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FEATURED

Residents Oppose 521 Unit Development on Gelson's Site

Clara Harter
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Photo by Matthew Hall.

Photo courtesy Matt Hall (SMDP)



SANTA MONICA- Over 500 people attended the second community Zoom meeting for the proposed 521-unit Lincoln Center Project, which mainly consisted of residents sharing their opposition to the project with the development team.

The project is located at the corner of Lincoln Blvd. and Ocean Park Blvd. on the site of an existing Gelson's grocery store and surface parking lot. Designs for the almost 900,000 square foot complex include ten separate residential buildings with heights of up to five stories and 36,000 square feet of street facing retail space, including a grocery store. The project is seeking additional height permissions under a state density bonus law in exchange for constructing 53 very low income residential units.

The property owner is SanMon Inc., a subsidiary of Balboa Retail Partners, who are working with Koning Eizenberg Architects and Cypress Equity Investments on the development.

The key concerns raised by residents were the vast scale of the project, its impact on traffic and water supply, the limited number of affordable units and the relatively small retail component. A smaller portion of residents voiced support for the development, saying it was an important part of addressing the housing crisis and helping Santa Monica meet its state mandated requirement to build almost 9,000 new units by 2029.



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The development is eligible for by-right approval, meaning that if it meets all building and zoning codes, Planning Commission and City Council cannot deny it. The use of by-right approvals for housing projects is intended to ensure that the City can build the ambitious number of units allocated by the State's Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA).

Although the project will not require a public hearing for development approval, Dave Rand, the project's land use attorney, emphasized to meeting attendees that approval is still a lengthy process with layers of oversight.

“The administrative approval process with our density bonus requests is not a short process. It’s a long, exacting review by the City. It will be reviewed in detail by a myriad of departments for all the various things that we’re seeing popping up in the (Zoom) chat: issues related to circulation, safety, infrastructure, sustainability, the like, and there will be a public hearing associated with the design of the project before the City’s Architectural Review Board,” said Rand.

The community Zoom meeting is one of the steps that developers must take before submitting their project application for administrative review. While they are required to listen to and record community members’ input, they are not required to alter their plans in response.

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The most common complaint raised by residents is that the 521-unit development is simply too large for the location.

“I feel that the project is way too big,” said 46 year Ocean Park resident Mitch Greenhill. “I could imagine that project being very appropriate on the side of the Big Blue Bus Maintenance yard, which is two blocks away from the metro station... you should not put 500 units at the corner of Lincoln Boulevard and Ocean Park Boulevard, it’s just way out of scale.”

Rand pushed back on that idea, saying he respectfully disagreed and believed that the site was well-suited to large residential development, especially in consideration of Santa Monica’s 8,895 unit RHNA allocation.

“The question is, where do you put those units?” said Rand. “Do you put them in the R1 neighborhoods, densify single family stable neighborhoods? Do we put them in R2 or R3 neighborhoods where you would displace existing tenants, many of them rent control tenants? Or do you put them on surface parking lots on the commercial boulevards, proximate to transit and make it bike friendly and pedestrian friendly as is our objective here?”



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Traffic was another key concern repeatedly raised by residents as Lincoln Blvd is a significant site of congestion.

“I’ve lived in Santa Monica for 34 years and, as many other people have stated, 521 units seems insane to me,” said Jim Bernstein. “If you stand on the corner of Ocean Park and Lincoln at 6pm, the traffic is backed up from that intersection all the way back down to Main Street and people wait for 15 minutes to go to the light.”

The developers have not yet conducted a traffic study, so the potential impact on congestion is unknown. On the one hand, residential uses produce less cars per square foot than retail uses, so the replacement of a highly utilized Gelson’s with housing could lead to a net negative impact on congestion. Alternatively, the sheer number of new units and the fact that the development still includes 36,000 square feet of retail space, including space designated for a small grocery store, could create a net increase in congestion.

Rand said the development team has hired a traffic engineer to look at circulation issues and ensure the project is designed to minimize negative impacts on surrounding roadways.



Residents also raised concerns about the impact of the 521 new units on the City's water supply. Rand dismissed this concern by citing the City's water neutrality ordinance, which requires that all new building projects offset their impact on the water supply in order to receive a development permit.

The Lincoln Center team is working on submitting its development application for administrative review, which will include information on the public comment shared during the community meeting. Rand estimates that the approval process, including a design hearing by the Architectural Review Board, will take at least two and a half years with construction estimated to take an additional two and a half years or three years, setting 2027 as the earliest potential opening date.

This story was published in partnership with SMDP.