It’s 10 minutes past noon on a gorgeous Thursday, and the UNe at Father Nature’s Lavish Wraps on DeLacy Street in Old Pasadena is out the door. In fact, restaurants throughout the district are jammed with the engineers, computer geeks, and financial analysts who work within easy walking distance. But what makes this downtown special is that it will be packed again tonight—and the next night, and the entire weekend.

Pasadena Mayor William Bogaard says central Pasadena is a 16/6 district, not 24/7, but he might be selling it short. The throngs on the sidewalks of Colorado Boulevard can be as thick on Sunday afternoon as at any other time of the week.

“Pasadena is an urban place,” says the city’s former development administrator, Marsha Rood, FAICP. “It isn’t suburban. That gets overlooked.”

Although Pasadena (pop. 144,000) lies only about 12 miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles, the smaller city has its own sense of place. It’s a place that the rest of the nation knows about because many television viewers spend the better part of New Year’s Day watching the Rose Parade and the Rose Bowl college football game. Those two events alone set Pasadena apart, but the city also offers more than 100,000 jobs and is home to about 40,000 students at the California Institute of Technology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena City College, and other institutions. In addition, Pasadena has a thriving arts and culture scene and leafy residential neighborhoods.

Now Pasadena is implementing many of the smart growth and new urbanist concepts that other California cities have only contemplated. Housing is booming in the central district—most of it in mixed-use developments. A transit-oriented development is nearing completion literally on top of the MetroLink rail line. Stores and restaurants are thriving. And private investment is reaching the shabbiest areas at the edge of the downtown.

It is no accident that the Congress for the New Urbanism is holding its annual conference in Pasadena this month, or that the League of California Cities chose Pasadena for its annual planners institute this spring. City officials constantly host planners, developers, elected officials, and real estate professionals eager to mimic Pasadena’s success.

“We get people coming here from all over the world—China, Australia,” says planning and development director Richard Bruckner, who has led many tours during his six years in town.

It also is no accident that Pasadena is getting this type of traditional downtown development. “Pasadena is a success story because it’s been at it for so long,” says Nathan Cherry, AICP, vice-president of RTKL Associates, which recently helped the city with a major planning update. “It has been chipping away at a smart growth strategy for nearly 30 years now.”

Setting its own course

Selecting that strategy required city officials, civic activists, and property owners to buck the conventional thinking of the 1970s. At that time, the city was working on a corporate headquarters plan that essentially would have turned the central district into a suburban office park.

But after nearly a decade of that approach, local residents said they didn’t want to become like every other suburb. They wanted an authentic city that respected its historic buildings and institutions.

So during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the city changed course. There would be no more urban renewal or even traditional, tax-increment-funded redevelopment. Instead,
Pasadena has become a model of smart growth for other California communities.

Old Pasadena was saved from the wrecking ball by a citizen revolt, aggressive historic preservation efforts, and the type of contrarian parking system endorsed by Donald Shoup of UCLA. Above: Paseo Pasadena. Right: city hall, built in 1927, is closed temporarily for seismic retrofitting.

Pasadena would make better use of its existing assets and recreate its old downtown. “I don’t claim any prescience,” says Mayor Bogaard, who served on the city council in the 1980s and, after a hiatus, was elected mayor in 2000, “but this community has been talking about the goal line for a very long time.

What has happened in the last five years is exactly what we wanted to happen.”

A bit of history
Settlers from the Midwest founded Pasadena in a valley between the San Gabriel and Verdugo mountains in 1873. The town began to thrive during the 1880s with the completion of the Santa Fe Railroad. Over the next few decades, Colorado Boulevard became Pasadena’s main street, and nearby neighborhoods filled with Craftsman-style houses.

In the 1920s, the city began executing a City Beautiful plan prepared by architect Robert Bennett. Just to the east of the historic core, the city built a spectacular Beaux Arts city hall and central library, and an Italian Renaissance-style civic auditorium. The city-owned Rose Bowl stadium went up about one and one-half miles north of downtown.

Progress came to a halt during the Depression. Not until after World War II did Pasadena begin to grow again. In 1947, Bullocks opened a first-class department store, which started the development of a new shopping district about 10 blocks east of the old downtown. The South Lake Avenue District thrived during the 1950s and 1960s as an upscale shopping destination for suburbanites living in the rapidly growing San Gabriel Valley.

At the same time, the historic core floundered. Buildings were underused or sat vacant. Few people went downtown after dark. No one thought to brag about Old Pasadena because the name didn’t exist.

Pasadena’s leaders responded to downtown’s demise the same way planners and elected officials did in many cities across the country: They planned to demolish it and start over. “It was a joke then to think that anything could happen here economically,” Rood says of Old Pasadena. “It was falling down. It was rubbish. The city’s plan was to tear it all down, so property owners didn’t put any money into their properties.”

In 1971, the city adopted the Central District Improvement Plan. It called for the city’s redevelopment agency to assemble downtown’s small lots, through eminent domain if necessary, and to work with developers to erect large corporate office buildings. The city did attract a number of corporate offices during this period, including a new headquarters for the Parsons Corporation, the engineering and construction giant.

But Parsons and similar redevelopment efforts came at the expense of historic architecture. The Mediterranean, Craftsman, and Art Deco commercial and residential buildings that lined the streets were replaced by glass-walled office buildings whose primary entrances faced onto parking lots.

From mall to overhaul
A crisis erupted in 1980 with the opening of Plaza Pasadena. The suburban-style, 600,000-square-foot shopping mall not only turned a
blank wall to two blocks of Colorado Boulevard, it sliced through Robert Bennett’s grand Garfield Avenue, cutting off the civic auditorium from city hall and the library.

