

What is the Community Character of Venice, CA? How Can This Be Used to Inform Future Actions by the California Coastal Commission?

Executive Summary

The California Coastal Commission (Commission) regulates development along the coast to protect and enhance the coast and ocean for present and future generations. The Commission implements the 1976 Coastal Act, which includes policies that protect public access and recreation opportunities, terrestrial and marine habitat, water quality, lower-cost visitor accommodations, and the character of special coastal communities that are important visitor destinations. One such special coastal community is Venice in the City of Los Angeles, a historic beach town that is an international draw because of its unique characteristics such as its famed canals, soft sand beaches, funky vibe, and beachfront boardwalk. The Commission has made many decisions on development projects in Venice informed by available standards including the certified Venice Land Use Plan (LUP), which points to architectural and social diversity as two attributes that have made Venice a unique visitor destination.

Over the years, the economic and demographic aspects of communities across the coast have gradually been shifting, with California coastal property emerging as some of the most expensive in the country. Longtime coastal residents continue to come before the Commission, pointing to the loss of “community character” when weighing in on development decisions, particularly in Venice. In addition, while the LUP points to the architectural and social diversity of Venice as attributes, it does not define the latter. Despite this, the Coastal Act nor Venice LUP include a comprehensive list of the specific characteristics that make Venice or anywhere else a special coastal community. Because of the strong public interest and complexity of the issues raised by current development trends, this thesis will look at information gaps and analyze these issues through an environmental justice lens, guided by the Commission’s Environmental Justice Policy.

In an effort to develop a deeper understanding of the community character of Venice as protected by the Coastal Act, this research is focused on the Oakwood neighborhood, which is a historically Black, working-class community within Venice, where a growing number of projects have been appealed on the grounds they adversely impact the social character of Venice and are inconsistent with the community character protection policies of the Coastal Act.

This thesis includes a reviewed literature and archival research on the definitions of community character and social diversity, researched the history of Venice and Oakwood, and an analysis of land use changes and coastal permitting decisions. What is discovered is that in Venice, community character is not limited to the physical or structural characteristics but is also deeply influenced by the people who occupy their community. Venice is described as a diverse, inclusive, artistic/creative, community-oriented, coastal-dependent, pedestrian, and small-scale residential community that has centered around coastal and recreational uses since its inception and draws visitors from all over the world. The Oakwood neighborhood, which has historically

had a higher proportion of Black residents as compared to any other coastal community in California, has contributed to this sense of place.

This thesis will demonstrate how the socioeconomics and demographics of this area have changed significantly over the decades. In the case of Oakwood, historic practices such as redlining forced black residents into this community and now gentrification has helped to drive them out. Over the decades police gang injunctions targeting mainly Black and Latino low-income residents, real estate speculation, and land use planning decisions, have all contributed to population displacement and gentrification in Oakwood and throughout Venice. This has all resulted in a dramatic shift in the community character.

Planning and permit data, as well as extensive historical evaluation, depict an overall trend of larger, more expensive homes replacing modest, often multifamily, sometimes affordable residential units. The construction of these larger homes and the influx of businesses with higher-cost services has also been linked to the loss of built and social character, architectural integrity, and community interactions historically prevalent in Venice. It is the conclusion of the thesis that these changes are cumulatively affecting the unique characteristics, including social diversity, that have made Venice a visitor destination worthy of protection under the Coastal Act.

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I. Introduction to the Research Project

A. Research Need & Goals

Venice is a coastal community located in the City of Los Angeles between the coastal communities of Santa Monica and Marina Del Rey. Venice, which is comprised of multiple smaller neighborhoods, was designated as a “special coastal community” along with a dozen other California towns by the Commission in the 1970s. This designation highlights and protects these areas as important coastal resources due to their unique characteristics such as cultural, historical, and architectural heritage, recognition as an important visitor-serving destination, and/or because they were areas that provide a diversity of housing opportunities including low- and moderate-income housing under the Coastal Act. All of this gives places like Venice a unique identity.¹

The Commission oversees permitting within the coastal zone until the Commission certifies a Local Coastal Program (LCP) and transfers permitting authority to that local government. The City of Los Angeles (City), which has seven planning segments in the coastal zone including Venice, does not have a certified LCP and is authorized and required to approve or deny CDPs for development within the coastal zone. The Commission, however, retains oversight of all City actions (approvals and denials) for development within the coastal zone, including coastal development permits (CDPs).²

While the City does not have a certified LCP for Venice, there is a Venice Land Use Plan (LUP) that was certified by the Commission in 2001, which provides guidance for determining whether development within the coastal zone of Venice is consistent with the Coastal Act. The LUP defines a “special coastal community” as an area which is an important visitor destination, characterized by a distinctive cultural, historical, or architectural heritage, provides opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle access, and adds to the visual attractiveness of the coast. The LUP also includes policies that require the preservation of the characteristics that make Venice unique, including its architectural and

¹ Special Coastal Communities were identified by (1) areas characterized by a particular cultural, historical, or architectural heritage and continuity that is distinctive in the coastal zone; (2) areas presently recognized as important visitor destination centers on the coastline; (3) areas with small-scale and limited automobile traffic providing opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle access for visitors to the coast; (4) areas having a physical scale consistent with and complementary to coastal landforms or having a particular physical coherence that adds to the visual attractiveness of the coast for residents and for the general public traveling to the coast; (5) areas that provide a diversity of coastal housing opportunities, particularly for low-and moderate-income persons and the elderly; or (6) areas within walking distance of a beach with generally 20% of all parcels in either small-scale hotel-motel or beach-oriented commercial uses. Normally such coastal neighborhoods and communities will be within walking distance of the coastline, roughly 1,000 yards, but in some cases they may extend further landward.

