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TO: Santa Monica Planning Department

cc: Judy Abdo, Mayor
City Manager
City Council (c/o City Manager -- kindly circulate)

FROM: Frank J. Gruber

RE: Civic Center Redevelopment -- "Piazza Santa Monica"

DATE: February 20, 1993

I recently read in the Outlook that plans are moving forward for redevelopment of the Civic Center and Rand areas, and I attended the OPCO meeting today where this was discussed. As an Ocean Park resident who in general is concerned about over-development, I have, nonetheless, long been in favor of the sensible redevelopment of the Civic Center in ways that support the improvement of our urban life.

The Civic Center area, forming a bridge between downtown and Main Street, and containing our most important public buildings, is crucial for Santa Monica's future success as a city. I see no great benefit in the current use -- parking lots and an auditorium that no one I know ever attends. My wife and I often walk from our house on Marine Street all the way to the Third Street Promenade, and the only unpleasant part of the walk is when we pass through the Civic Center. Yet, over-development, particularly development that primarily serves commercial and transient interests, would be a mistake. We do not need another Century City nor, for that matter, another Water Garden at this ideal spot for a true urban center.

Because of a prior commitment, I will be unable to attend Wednesday night's meeting, and I am therefore sending you this memo with my views.

I am excited that the Planning Department and Rand are considering a mix of residential, office and commercial/retail development. I have concerns, however, about the scale of the development, particularly the suitability of high-rise offices, and surface parking must be avoided at all costs, as it is a complete negative when it comes to land-use and urban space. Based on the discussion at OPCO, however, I assume that these issues will receive considerable attention, and they are not what this memo is about. Instead, I have one

primary suggestion and several ancillary suggestions for you to consider.

My primary suggestion is that we think big when it comes to the purpose of this development. We should build a real center for our lives as urban citizens, an urban heart, something that I call, at least for purposes of this memo, and in honor of the great urban spaces that were created in medieval and renaissance Italy, "Piazza Santa Monica." We should be as ambitious as the builders of the Piazza San Marco in Venice. We can create something wonderful, something that the people will use and love, something that will be an effective counter against the alienation of our automobile dominated version of urban life.

(Keep in mind that it is only about a 15 or 20 minute walk to the Civic Center from both Marine Street in the south and from Montana in the north. We can make this a walking city, if we make it an enjoyable and practical place to walk.)

Aside from the appropriate architectural context, how do we make Piazza Santa Monica happen? The basic questions involve what uses we need to support, and how to make these uses interact. I have a few suggestions:

A market. You are currently proposing retail uses, which are important. But we already have a lot of retail in downtown, in Santa Monica Place, and on Main Street (and a lot of empty stores), and therefore we need something special, not the usual collection of franchises.) I suggest including as part of Piazza Santa Monica a permanent site for the Wednesday and Saturday farmers markets, an area that would be surrounded by permanent specialty food shops. There might even be enough volume to have the farmers market every day, perhaps with different farmers using the stalls on different days. People love the Wednesday and Saturday markets, and everyone who goes there bumps into friends. They would be terrific magnets for people during the day. At night the stalls could be folded up, leaving the piazza open for strollers, cafe sitters, children, etc. (In addition to the advantages for the Civic Center site, this plan would eliminate the Wednesday congestion around the Promenade.)

The models for this are numerous around the world. Every Italian city has neighborhood markets, where pushcarts and other temporary structures share space with permanent shops, occupied by butchers, cheese shops, groceries, cafes, etc. At the famous Campo dei Fiori in Rome there is a market. The Italian Market in Philadelphia, and Pike's Market in Seattle, are similar. Quincy Market in Boston is also similar, and has been a big success, but without much of a neighborhood nearby, it is primarily oriented to tourists. Our market serves not

only our local neighborhoods, but also Santa Monica's "hinterland," the Westside. A market at Piazza Santa Monica, augmented with permanent food specialty shops, would also serve the transient office crowd, much like the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia has always served commuters.

Performing arts. I am pleased that you plan to include cultural uses. Obviously, the nighttime use provided by the movie theaters has been key to the success of Third Street, and the Civic Center will need something to ensure nighttime use as well. As successful as they are, duplicating the movie theaters would be a mistake. We need something different, either a good moderate sized concert hall or a theater or group of theaters where cutting edge work would be performed. (A few years ago I was on the board of the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, and we looked at the possibility of taking over and converting the Civic Auditorium. We discussed this with various people in City Hall, but the time was not right, for neither the Odyssey nor the City.) You get interesting and diverse audiences for theater and music, especially if the theater and music are interesting and diverse, and that's what we want on Piazza Santa Monica.

