in design. Again, I am reemphasizing the fact that individuals in the community want to see appealing establishments: businesses and buildings that really speak volumes as to the quality of life in the community.

Dwayne: It's really mixed uses, plural, as opposed to mixed use. We're trying our best to cater to the community. Something else that's going on in the area is the old Santa Barbara Plaza

along the backside of the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Mall. If my memory serves me correctly, on the corner of King Blvd. and Buckingham Ave. there will be a 4-5 story senior citizen complex. Then in the rear of the parking lot along Santa Rosa, you will have single-family detached dwellings. It's very exciting to have these new homes coming and new homeowners coming in.

Coby: One of the challenges for Neighborhood Councils is always getting people to come out to do outreach. How have you been doing that and how have you been involving the stakeholders in the community?

Rick: From my perspective, we try to encourage that face-to-face interaction. The Crenshaw Chamber of Commerce attends the Neighborhood Council meetings. They meet once a month and I put it immediately into my calendar. I also try to utilize the block clubs. There are many in the area. By doing this you develop trust and a relationship, which fosters communication. You also tend to listen to them rather than telling them what to do or infringing your beliefs upon them.

A number of times at the Neighborhood Council meetings I sit there and listen to some of their concerns, to their ideas, and from that I try to implement a plan for the commerce. I use it as more of an educational tool because they are the ones that are there everyday. I can't begin to tell you how instrumental the Neighborhood Councils in the our community are.

Coby: If a viewer wanted to visit this community, can you quickly tell them how to get there?

Dwayne: Leimert Park is along Crenshaw Boulevard, so from I-10 you exit Crenshaw going southbound. It's about a mile south. The cross street is 43rd Street. While driving there, along Crenshaw, you'll see a lot of what we've discussed on the show today.

Coby: I see our check coming and I think we are just about out of time. I thank both of you for sharing your insights and the excellent news we have coming out of Crenshaw. If you have any questions or topics that you like to see covered in future shows you can email your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at www.lacityneighborhoods.com or call 1-866 LA HELPS, that's a toll free number. If you have any questions on any city services you can always remember to dial 3-1-1. You're one call to City Hall. For everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Coby King.