² Coastal development permit jurisdiction in the City of Los Angeles coastal zone is divided into three categories: the Commission’s retained jurisdiction, the “Single Permit Jurisdiction,” and the “Dual Permit Jurisdiction.” The Commission retains permit jurisdiction in the water and other sensitive areas. The Coastal Act (Section 30601) identifies the Dual Permit Jurisdiction area of the City of Los Angeles permit program where any development that receives a local CDP must also obtain a second (or “dual”) CDP from the Coastal Commission. For projects located inland of the areas identified in Section 30601 (i.e., projects in the Single Permit Jurisdiction), the City of Los Angeles local coastal development permit is the only CDP required.

social diversity. Social diversity, however, is not defined so it has been unclear what is protected. The document includes general policies to protect the cultural, historical, and architectural heritage of Venice. It also includes neighborhood-specific policies for the subareas of Oakwood, Milwood, Southeast Venice, Oxford Triangle, North Venice, Venice Canals, Silver Strand, Ballona Lagoon East, Ballona Lagoon West, and Marina Peninsula.

In recent years, the Commission has seen a noticeable increase in the number of appeals in Venice filed by community members. Since the certification of the LUP, at least thirty-four City-approved CDPs for development in Venice have been appealed to the Commission on the basis that the development could have negative impacts on the community character of specific neighborhoods. Some contentions include whether an approved development respects the existing mass and scale of the neighborhood; that projects involving residential density reductions and/or increases in the size of homes are contributing to gentrification³ and drastically altering community character; and that a development that does not respect the mass, scale, or density of neighborhoods will negatively change the social diversity or cultural heritage of Venice, especially in Oakwood—a historically Black, working-class neighborhood that contributes to the special character of Venice.

Appellants have also questioned whether a development is consistent with the social character of Venice and raised the Commission’s adopted Environmental Justice Policy. The Coastal Act was amended in 2016 to give the Commission the authority to specifically consider environmental justice and the equitable distribution of benefits in its planning and permitting decisions. The subsequent Environmental Justice Policy acknowledges the lack of diversity along the coast, the role of historic inequalities, socioeconomic forces, and policy choices in widening that gap, and that coastal development should be inclusive of all who work, live and recreate on the coast and provide equitable benefits to those who have been historically excluded, marginalized, or harmed by such development. However, neither this policy nor the Chapter 3 policies of the Coastal Act, which are the agency’s standard of review, define community character or include specific development standards for its protection. As a result of these appeals and issues raised, it was decided there was a need to better define the characteristics that make Venice a “special coastal community” and focus on the social character of the seaside town.

B. Guiding Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to define the community’s past and present character and identify how land use planning decisions have affected Venice, including the Oakwood community. There were two key questions to answer:

- 1) What have been/are defining characteristics of Venice and the Oakwood community?

³ Gentrification is the process by which the character of an area is altered by a large influx of wealthier people moving into a poorer area, displacing the existing community members by increasing the cost of living. Through increases in property value, the community becomes less accessible to prospective and current low-income residents who have to accommodate increased housing expenses. As a result, wealthy businesses also follow suit in occupying these areas to accommodate high-income local residents.

2) How have land use decisions affected the character of Venice and Oakwood?

C. Methodology

To answer these guiding questions, I developed a research design involving academic and institutional literature reviews, archival research, land use study, and coastal development permit data collection (CDPs and appeals). In order to supplement the limited capacity, a work plan was carried out to meet the goals of defining community character and social diversity and understanding the history of Venice through literature reviews and qualitative and quantitative data collection.

II. Defining Terms

As stated earlier, Venice projects have been appealed to the Commission based on contentions that the development does not protect the character that makes Venice a “special coastal community.” However, that term has never been explicitly defined in the Coastal Act, or the Venice LUP. And, while “social diversity” is one of the attributes that is protected by the LUP, it is also undefined. Thus, the following subsections include a discussion of current and suggested definitions for these terms.

A. Special Coastal Community

The California Coastal Plan included findings that defined and listed characteristics that contribute to the special coastal community designation including “orientation to the water, usually a small scale of development, pedestrian use, diversity of development and activities, public attraction and use of facilities, distinct architectural character, historical significance, or ethnic or cultural characteristics sufficient to yield a sense of identity and differentiation from nearby areas.” The Venice LUP defines a special coastal community similarly. The designation of “special coastal communities” under Coastal Act 30253(e) emphasizes the function of these areas as popular destination points for recreational uses. The term can also be found in the Coastal Act under Section 30116(e), which defines sensitive coastal resource areas as one of the resources that can be protected through such a designation.

B. Community Character

The Coastal Act requires the Commission to take community character into consideration when analyzing the impacts of new development on coastal resources,⁴ but does not define the term. A review of academic literature was carried out to provide clarity. As defined in the 2010 book “Community Character: Principles for design and planning, the term “community character” includes the social, cultural, and economic atmosphere of the people who occupy a community, and their relationship to the built and physical environment.⁵ In contemporary literature, this general concept has often been categorized in terms of the people, processes, and places that contribute to the overall community character.⁶ Thus, special coastal communities can be defined by their people, place, and processes.

⁴ Coastal Act Sections 30251, 30253, 30525, and 30610.5.

⁵ Kendig, L. H., Kendig, L., & Keast, B. C. (2010). *Community character: Principles for design and planning*. Island Press.

