

Former LA City Planning Commission President Jane Usher on Density Bonus Bonanza (SB 1818)

Density Bonus Bill: The WRONG Solution

Repealing SB1818

By Jane Ellison Usher

You may be aware that, as President of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission, I have voiced repeated and serious disagreement with SB 1818. Like you, I am aware that SB 1818 has had the immediate effect of replacing more affordable housing with costlier, less affordable housing. It has also given us updated housing stock, which on its face can be identified as a positive outcome, though I suspect that this superficial reaction bears more true investigation into whether we are indeed getting “better” buildings. Without belaboring my opposition, may I summarize just a few points for your consideration:

1. Because it overrides all local zoning, SB 1818 breaks the promises made by our general plan. The general plan and its subsidiary components, unlike SB 1818, are the product of substantial professional planning, constituent, and environmental review. Instead of coherent, consensus-based planning, SB 1818 offers us planning via the mechanisms of developer whimsy and desire.

2. Because its bonuses are not limited to employment and transit centers, SB 1818 does not advance the smart growth patterns and practices that will enable Los Angeles to remain a world class city. SB 1818 allows growth to occur at traffic worsening locations. Los Angeles, by contrast, needs to rein in growth at traffic-inducing locations.

3. The manner in which the City of Los Angeles is proceeding eliminates environmental review for all SB 1818 projects that seek only the density bonus and not other, additional development incentives. The City Council has adopted language that defines such projects as “ministerial.” Per state CEQA guidelines, “ministerial” projects are exempt from its oversight. I believe this powerful wordsmithing has occurred below the radar.

4. I give credence to the often expressed sentiment that the City of Los Angeles lacks sufficient housing for low and middle income residents. From my perch as President of the CPC, I can observe that more than 90% of our new housing stock will be sold at market rate prices. Market rate prices are beyond the reach of the poor and middle class, as must be obvious to anyone who tries to purchase housing. Unfortunately, SB 1818 is the WRONG solution to our problem. Los Angeles needs a citywide solution that relies on smart growth land use policies and a menu of contribution options that apply to all developers. The current decline in the housing market impedes our progress to sensible solutions, as are already in place in other cities throughout the country.