Plaza Pasadena was a redevelopment agency project. The city acquired the land, taking some of it through eminent domain, relocated more than a hundred businesses and households, and built a parking garage. In all, the city invested $58 million in the shopping mall.

"Plaza Pasadena polarized this community," recalls Jim Plotkin, a downtown property owner and civic activist for more than 30 years. "The city tore down historic buildings. At that point, people were starting to say, 'No, we need to save some of these things.'"

Responding to the criticism, the city abolished its redevelopment arm in 1981. Historic preservation emerged as the next strategy, led in part by Pasadena Heritage, a private, nonprofit group that ultimately became one of the largest local historic preservation organizations in the nation. At about the time that retailers were preparing to open stores at Plaza Pasadena, Pasadena Heritage and other groups were writing a plan to revitalize downtown by means of historic preservation, assistance to small businesses, and public-private partnerships. The city responded with new regulations aimed at protecting historic structures.

Historic preservation did not bring immediate economic success, however. In the early 1980s, Colorado Boulevard was still lined with secondhand stores, pawnshops, vacant storefronts, and an assortment of light industrial operations. So the city, civic organizations, and property owners undertook a number of projects, starting with historic designation.

Although many buildings were underused and dilapidated, most of the historic core had survived the city's urban renewal efforts (which had swallowed nearby blocks). Scores of these older buildings and neighborhoods remained in the core. In 1983, city officials got eight blocks of Colorado Boulevard—the heart of what was becoming known as Old Pasadena—listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The city sold revenue bonds to fund restoration of three historic buildings and an assortment of light industrial operations. So the city, civic organizations, and property owners undertook a number of projects, starting with historic designation.

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Another place with new housing is the former Plaza Pasadena shopping mall, which never succeeded economically. Mall owner TrizecHahn sold the air rights to Post Properties in the 1990s and together the developers overhauled Plaza Pasadena. TrizecHahn, which has since sold the property, reworked the retail spaces, adding storefronts on Colorado Boulevard and a 14-screen cinema, while Post built 387 apartments in four stories on top of the mall. In addition, TrizecHahn created a 70-foot-wide public plaza, restoring the City Beautiful corridor down Garfield Avenue.

Plaza Pasadena is now called Paseo Pasadena. While the residential component is successful, with apartments renting for roughly $1,700 to $3,500 a month, a number of stores and restaurants have already come and gone. Still, few residents miss the old shopping mall.

Now the central district has other growing pains. Traffic congestion is a sensitive subject. Slow-growth advocates blame the downtown housing boom for all the cars, while city officials say much of the traffic is simply passing through. Because area freeways are jammed and driving from one freeway to another requires a trip onto Pasadena’s surface streets, the city can do little except ensure that through motorists stay out of residential neighborhoods, Bruckner says.

Piotkin adds that transit has not alleviated the problem. He points to a Gold Line stop that is five congested blocks from Colorado Boulevard and another stop that is four blocks from the Pasadena City College campus.

Rood, a central district resident who is now a planning consultant, also questions the city’s commitment to pedestrian mobility. “The pedestrian is not the focal point of a lot of the planning,” she says, pointing to uninviting sidewalks near Gold Line stations. “The city puts more money into traffic mitigation than it does into pedestrian amenities.”

They’ve got issues

Parks have become another bone of contention. Recognizing that the influx of residents in the central district places a premium on public open space, the city council raised the park impact fee from $750 per housing unit to $3,600 and then to $11,000. The fee is scheduled to jump to nearly $20,000 later this year. Mayor Bogaard concedes that the fee is high, but he makes no apologies.

Bruckner explains the problem: “How do we meet the community’s needs, and how do we preserve the parks we do have that are getting so much more usage?” He suggests that the city’s open space plan needs to be revamped.

The development community is skeptical. Al Moses, an attorney for development interests and a former planning commissioner, complains that the $20,000-per-unit fee “just dropped out of the sky on us.” He and others convinced the city to phase in the higher rate over two years, but he believes the fee was intended to slow development.

Another concern is the lack of affordable housing. Market-rate housing in Pasadena is expensive, even by California standards. New two-bedroom condos start at more $500,000, and even studio apartments rent for $1,500 per month. A city ordinance requires that 15 percent of new units be designated for low-income moderate-income residents (families making up to about $60,000), but nearly all developers opt to pay an in-lieu fee rather than build the price-restricted units.

Again, city officials concede there is a problem but say they are working on it. The city has acquired some sites, and it intends to combine in-lieu fees with block grants and tax increment financing to subsidize affordable housing development, Bruckner says.

Of course, many of these issues—traffic congestion, parking shortages, expensive housing, overused parks—may be viewed as signs of success (or at least of popularity). Vibrant urban areas are usually crowded and expensive. Pasadena remains an inspiring model for many cities, says Judith Corbett, executive director of the independent Local Government Commission and author of the new urbanist Ahwahnee Principles. The fact that it is Pasadena—and not one of California’s liberal college towns such as Berkeley or Davis—only adds to the model’s credibility, she says.

The complaints are also a sign of how deeply Pasadena residents care about their town. “Pasadena is a city that has a lot of community participation,” Moses says with a chuckle. “I think it probably has more commissions and committees than any other city of its size.”

As the city’s top planner, Bruckner knows well the experience of six-hour public hearings. “The conversations are passionate and long. It’s exhausting, but in the end, the product is better,” he says.

Paul Shigley is the editor of California Planning & Development Report.
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