⁶ Ibid.

Prior definitions or descriptions of community character in Commission-certified documents and actions have focused on the “place” and “people” elements of the community character framework. For example, Mendocino’s LUP describes its early northern California architecture (weathered wooden structures), unobstructed views of the water, foot paths, and native vegetation—place characteristics—as well as its New England roots (people). The Venice LUP specifically names two characteristics that make Venice a special coastal community: architectural diversity (place) and social diversity (people). The Commission staff report for certification of the Venice LUP also describes diverse residents and visitors of different income levels and cultural backgrounds as contributing to its character (people).



Figure 1. (Left) A typical street-level view of Mendocino Village exhibiting architectural cohesion and character.⁷ (Right) An image taken in Oakwood, Venice around 1960.⁸

The third category—processes and interactions—captures the active, experiential aspect of community character that ties the people to these special places. The Mendocino LUP describes “isolation” as contributing to the character of the community, which could be an example of an interaction-based characteristic as the community is physically separated from other towns and its residents and visitors experience a related remoteness. The staff report for certification of the Venice LUP emphasizes the pedestrian orientation of development, which also reflects an interaction between the built environment and people’s experience of it. In addition, in a 1997 Commission action on a project to improve public recreational facilities, the addition of a skate path, which is how some people interact with the built environment in Venice, was found to be consistent with the community character of the area.

For Venice, many Commission staff reports on project applications and local permits on appeal⁹ analyzed community character in terms of place characteristics: bulk, massing, and/or

⁷ [the-village-of-mendocino.jpg](#).

⁸ [Charles Brittin - Photographer: Oakwood, Venice | Departures | KCET](#)

⁹ Staff reports selected based on availability of digital records, temporal spread since adoption of the Coastal Act, diversity of action-types (i.e. appeal, administrative permit, regular calendar permit, permit amendment, and revised findings), presence of community character findings, and recent action on an appeal where social aspects of community character were raised: 478-11, 5-82-479, 5-86-930, 5-90-789,

scale as reflected in structural height (in feet and stories), setbacks and yard areas, landscaping, floor area, and articulation (step backs). Less commonplace characteristics analyzed include the age of a structure (place), residential density (people/interactions), and the income-levels (people) accommodated by new development. The affordability of development, including residential, commercial, and visitor-serving uses, which can affect the types of people who spend time in Venice, can be considered a process/interaction characteristic.

Based on these academic definitions and descriptions of community character in Commission findings and certified documents, and for the purpose of this report, “community character” is defined as:

The unique quality of an area defined by its social, natural, and built environments and the experience of those interacting with it.

This definition captures the people, processes, and places that characterize an area at any point in time, as well as unique perspectives informed by history and personal experiences that also contribute to how and why people spend time in an area. While this definition acknowledges that different people can experience community character differently, ideally, the character of an area could be distilled into a list of distinguishing characteristics that are present in the area and make it different from other areas.

C. Social Diversity

The certified Venice LUP specifically protects but does not define the term “social diversity.” In contemporary literature, “social diversity” is described as a subset of social character and can be broken down into socioeconomic, cultural, and political attributes.¹⁰ Social diversity refers to the structural differences between members of a community and can be qualitatively defined in terms of magnitude and type (for example, “very racially diverse”). This can include cultural and economic elements such as race, income level, and homeownership status, all of which can contribute to the uniqueness of a community.

Appeals that raise contentions relating to impacts on social diversity have, generally, focused on housing affordability (diversity of income levels) and residential density (related to diversity of income level and home ownership status). The staff report for certification of the LUP specifically calls out income and cultural diversity, but, as described in the following section, community members have identified a number of other social characteristics that contribute to the character of Venice and are changing rapidly due to development pressures and policies.

In analyzing social diversity, a list of the social attributes that make a community special should be considered. Then, the spread of those attributes amongst the community and how trends in development could change those relative proportions should be assessed. It is difficult to define the threshold that qualifies a community to be considered socially diverse,

5-95-248, 5-96-176, 5-00-440, 5-04-484-A1, 5-08-285, 5-14-0111, 5-17-0334, and A-5-VEN-18-0049/5-19-1015.

¹⁰ Deener, A. (2012). *Venice: A contested bohemia in Los Angeles*. University of Chicago Press; Talen, E. (2006) Neighborhood-Level Social Diversity: Insights from Chicago, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 72:4, 431-446

but there are quantitative metrics such as diversity indices like the U.S. Census' Racial and Ethnic Diversity Index that can help. In instances where social diversity in a community is changing (e.g., segregation, integration, gentrification, homogenization, etc.), the current social diversity of a community could be compared to a particular snapshot or static baseline. For example, since Venice was distinguished as socially diverse at the time the LUP was developed, the racial, ethnic, or income data of the residential population at that time could be used as an indication of what is understood as socially diverse. In addition to that baseline condition, the Commission's EJ Policy states that coastal development should provide equitable benefits for communities that have historically been excluded, marginalized, or harmed by coastal development; thus, an equity lens in reviewing coastal development is also appropriate.

III. History of “Venice”

The following section discusses the history of Venice, which provides important context. The historical arc, spanning from indigenous sovereignty to Spanish colonization, to the purchase by famed developer Abbot Kinney, to the current Venice nicknamed by some as “Silicon Beach,” generally tells the story of a place that has drawn visitors and residents due to its coastal and recreational offerings. The Oakwood neighborhood was established as a residential area for laborers. Subsequent redlining in the 1940s and 1950s reinforced its identity as a majority Black and, later, Latino coastal enclave known for being a tight-knit, working-class community of color with a strong connection to its historically unique roots, including through architecture, art, community gathering spaces, and particular traditions. However, the story of Oakwood, and of greater Venice, has become one marked by gentrification, a housing affordability crisis, and loss of historic character, both socially and in terms of the built environment.

