



Village design group plans workshop

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After listening to a presentation on June 17 by consultant Howard Blackson, members of the Ramona Village Design Group planned a three-day workshop with him later this summer to proceed with Phase II of the village design.

Blackson, who previously worked for San Diego County, was hired by the county to work on the project. He is an urban designer with PlaceMakers, a firm that works with developers and municipalities to create customized (known as "calibrated") coding. Specializing in form-based codes which strongly address the physical form of building and development, Blackson said he knows "how important character is for places. That's why people use these codes."

Conventional zoning codes, Blackson noted, are based on use—commercial, residential and industrial—and density. They provide height restrictions, regulate setbacks and parking ratios.

"That's not how you build a city or town. That's how you measure it," he said.

The form-based codes support community vision, local character, conservation of open lands, transit options, and walkable and mixed-use neighborhoods.

Referring to a proposed retail center of Ramona, Blackson said, "It fits the code. It fits the zone. It just doesn't fit Ramona."

"Right now you have a city of zones," he told members of the design group. "With the principles we have, really you're a town of neighborhoods. There are many distinctive neighborhoods...and where they come together is where you have important town centers, neighborhood centers."

Blackson showed and discussed a number of municipalities using form-based codes such as Carmel, Lodi and Mountain View, Calif., and how the codes have transformed their "Main Streets."

"It's the character that matters. The quality of the place," he said.

Ramona is moving in the right direction, he added, "but we want to take that next step to create some place you want to spend time, spend money in."

PlaceMakers offers pattern books showing different architectural styles and elements that can be used to create the character of a place. Blackson noted that Hemet, Calif., used the pattern books because they wanted a specific style.

"You are going to find a lot of places in Southern California want to be a sustainable place," he said. "You can do that with this type of coding very easily. Sustainability is going to be a new market."

Using a project in King City, Calif., an agricultural area, as an example, Blackson said character of the place comes first, followed by other factors such as use, building types, where the building sits on the lot, the frontage, parking, and scale and height.

"It's not dismissing zoning ordinances," he said. "It's just putting the right stuff in the right place."

He identified the three-dimensional aspect of a municipality: the core, the middle and the edge. The edge of town is softer, greener, and there is more building space, he explained. As one moves toward downtown, the neighborhoods start to become more formal, there are curbs and sidewalks, the buildings start to get higher and there is less green.

He pointed out that Ramona's Main Street is different from the town's rural edge where there are ranch houses, cattle, horses and wineries. "You don't want to take an apartment building and stuff it out here," he said, referring to the rural edge, "just like you don't want to take the suburban large single family home and stuff it downtown."

"Ramona has a very clear town center. Unfortunately Main Street has a highway going through it," he said, adding that they have to be flexible with the transition from Main Street to neighborhoods because it happens very quickly.

Design Group Chairman Rob Lewallen commented that Ramona has the benefit of concentric circle zoning and that from the town center, the lots gradually increase in size as you head out of town.

Blackson agreed, pointing out that there are lots behind Main Street that have alleyways and then as you move out farther there are large ranch lots. You have a center, good middle and a real edge that most places don't have, he told the group.

While members identified the appeal of having structures downtown up to 100 years old, one problematic issue for potential businesses has been the parking standards and how they can prevent some businesses from opening downtown or forcing them to open in another part of town that might make the business unfeasible.

Blackson said the parking standards and setbacks are wrong because they are "not calibrated to place. It can't be one-size fits all as it is now." Blackson added that parking can be addressed in form-based codes. Another problem mentioned was the environmental regulations and the limitations they pose. Blackson said the group has to treat the downtown area or a portion of it like you treat a project, "because the county responds to projects." Bring a project in and they'll coordinate with the different entities, whereas if there are five to 15 owners coming in at different times, the county cannot coordinate it as well, he explained. Lewallen said the state-mandated Fair Share Program in the 1980s resulted in 1,154 units and led to various problems, some residents are scared of growth in general. They are not convinced of mixed-use or form-based codes.

"This group is all about consensus," he said. "We want community-wide consensus."

Blackson agreed that such state-mandated building forced upon Ramona was bad in a variety of ways and can create social imbalances.

"This community really needs to be convinced that it's something different than we've had in the past," Lewallen said.

Blackson responded that the group needs to educate the residents. "You've got good committees...you've actually got a great newspaper. You've got good bones for dialogue. Inform the people and let them make the good decisions is the best way to do it. You've got to engage the public."

To do this, Blackson said, he will conduct a three-day workshop, bringing together committees and individuals in the community to get their input. They can also build on work that was done in Phase 1 by the village design group.

"The idea is you don't do never-ending workshops, you actually do a design event," he said.

Those involved put together a plan and then give it to the decision-makers, he said.

Blackson said it is good to get a cross-representation of Ramona residents at the workshop. Co-chair Carol Fowler said that there is an excellent mix in the village design group. Lewallen and Greg Roberson represent the Ramona Design Review Board; Fowler, the chamber of commerce; Bob Stoodly, Ramona Unified School District; Jim Robinson, Ramona Municipal Water District; Torry Brean and Paul Stykel, Ramona Community Planning Group; and Steve Powell is a director at large.

To obtain other input, members discussed bringing in residents representing such groups as real estate agents, Kiwanis, Rotary, the senior center, and boys and girls club, with a target of around 30 people involved.

When asked to determine the study area, the members discussed the three areas of downtown: 1) the Colonnade on the east side of town, from Etcheverry to Pala streets; 2) Paseo, from Pala to 10th streets; and 3) Old Town, the historic part of town. They agreed to focus on Paseo first. However, Fowler said, "It's important we don't do one section and then leave the others."

Although a specific date was not set, the design group hopes to hold the workshop in late July or early August. In other business at the design group's meeting, Lewallen announced that the Ramona community gardens are "up and running" and there will be an open house on Aug. 1. Plots are \$65 but there are plots available that people have purchased for "those less fortunate," he said.

Torry Brean said that he and Bob Hailey, both members of the Ramona Community Planning Group, volunteered to be on the Ramona Retail Site Selection Committee to discuss the proposed Target Center. Fowler and Steve Powell also volunteered to serve on the committee.