



## Grand Avenue Project

*by Tom Rippe*

Two billion dollars are floating around downtown Los Angeles. Developers want to turn a profit. Community advocates want affordable housing and job training. And officials want to balance the two and get the project done.

The project will create jobs and raise tax revenues. But some members of the community say the project doesn't do enough to benefit people living in downtown.

"We feel at this time and throughout this process that the community's interests have not been well represented," said community leader Benjamin Torres.

A two billion dollar development plan is going to draw some attention, and some criticism. Some of the most vocal are the same community advocates who won a major victory by securing affordable housing and job training during the construction of the Staples Center.

They're not against development, but they are concerned about how it happens, and who it benefits. "I'm for revitalization. I'm a developer. But I'm not for revitalization for wealthy people at the expense of poor people," said Noreen McClendon, the executive director of a community development corporation in South Central, who has been developing housing and retail spaces for years.

"We don't want to stop it, we just want to be a part of it. I mean, you know, we want change, but for the betterment of our community. They decided they wanted to come in and change it, but for whom, for the betterment of whom?" said downtown

resident Deborah McClendon. She worries about who the new jobs are going to, and about the availability of housing.

But not all downtown residents are skeptical about the project. Russell Brown is president of the Downtown Neighborhood Council, and he loves the Grand Avenue Project. “It’s literally going to be a catalytic development that will change the face of the northern part of downtown. And it’s quite exciting,” said Brown. But he does recognize that there are causes for concern in the community. “I think a lot of people’s frustrations were their feeling of just being left out economically, of being left out of many of the opportunities of the city. And they’re trying to figure out how they fit in.”

Beatrice Hsu is vice president of development at The Related Companies, the developer of the Grand Avenue project. She says they’ve worked hard to include the community in the planning process, but expectations are different now than they were a few years ago. “I think we’re having a different conversation here than we’ve been having with other major redevelopment projects elsewhere in the city. In large part, I think, due to the success of community advocates for community benefits in redevelopment projects.”

Advocates want that conversation include 10 million dollars in job training and 25 percent of residential units for affordable housing. Right now the plan calls for half a million for job training and 20 percent of residential units for affordable housing. They also object to the use of public funds for a project they say does not benefit the entire community.

“I’m just concerned that the project is going to use up resources. And with that kind of investment, south of the 10 freeway we won’t get anything,” said McClendon.

But Hsu says things aren't that simple. She says the money isn't just out there, to be spent on any project the city chooses. "Every dollar of public assistance going into the project is actually generated by the project itself. So it's not as if you could take the dollars that are being invested in Grand Avenue and instead invest them in a different part of the city."

So how exactly does that work? Hsu says either the developer or the city will put up the money, and later be reimbursed from tax revenues generated by the development after its completion.

Community Advocate Pete White says it's all smoke and mirrors, and shows no signs of giving up the fight. "We need to come back out and we need to get ready to fight y'all. We need to drag the fight into the streets because that's where we know how to fight. You can't fight them in there."

The community has been actively involved in the Grand Avenue Project from the beginning. Some feel they have been heard, others do not. But as the project moves forward community voices are likely to get louder, and could change the face of the project that will change the face of downtown L.A.