Establishment of “Venice.” Venice, California is located on ancestral indigenous lands of the Gabriellino-Tongva, Gabrieleno Tongva, Gabrieleño-Kizh, and Chumash peoples, whose native population was estimated to be approximately 5,000 individuals amongst 50 communities around the 1600s. The settlement of Waachnga occupied the area closest to the present location of Venice. By the 1930s, 88% of the Native American population in this region would be decimated by forced removal, conflict, and disease since Spanish colonization fifty years earlier.¹¹

In 1891, real-estate developer Abbot Kinney and his partner, purchased beach-front property south of Santa Monica using money he earned from the tobacco industry. He eventually established the resort community of Ocean Park, which would later become part of Venice.¹² By 1900, the Native American population in the area was reduced by up to 90%.¹³

Kinney established a seaside resort community named “Venice of America,” which was renamed “Venice” in 1911.¹⁴ Parts of the Ballona Wetlands were dredged and filled to create

¹¹ [The Ancient Roots Of Malibu and Topanga Are Still Alive \(topangamalibuproperty.com\)](http://topangamalibuproperty.com)

¹² [HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE VENICE \(lacity.org\)](http://lacity.org), [The Story of Abbot Kinney and How One Man Brought Venice, Italy to Southern California | Surf City Hollywood Tours \(surfcitytours.com\)](http://surfcitytours.com)

¹³ Baumhoff, 1976.

¹⁴ [HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE VENICE \(lacity.org\)](http://lacity.org)

habitable areas and the Venice canals, constructed to mimic Venice, Italy. The town was characterized by small-scale, pedestrian-oriented development, and the adjacent unincorporated Los Angeles County beach was the closest coastal access point from Los Angeles, which drew visitors and workers in large numbers.



Figure 2. Amusement Pier¹⁵

The small lots and small homes attracted a diverse group of lower income people that included new immigrants, artists, and bohemians. Black laborers traveled from the South, as part of the Great Migration, to work in the early development of the Venice community. They were confined to live on the north side of town within the boundaries of Lincoln Boulevard and (approximately) Dewey Street to the north, California Avenue to the east, Electric Avenue to the south, and Hampton Drive to the west. Even now these are now the borders that define the historically Black and working-class neighborhood of Oakwood.¹⁶ The First-Baptist Church of Venice was built in 1910 and has since served as an anchor for Black community members.¹⁷

In the mid-1920s, Venice became increasingly hard to govern with strong political divisions in the community.¹⁸ In order to accommodate the infrastructural needs of the growing population, trustees of Venice voted to incorporate Venice into the City of Los Angeles in 1926.¹⁹ During this time, some of the iconic canals were filled in and paved over in response to water quality issues and the introduction of the automobile.

The economic landscape of the region was drastically altered in 1929 upon the discovery of oil in the southern portion of Venice (present-day Marina Peninsula), which catalyzed a boom in oil development and production. Within two years, the number of oil wells in the area

¹⁵ <https://la.curbed.com/2018/7/6/17537818/los-angeles-beaches-vintage-photos-marilyn-monroe>

¹⁶ <https://knock-la.com/venice-oakwood-black-neighborhood-history-a270785f0a04/>

¹⁷ <https://la.curbed.com/2017/12/15/16780810/first-baptist-church-venice-jay-penske>

¹⁸ [Lost Amusement Parks \(westland.net\)](#)

¹⁹ [Vexit: Venice Beach wants to leave Los Angeles - Curbed LA](#)

increased from 50 to 340.²⁰ Parts of Venice, including Oakwood, became redlined²¹ as part of restrictive racial covenants indoctrinated in 1934 for Black Americans to work the oil fields. The federal government sponsored Home Owners' Loan Corporation created maps that purposefully steered low-income, minority, and particularly Black populations away from white communities.²² Black individuals and families were only allowed to own homes in Oakwood. This practice was legal up until 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act. However, the implications and more covert practices of redlining are still felt today as housing discrimination transitioned from de jure to de facto segregation.²³

