

Speaker's notes of panelist Zelda Bronstein
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Before I was a planning commissioner, I was a neighborhood activist. So I'm going to talk about how I would react if I were a neighbor of the Ashby BART station and was confronted with a proposal for a massive development at the station's west parking lot.

My agenda: I'd get together with other neighbors—residents, merchants, Ashby Arts District members, flea market vendors and anyone else whose work and life are directly affected—and do two things: **stop this project**, and **take control** of planning for any future development at Ashby BART.

This project should be stopped because **it's a backroom deal**, and it's **cronyism**, and backroom deals and cronyism are the wrong way to do public business, especially when that business is supposed to be **Community-Based Planning**.

As I expected, the project's sponsors are now saying that from here on out, the community is going to be closely consulted.

My question is, **consulted about what?** Right now, **the basic issue is, who's in charge?** Let's be clear: it's the South Berkeley Neighborhood Development Corporation.

Read the application: SBNDC will be receiving and disbursing the grant money. SBNDC will be hiring and directing facilitators and consultants. SBNDC will convene community members.

Judging from the way this project has been handled so far, I'd say that the South Berkeley Neighborhood Development Corporation cannot be trusted to fairly represent south Shattuck community.

Its grant proposal needs to be stopped so that that community really **can** shape future development at Ashby BART.

How to stop it?

Go to the City Council and demand that they pass a resolution withdrawing the grant application.

At the same time, let the Council know that the community is asking Caltrans not to approve the grant.

The first step in the review process is that each Caltrans district office rates all the applications in its area and then sends the ratings and the proposals to Caltrans headquarters in Sacramento.

Unfortunately, that happened in early November, which, I suspect, is one reason why the project sponsors waited until December 13 to put the item on the council's agenda. So it's way too late to go to the Caltrans District 4 office in Oakland. At this point, the community has to appeal to

Caltrans headquarters in Sacramento.

Two weeks ago, a Caltrans staffer has told me that the grant program is oversubscribed and very competitive. Sixty-seven proposals have asked for a total of \$9,200,000. They're only giving out a million and a half. Let's hope that Caltrans will be reluctant to support a proposal that's already mired in controversy.

The first task is to stop the project; the second is for the community to **take control of future planning for** Ashby BART. Here the **top priority** is to get the Council as soon as possible to pass a resolution saying that it will not convert the South Berkeley Plan into a transit village plan. If Ashby BART gets included in an official transit village district, it greatly increases the chances of overbuilding.

And then the question is: what does the community want to go there? In answering that question, you need to know what you think about **transit-oriented development, smart growth, and transit villages**. Those three terms are all over the SBNDG grant application.

That's because the **planning profession goes through fads**, and these are the fads of the moment. On one level they make sense: build in the center of cities—do infill housing—instead of at the edges; and put it near transit. The idea is to reduce car use, get cleaner air, safer streets, prevent sprawl, make better cities. It all sounds good.

The trouble is, the advocates of transit-oriented development and smart growth tend to be true believers, and their pet concepts are largely unproven.

Let's focus on transit villages, particularly ones associated with fixed rail, like BART. Do they really get people out of cars?

According to the experts, not much. Transit village fans assume people use their cars mostly to go to and from work. In fact only one out of five auto trips is for commuting. The other four are for shopping, recreation, chores. So people are going to use their cars, even if they live at Ashby BART. More precisely, **especially** if they live at BART: the limitation of fixed rail is that—well—it's fixed—it doesn't go most of the places people want and need to travel.

Can dense developments at transit stations really prevent sprawl?

Consider who's moving out to the new subdivisions in the Valley: It's people who want yards for their kids and garages for their cars. They're not going to get those things in a dense housing development at Ashby BART. I'm not saying I approve; I'm just pointing to realities.

How about the retail component?

The *East Bay Express* just did a story on how the retail tenants at the transit village at Fruitvale Ashby BART are having a hard time making a go of it. But you don't have to go Fruitvale—look at the retail spaces in all the big new mixed-use projects on University and on Shattuck—they're mostly empty and have been for a long time—another regrettable but real situation.

So far I've been talking about **false promises**. But there's one prediction that **will** come true if a massive housing development gets built at Ashby BART: the **density** in the south Shattuck area will go way up. Higher density is part of smart growth. In some contexts, it's good planning.

But what smart growth advocates never ask is, is higher density always good planning? How much density is too much? In our city, and in this neighborhood, how much growth is truly smart?

Again, do a reality check. The **Ed Roberts campus**—80,000 square feet of new development—is going up over the Ashby BART east parking lot. Wouldn't it make more sense to wait and see how that project affects the neighborhood, before putting in a huge development across the street?

And in any case, is more housing the best way to make the south Shattuck area a better place? How about more open space? How about a beautiful park or plaza?

These questions should all be on the agenda, once a real community-based planning process gets underway.

Right now, the community's top priorities should be to derail this proposal, and to take charge of the future at Ashby BART.

Thank you.