

# Planning for density; Downtown L.A. is an urban center, and the city's plan to ease building restrictions there is the right move.

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

New rules for building downtown need not forecast the elimination of suburban space elsewhere in the city. In fact, these ordinances would sharply contain their incentives for building to the area now thought of as downtown and extending south as far as Martin Luther King Boulevard. Whatever works under the new downtown ordinances -- and whatever doesn't -- will be a lesson for other places where the city chooses to encourage a denser concentration.

## FULL TEXT

Just as the Los Angeles City Council considers new laws to preserve front yards and maintain a suburban feel in many parts of town by banning huge mansions that extend all the way to the sidewalk, the same officials are soon to consider ordinances that eliminate set-back requirements downtown and encourage builders to construct units that take up more space.

Inconsistent? Not in the least. The downtown ordinance package represents a giant step forward for the city and its efforts to encourage construction of housing, in one part of town, at and below market rate. The council should pass it without delay.

Any confusion about the direction of land-use policy in Los Angeles is understandable because City Hall is doing something completely alien to its history and tradition: planning. The new ordinances finally will allow planners and builders to treat downtown as the urban center it is, without a patchwork of suburban-oriented restrictions that are out of place there. Would-be residents of downtown don't need front lawns. They need apartments or condominiums, including many that are affordable for office workers, civil servants, service-sector employees and their families.

The ordinances harvest the power of the market to build affordable units. Builders will be able to construct housing with more units than they otherwise could, and without jumping through the administrative hoops they currently face -- as long as they include below-market units.

Earlier this year, the city made it possible for builders to buy unused "air rights" above the Convention Center. But while they can add more square feet, they can't house more people. The downtown ordinances will change that. What about those micro-apartments people have been talking about? Will downtown suddenly be overrun by closet-sized units? There is nothing in current law to prevent construction of tiny apartments, but no one is building them because, as bad as the housing shortage is, people so far don't want them.

New rules for building downtown need not forecast the elimination of suburban space elsewhere in the city. In fact, these ordinances would sharply contain their incentives for building to the area now thought of as downtown and extending south as far as Martin Luther King Boulevard. Whatever works under the new downtown ordinances -- and whatever doesn't -- will be a lesson for other places where the city chooses to encourage a denser concentration.

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