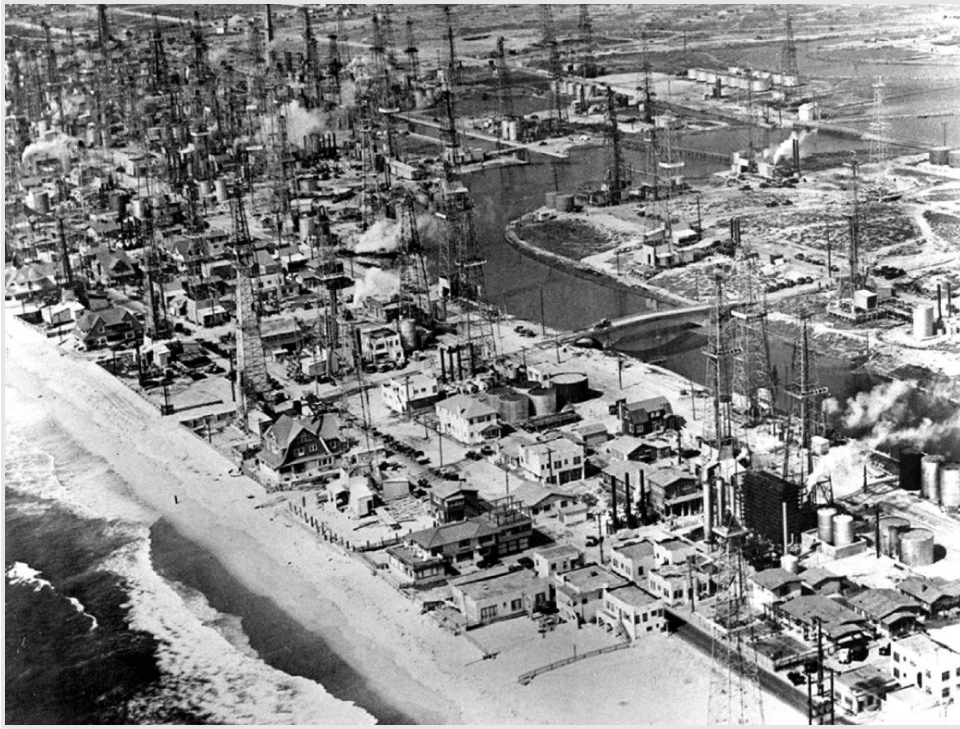


Figure 3. Marina Peninsula²⁴

Post-War Development. During the late 1940s and early 50s, Venice became an epicenter for the Beat Generation as the post-war population grew and residential development boomed. Some of Venice's present-day subareas, including Southeast Venice and the Oxford Triangle were built during this time, as well as numerous landmarks including Beyond Baroque and the Lincoln Apartments. While Venice became known as the "Slum by the Sea"

²⁰ <https://www.westland.net/venicehistory/articles/oil.htm>

²¹ Redlining is the systematic denial of various services or goods by federal government agencies, local governments, or the private sector either directly or through the selective raising of prices.

Hillier, A. E. (2003). Spatial analysis of historical redlining: a methodological exploration. *Journal of Housing Research*, 137-167.

²² Galster, G., & Godfrey, E. (2005). By words and deeds: Racial steering by real estate agents in the US in 2000. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 71(3), 251-268.

²³ Frankenberg, E., & Taylor, K. (2018). De facto segregation: Tracing a legal basis for contemporary inequality. *JL & Educ.*, 47, 189.

²⁴ www.marinelreghistoricalsociety.org

due, in part, to the oil industry,²⁵ the low property values, cheap rent, mild climate, and general toleration of beatnik lifestyle attracted lower-income residents, including poor artists,²⁶ and at the end of the 1950s, Venice residents voted against urban renewal and beatniks began publicizing Venice as a haven for bohemian counterculture.

During the 1960s, a city code enforcement program brought the demise of many original landmarks, leaving many lots vacant along the Venice Boardwalk. In 1964 the construction of the 405 San Diego Freeway forced the displacement of Mexican American communities who were pushed west towards Oakwood and began to surpass the local Black population.²⁷ This marked the beginning of a period known as the Latinization of the Los Angeles area which continued into the 1970s. All of these changes contributed to Venice shifting from more of a vacation destination to a mostly residential community that became increasingly popular among actors and musicians because of its bohemian, funky vibe. Hippies began holding drum circles and love-ins on the beach and were, at times, met by police resistance.²⁸



Figure 4. Oakwood circa 1960²⁹

In the early 1970s, Proposition 20 and then the Coastal Act were passed, which carved out unique permitting authority for the City of Los Angeles. Following a failed proposal by the Venice Canals Improvement Association to close the walkways and develop the canals as a marina, property owners began proposing larger houses than what was characteristically found in Venice on larger lots. These canal improvements were opposed by residents that

²⁵ [Venice West Cafe: A Lost Beat Landmark that Helped Shape Modern-Day Venice | Departures | KCET: A Short History Of Venice, Which Used To Be An Oilfield | LAist; Life at Venice Beach in the '70s | HuffPost Los Angeles; Venice Beach in the Sixties: A Celebration of Creativity \(2008\) - Plot Summary - IMDb](#)

²⁶ [Venice Timeline \(westland.net\); Venice West Cafe: A Lost Beat Landmark that Helped Shape Modern-Day Venice | Departures | KCET](#)

²⁷ Deener, A. (2012). *Venice: A contested bohemia in Los Angeles*. University of Chicago Press.

²⁸ [Venice Timeline \(westland.net\)](#)

²⁹ <https://www.kcet.org/shows/departures/photographer-charles-brittin-oakwood-venice>

staged annual festivals (1969-1976) to protest the improvements that forced lower income renters out of the area.³⁰ Around the same time, the Coastal Plan highlighted that some special coastal communities were being destroyed by the effect of development on smaller-scale neighborhoods, special places, and lower-income housing. In the mid-1970s, the Commission responded to the first of these individual requests by permitting houses but limiting the scale of development and requiring setbacks so that the new houses did not dwarf the canals and requiring water quality protection through the maintenance of previous yard areas.³¹ Architectural innovation was also gaining popularity, as illustrated by a ten-week symposium held in Venice in 1979 featuring emerging architects like Frank Ghery who went on to design multiple buildings in Venice.³²

1980s & 1990s. The 1980s and 90s, as described by members of the Venice community,³³ was a period characterized by inexpensive real estate and experimental architecture, famous artists and speakeasies, racism, and a crack epidemic brought on by the import of drugs into the community (by non-residents who took advantage of the poorer communities of color in Venice). The 1980s also marked a significant period where the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) carried out City-wide gang suppression operations that criminalized gang-related activity, increasing the incarceration rate of those living in communities of color such as Oakwood. Venice and the neighborhood of Oakwood was home and neighbor to the Shoreline Crips, Venice 13, Santa Monica 13, and other gangs and cliques. The LAPD developed the Oakwood Plan in the late 1980s, which included strategies intended to eliminate gang violence but the intimidation from increased police presence also helped to displace long-term residents of color.³⁴