The piazza itself has to be designed to encourage the ultimate entertainment, people watching. It has to be big enough, so that people don't feel claustrophobic, and so that different groups can separate themselves a little, but not so big that the scale is intimidating. You want a fountain, and perhaps a bandstand, around which people can casually group themselves. Maybe a small-scale merry-go-round in one corner, so that young kids will have something to do while their parents have a coffee and talk to friends. (As the father of a three-year-old, I can tell you that the dinosaur topiaries on Third Street serve this function, but they obviously were not designed for it.)

Low-scale public transit. Piazza Santa Monica will be the natural connection between downtown and Main Street, and ultimately we want to encourage strolling that would go back and forth, from downtown to Main Street. However, one of the best ways to encourage walking is to make public transit easy, so that people are not tempted to take their cars because they don't want to walk both ways. The big blue buses, however, are unwieldy and intimidating on these short runs. I suggest two shuttles running frequently using half-size buses ("little blue buses?"). One would run from say 16th and Montana down to Fourth, down Fourth to Pico, where it would jog over to Main Street and continue at least to the Venice line, perhaps down to Windward. The other shuttle would make an east-west "circle," hitting the Pier, going down to Colorado and then out to say 14th Street (the terminus of the Exposition line?) or as far as the College, down to Santa Monica and back to

Ocean. The fare should be cheap or nothing. Subsidize the service by parking fees charged those who choose to drive.

Big-scale public transit. It should go without saying that any development at this site, right off the freeway at a spot crisscrossed by bus lines, should be designed to encourage the use of public transit. While parking, below ground, must be provided, commuting by car can be discouraged by various means, and public transit can be made easier and more available. Perhaps half a million people live within a 30 minute bus ride. That's quite a market.

Low-rise office buildings. I should say, "low-rise offices above retail," because what we should avoid is the satellite downtown cliché of free-standing office buildings. Yes, we need offices, not only to help pay for all this, but also to provide people to use Piazza Santa Monica during the day. But real office buildings in real cities have retail on the ground floor! (And I mean real retail, not just banks and brokerages.) Again, consider the Piazza San Marco, or the Galleria in Milan. Offices everywhere, but not on the ground floor.

Speaking of offices, given the proximity to the Courthouse and City Hall, this is a natural location for lawyers. They can walk to court, and thereby reduce non-commuting traffic. In fact, a non-stop bus could run from Fourth Street side straight down the freeway to the L.A. Civic Center, so that a lawyer with his or her office at Piazza Santa Monica would never need a car to travel to court.

Housing, yes. Building housing in the downtown is a necessity, and it will be especially valuable if: (i) 30% is low-income, and (ii) it is family-friendly. We need housing that will house people, people who will use Piazza Santa Monica and the rest of downtown and Main Street. According to the figures I saw, Rand plans on building 350 units in only 315,000 square feet. These sound like one-bedroom pieds-à-terre. That's not what we need.

While homelessness and housing the poor are huge problems, in terms of sheer numbers, there are probably more people, young families, who cannot find a reasonably priced first house in our urban core. They have to move to Riverside or Canyon Country to find a house. This sprawl perpetuates environmental and economic disaster. Why are we building infrastructure, such as schools, out there, when we already have our sewers and highways and the Santa Monica school system is begging for pupils? One answer is to build family-friendly housing here (and elsewhere in the built-up areas of Southern California). Two, three and four bedroom units, with access to play areas, etc. We want people living around

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Piazza Santa Monica, and we want their children playing there, because if the children are there, the parents will be there, too. Let's build neighborhoods, not just housing.

The architectural context. We need wonderful architecture to make this work. There are huge challenges. First, Main Street, which is so destructive as it gashes its way through the site. Can Main Street be eliminated, and traffic routed around the perimeter? (Keep in mind that the goal should be to discourage cars anyway.) Or, could Main Street be dug down and covered over, in which case it would have direct access to the underground parking? Removing Main Street would free up much more currently vacant land that is useless "front yard," so that it could be turned into productive open space.

Second, the hugeness of the site itself, and the lack of focus of the existing buildings. Let's face it, the existing buildings, City Hall (nice as it is) and the Courthouse (ugh) do not create much synergy. Someone is going to have to come up with a plan that brings everything together, and hopefully in a way that utilizes the natural beauty of the site. Consider again Piazza San Marco, how it opens to the sea. Our Piazza Santa Monica should attract sunset-watchers every night.

A final word. Much of this must sound grandiose. It's not meant to be -- above all, Piazza Santa Monica must be built to human scale. It must also sound expensive. I don't know about that, but keep in mind that good design is no more expensive than bad design, and the externalized costs of bad design -- including ugliness itself -- are permanent.

Thank you for your attention. This memo turned out to be about three pages longer than I expected, but I hope you find these suggestions worth considering. No doubt some of my specific ideas are mutually exclusive. In any case, good luck with your planning. I would be pleased to hear any responses you have to these ideas.