

South “Central” Los Angeles

Residents Fight to Save Their Beloved Community in the Face of USC Expansion Plans

By *Paulina Gonzalez*

SOON AFTER THE CIVIL UNREST that shook Los Angeles twenty years ago, promises to “Rebuild LA” through investment, development and economic opportunities for South Central Los Angeles echoed throughout the city. Twenty years later, although South Central has been re-branded (not so creatively) as “South Los Angeles,” many of the problems that plagued us twenty years ago remain today. For instance, unemployment has stayed at a staggeringly high 24 percent in some areas. Furthermore, investment and development in the northern portion of what was once known as South Central has led to gentrification with mass displacement of low-income residents. The area between the 10 Freeway on the north and Martin Luther King Blvd. on the south is held up by the city officials as a prized product of redevelopment. At its center lies the ever expanding University of Southern California (USC), the primary culprit behind the increasing economic pressure and displacement that is occurring in the surrounding Latino and African-American neighborhoods. Despite USC’s already sprawling footprint, including dozens of parcels the university purchased surrounding the main campus, it has now announced plans to double the size of its campus. With our community’s future hanging in the balance, a David and Goliath battle is brewing as low-income

residents prepare to stand toe-to-toe against a nationally recognized university and its billionaire trustees.

For the last twenty years, the predominantly Latino and African-American working-class families that live in the neighborhoods surrounding USC have been paying the high cost of the promise to rebuild South Los Angeles. At the same time that USC has transformed itself from a commuter college to a college in which 90 percent of its students live within one mile of the campus, other development forces push steadily southward. The LA Live/Staples Center and the newly opened Exposition Line, as well as brand new luxury housing developments along Figueroa Blvd., have added to the increasing economic pressure on the area’s longtime residents. Low-income residents, many of whom pay more than 30 percent of their income, *and some more than 50 percent*, on rent, are especially vulnerable to displacement as the northern part of South Los Angeles continues to attract market-driven and publicly subsidized investment.

At a March 14th Los Angeles City Planning Department hearing this spring, with hundreds of community residents packed into the USC-owned Radisson Hotel on Figueroa Blvd. to discuss USC’s expansion and development plans, Father Bill Delaney of St. Agnes Church testified about the university’s role in the loss of 1,000 families from his parish in the last ten years. Orinio Opinaldo, a St. Agnes parishioner who has lived in the neighborhood for 62 years, echoed these concerns about mass displacement: “The entire community has changed and continues to change. People are being forced to leave and so are our resources. I used to be able to walk to the library at Hoover and Jefferson, but it was torn down during the first USC expansion.



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Photos by Beverley Keefe

I loved that library. Now that's gone, and my neighbors and fellow parishioners are disappearing too.”

A Health Impact Assessment of the USC expansion plan, conducted by Human Impact Partners along with SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy) and Esperanza Community Housing Corporation used data from the 2010 Census to provide evidence on the loss of families from the area. The 90007 zip code, which surrounds the USC campus and is bordered on the north by the 10 Freeway, experienced a decrease in population including family households, while surrounding zip codes saw an increase in this population. This 90007 zip code saw nearly three times the decrease in the population under 5 years of age and between 10 and 14 years of age, and two times the decrease in children ages 5 to 9 compared to the City of Los Angeles and surrounding areas. At the same time, this zip code experienced a much higher increase in the college age population between 20 and 24. The 90007 zip code also experienced a more significant decrease in the African-American population than surrounding areas. Most revealing, 90007 saw a decrease in the Latino population, while the rest of the city, including the zip codes surrounding 90007, saw an increase in the Latino population.

What the Census data shows is a population moving southward. Families with children are moving from the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the university to south of Martin Luther King Blvd. In other words, the promised economic opportunity that has taken place in the northern part of South Los Angeles hasn't relieved poverty—it has merely displaced it south of Martin Luther King Blvd.

In 2007, as gentrifying forces gathered steam, just a few blocks from where USC students were paying tens of thousands of dollars a year to study urban planning, dozens of South Los Angeles community members gathered at a People's Planning School. This school, employing the principles of popular education, was organized by SAJE, Trust South LA (formerly known as the Figueroa Corridor Community Land Trust) and Esperanza Community Housing Corporation. Their goal? To arm themselves with the tools necessary to become involved in the City's planning process and save their neighborhoods. Community



Community action at the Planning Department hearing on the USC's development plan.

members, many of them with limited education and limited English-speaking skills, were learning about USC's proposed Master Plan, the City's Community Plan updates, zoning, entitlements, affordable housing, the California Environmental Quality Act, the relation between urban planning and health and more.

Following the People's Planning School, residents conducted crucial participatory research in the form of two community walks. Doing work the City and the university should have done, residents knocked on hundreds of doors in order to explore and document the loss of family housing in their neighborhoods. What they found was astonishing. In a ten-year period, 76 percent of the housing that was previously occupied by families had now been converted to student housing.