Gang injunctions in the 1980s and 90s had a profound effect on the community character of Oakwood. Policy reforms increased the range of violations and penalties that suspected perpetrators of gang activity could be prosecuted for.³⁵ Over policing and targeted code enforcement led to racialized arrests of Oakwood residents suspected of being gang members. Many residents of color were forcibly removed from Oakwood when they were incarcerated because they were unable to pay fines, leading to a mass movement of residents out of the community. Gradually, the gang violence slowly subsided after 1994 when community leaders began to organize in response to the impact of gang activity in the community. This period of decreased racial tensions and gang violence following the movement of residents of color out of the area, made the Oakwood neighborhood ripe for development and gentrification.

Turn of the Century to Present Day. Thus far, the dominant changes since 2000 (right before the LUP was certified) follow trends associated with rapid gentrification. Between 2000 and 2015, Venice lost 700 housing units and home prices more than tripled (246%

³⁰ [Venice Timeline \(westland.net\)](#)

³¹ Venice LUP staff report

³² [Graham Foundation > Grantees > Southern California Institute of Architecture](#)

³³ Community listening sessions, June 15, 17, 2021.

³⁴ Umemoto, K. (2018). *The truce: Lessons from an LA gang war*. Cornell University Press.

³⁵ The impact of policy changes was precedent through the Gang Violence Suppression program of 1981 and the Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (California Penal Code Section 186.20), which intensified the extent to which gang-related criminal offenses could be sentenced. Legislative acts, such as the 1994 Crime Bill passed by Congress, also increased the federal authority of criminalizing gang activity and awarded increased power to the police.

increase, as compared to the national average of 52%).³⁶ Populations of color, especially Black communities, generally decreased in Venice at the end of the 20th century as white populations increased (Table 1). In Oakwood, this was even more drastic when the price of housing substantially accelerated.³⁷ The Latino population decreased, and white residents have become the largest racial demographic in the area.³⁸ Moreover, each Census Block Group in Oakwood reported an increase in median household income, anywhere from 55% to 232% higher. When compared to the 0% change reported in the Census Block Groups immediately seaward of Oakwood, this data suggests that the Oakwood area has experienced rapid and substantial increases in the wealth of its population.³⁹ In addition, tech industries established themselves in Venice and the median income throughout the community continued to rise. Consistent with this data, Venice community members noted influx of larger corporations and rapid gentrification, as well as legal downzoning of residential areas and numerous evictions of lower income residents.

Within the last two decades, Venice's Black population has fallen by nearly half as the result of the injunctions, increase in property values and developer interests that may not serve the community as a whole. In 2017, multi-millionaires purchased the First-Baptist Church of Venice with the intention of maintaining its structural integrity, but re-purposing the building into a 11,000 square foot single-family home.⁴⁰ Local organizations such as the Venice Neighborhood Council initially supported the plan.⁴¹ However, local campaigns against the redevelopment led by community advocacy group Save Venice have garnered support. City Councilperson Mike Bonin spoke at a local rally in August 2017 protesting President Trump's refusal to adequately denounce white supremacists where he highlighted the importance of the church to the Black community in Venice. Members of the Oakwood community have called on the city to restore the church as a place of community gathering, as a form of reparations. To prevent future demolition efforts of the church and restore its community integrity, the Save Venice campaign attempted to have the church designated a Los Angeles Historical-Cultural Monument by the Los Angeles' Cultural Heritage Commission.⁴² Shortly after, the Los Angeles City Council Planning and Land Use Management Committee (Planning Committee) unanimously denied an appeal to overturn a West LA Planning Commission decision to allow for the conversion of First Baptist into a single-family residence. As of June 2021, the Cultural Heritage Commission voted in favor of designating the church as a Historical-Cultural Monument. This example has become a poignant symbol for the continual struggle and controversy surrounding the preservation of Oakwood's community character and social diversity.³⁹

³⁶ [Venice, California Has Fewer Housing Units Than in 2000 | Planetizen News; Venice Beach Is a Hot Place to Live, So Why Is Its Housing Supply Shrinking? - WSJ](#)

³⁷ [Venice Neighborhood Council Land Use & Zoning Trends — PACIFIC URBANISM](#)

³⁸ Deener, A. (2012). *Venice: A contested bohemia in Los Angeles*. University of Chicago Press.

³⁹ [Los Angeles, California \(CA\) income map, earnings map, and wages data \(city-data.com\)](#)

⁴⁰ <https://yovenice.com/2020/01/17/venice-church-mansion-millionaire/>

⁴¹ Swann, J. (2017, December 15). 'Variety' owner wants to turn a black Church in VENICE into a residential compound. Retrieved from

<https://la.curbed.com/2017/12/15/16780810/first-baptist-church-venice-jay-penske>

⁴² <https://www.laconservancy.org/issues/first-baptist-church-venice>

Another development trend affecting the social diversity of Venice began in the mid-2010s, when the community began losing affordable housing units at an accelerated rate.⁴³ This is partly attributed to the rise in short-term rentals that cater to tourism⁴⁴ It has also been observed that property owners sometimes claim that replacing affordable units in smaller-scale residential development projects is usually infeasible; due to the City's existing Mello Act Interim Administrative Procedures, developers are able to avoid City requirements to replace all affordable units lost. In addition, conversion of rent-stabilized units to other uses like market rate units or short-term rentals has been linked to the crisis of homelessness in Venice.⁴⁵ Housing initiatives such as Project Room-Key launched at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, as well as the multi-million-dollar outreach plan by Councilmember Bonin, offered limited housing resources to accommodate the 2,000 Venice residents experiencing homelessness, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority Court.

The current issues surrounding the balance of lower-cost housing and visitor-serving accommodations, maintenance of affordable housing, and provision of housing opportunities for unsheltered people, as well as the changes in the community described in this section that impact the character that makes Venice a special coastal community can be addressed through the City's LUP update and subsequent LCP amendments.

IV. Local Land Use

The history of Venice and Oakwood provide one narrative of what community character may have been when Venice was designated a special coastal community, how it has changed overtime, and what historical events and elements have and continue to contribute to its character. The following section outlines another: that of historic use of the land. Changes in land use may have occurred in response to historic events, influenced changes in community character, and tell a story of what existed over the decades.

As mentioned earlier, the lands and waters that now include Venice were inhabited by Native American tribes, then colonized by the Spanish who offered land concessions for residential and cattle grazing. The Mexican government granted Rancho La Ballona, which included part of present-day Venice, to ranching families, much of which consisted of wetlands and sand spits in 1902.

⁴³ [Venice Neighborhood Council Land Use & Zoning Trends — PACIFIC URBANISM](#)

⁴⁴ Abramsky, S. (2021, August 11). *The tents of Venice Beach*. The Nation. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/venice-homeless-encampments/>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

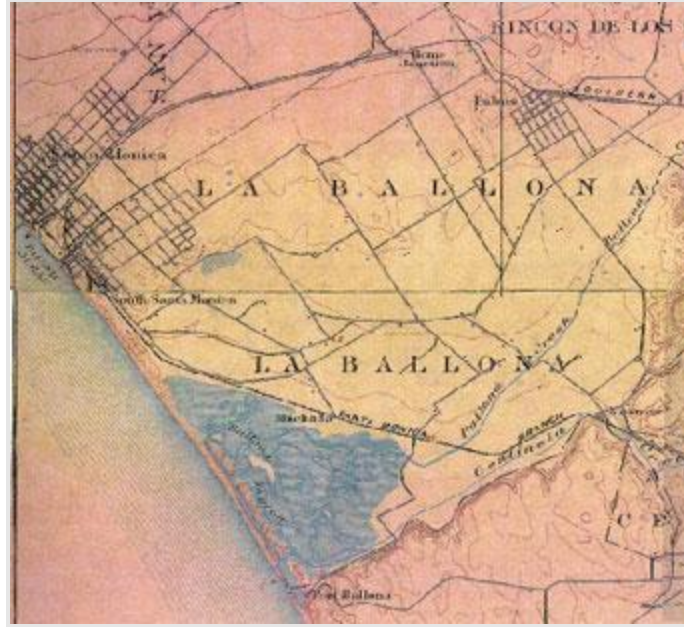


Figure 5. Map from 1902

When Ocean Park and then Abbot Kinney’s “Venice of America” were eventually established, the general land uses changed to visitor-serving commercial, recreational, industrial (oil drilling), and residential. While these uses were not codified, piers with amusement parks, resorts, casinos, theaters, bath houses, and the canals dominated the coastal community with apartments and summer beach cottages filling in and around these destinations.