Not too long after the community walks, council members and planning officials took part in a public forum in which they listened to the residents' concerns regarding illegal evictions, the lack of healthy affordable housing, housing discrimination and the displacement of their neighbors. Just as in the aftermath of the Rodney King uprisings, promises by elected officials and planning officials to protect the community were made.

Now, as USC seeks approval for its expansion plan, the moment of truth has arrived. On May 10 2012, despite objections by hundreds of community residents, and with few mitigation measures in place, the USC Specific Plan was recommended for approval by the Los Angeles City Planning Commission. This summer, the Specific Plan will be moving to City Council for a vote.

The public input and City approval process thus far have been marked, on both the university's and the City's part, by disingenuousness, cynicism and spin. To

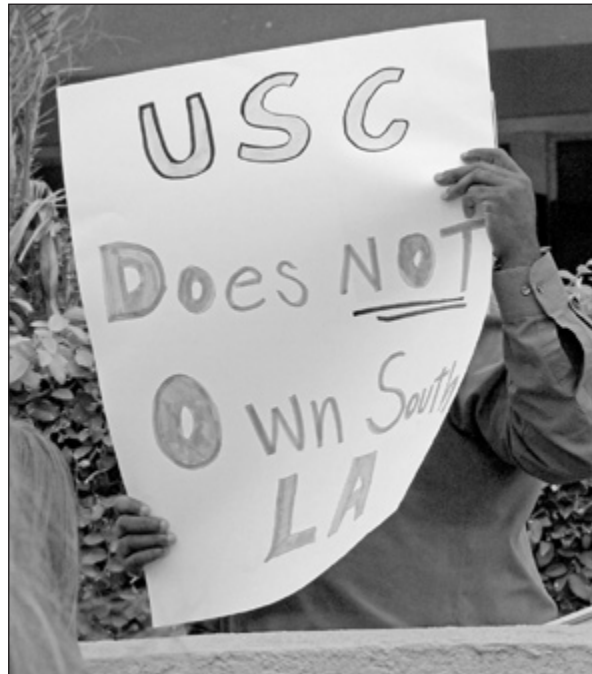
give just one example, a central argument in favor of the USC Specific Plan, offered by both USC and the City's planners, is that USC's construction of new student housing will "free up" 900 units of local housing for the non-USC community. In reality, even if students do eventually move out of enough local housing to vacate 900 units (a highly debatable prediction), those units will merely be made available at market-rate rents, rents that have skyrocketed over the past dozen years out of the reach of most of the local low-income families.

Similar cynicism characterizes the university's approach to local small businesses under its expansion plan. One of many cruel ironies is that, as a major part of its expansion,

USC proposes to demolish a community-serving grocery store and numerous small businesses on a plot of land initially acquired and assembled through eminent domain to serve small businesses displaced by USC's expansion in the 1960s. The university plans to build a high-end hotel, student housing, retail and restaurants. Along with the loss of community-serving businesses, the development is expected to increase gentrification and displace thousands of additional local low-income families.

But what the university didn't expect as it crafted its plan was that the doz-

ens of community residents who attended the first People's Planning School, and the dozens more who have participated in subsequent ones, would organize themselves and hundreds of their neighbors. These residents, the "David" in the brewing battle against "Goliath," or USC, are determined to prevent the further disappearance of their beloved community. They are determined to be heard. Although they welcome investment, they know it must be done responsibly if they are to stay in the community in which the investment will be located—as we say at SAJE, "Better Neighborhoods, Same Neighbors!"





SAJE's People's Planning School

Their goal is *not* to stop the expansion of the university; their hope is that the university will hear their concerns and act responsibly. They see the possibility of increased income for community members at living-wage jobs through the implementation of a local hiring program like the one being implemented by Anschutz Entertainment Group at the LA Live/Staples Center. They see an opportunity for the university to make the community whole again after years of displacement by leveraging its resources to build or preserve affordable housing in the area. They hope for small business assistance for enterprises currently located at University Village and in the surrounding neighborhood that will have to compete against the shiny new chain stores in the newly developed University Village. They hope that the community's grocery store will be allowed to remain. They know that without such mitigation measures they and their neighbors may be gone tomorrow, but that if the university approaches this development with their most vulnerable neighbors in mind, this development could serve as a model of responsible

investment, and of true town and gown partnership.

If their requests are not heard by the university, these residents hold onto the hope, against all odds, that they will be heard by City Hall. But there the residents remain a “David” amongst high-powered, university-paid lobbyists who roam its halls. As hundreds of residents filled the council chambers last month for the Planning Commission vote, they knew that the university and its billionaire trustees, like developers Rick Caruso and Ed Roski, count the mayor and some council members as close personal friends.

Twenty years after broken promises to “Rebuild LA”, South “Central” Los Angeles residents are not sure that they will be able to count on friends in high places, but they know they can count on each other. Margarita Madero, who has lived in the neighborhood just north of the university for over twenty years, says it perfectly, “If we don’t fight for our family, friends and neighbors, who will?”

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