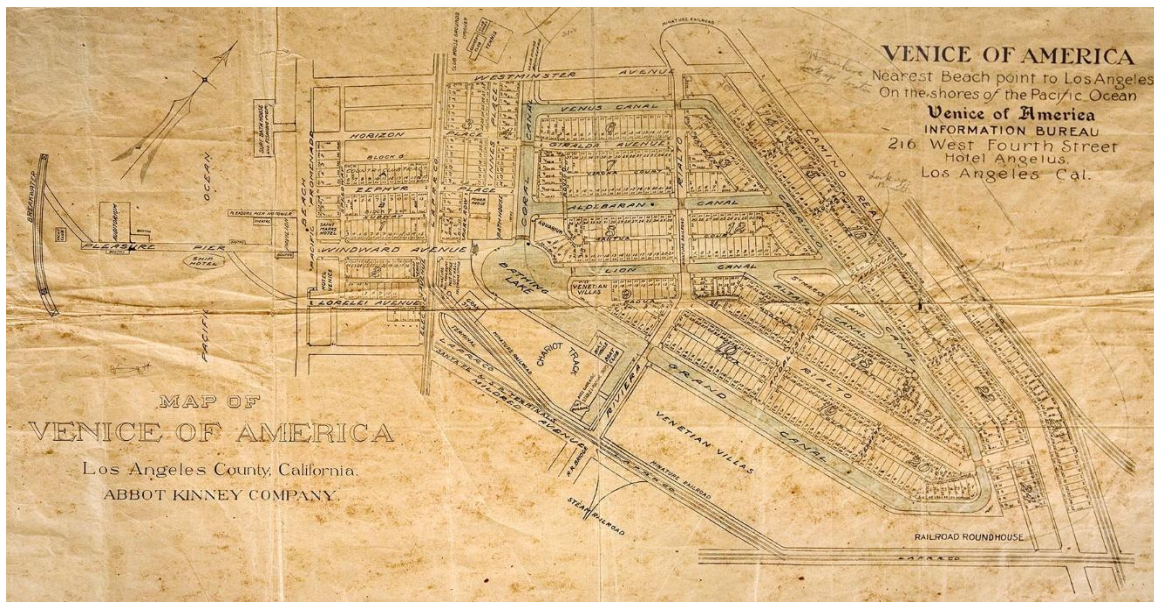


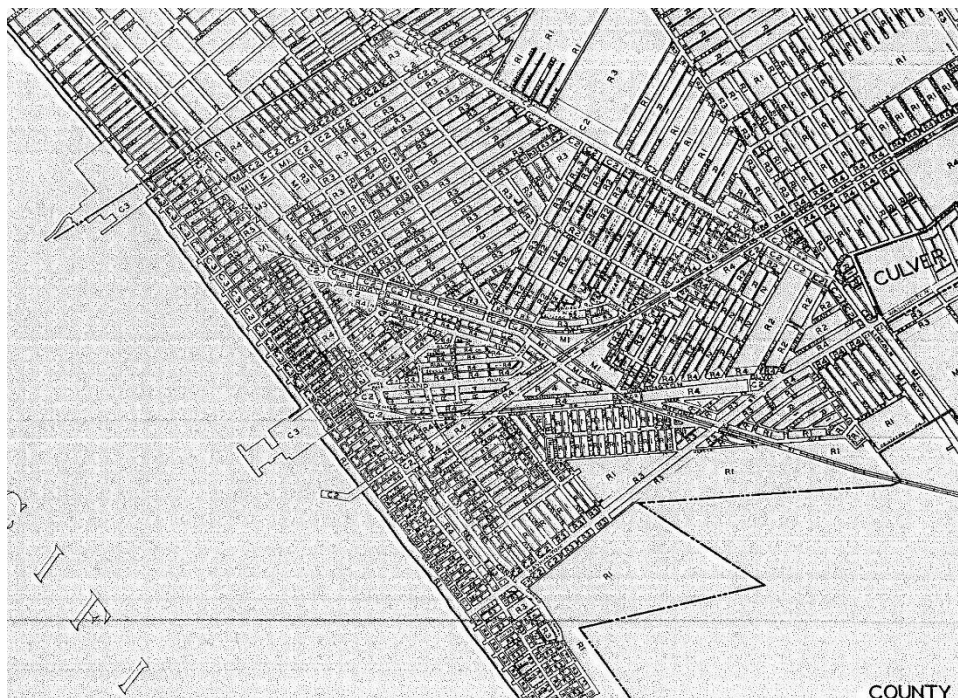
Figure 6. Venice of America Map (1920)

In 1909, the City of Los Angeles became the first large city in the nation to adopt a zoning ordinance that distinguished between commercial and residential uses with a large update in 1921 (Ordinance No. 42666). Soon after Venice was annexed into the City of LA, the City

passed Ordinance No. 66750 (1930), which created three main zones: residential, commercial, and manufacturing. In the R1 zone, residential density was generally limited to one single-family residence on any lot less than 10,000 square feet. Garages were not allowed to be rented to anyone that didn't reside in the primary residence, but an office was allowed only for someone with a religious or legal medicinal/healing vocation. This use also allowed farming, including raising livestock.

R2 allowed R1 uses as well as multiple dwellings up to four families per dwelling or 10,000 square-foot lot. Similarly, R3 allowed all the residential uses plus apartments, sorority and fraternity houses, churches, and public educational institutions. For R2 and R3 zones, building heights were only allowed to exceed one-story if at least 30% of the lot area was one-story or less. R4 did not have the height restriction and allowed additional uses including hotels with dining rooms or restaurants, private clubs, and non-profit public institutions. Commercial zones (C2 and C3) also allowed for R1 through R4 uses and uses like retail, theaters, banks, hospitals, auto shops, and places of amusement. Finally, the M2 and M3 manufacturing zones allowed for everything else. It appears, however, that oil drilling was allowed south of Washington Street (present-day Washington Boulevard).⁴⁶

Additional land use ordinances were adopted overtime until 1946 when the City consolidated those changes.⁴⁷The uses in the ordinance included agricultural (A1 and A2), suburban (RA), residential (R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5), commercial (C1, C2, C3, C4, and CM), and industrial (M1, M2, and M3). The "Suburban Zone" (RA) allowed for the codified agricultural uses, as well as single-family homes, churches, libraries, requiring⁴⁸ for such non-agricultural uses, and transitional uses like multi-family residential and public parking adjacent to commercial or industrial zones. The ordinance also established oil use districts, including in urbanized areas, and associated standards.



⁴⁶ [Venice California - Discovery of Oil \(westland.net\)](http://www.westland.net)

⁴⁷ Contained in Ordinance No. 90500

⁴⁸ Front, rear, and side yards were required to be 20%, 25%, and of the lot depth and width, respectively.

Figure 7. 1946 Land Use Map

As shown in the land use map above, there appear to have been no agricultural or suburban uses in Venice. There were some commercial corridors (C2 & C3) along Washington Street (present-day Washington Boulevard), Lincoln Boulevard, Washington Boulevard (present-day Abbot Kinney Boulevard), Rose Avenue, and along the beach between Washington Street and Rose Avenue. There were also some smaller commercial areas at intersections like at Indiana Avenue and Washington Boulevard (present-day Hampton Drive), where Marr Street meets Oxford and Washington Street, and Main Street between Venice Way and Westminster.

Industrial manufacturing uses were allowed near the intersections of Rose Avenue/Main Street and Venice Boulevard/Washington Boulevard. Of the approximately 20 properties that appear to have been designated M1 “Light Industrial,” nine were in the northwest corner of Oakwood (including the only M3 “Heavy Industrial” site) with an additional two immediately adjacent. This suggests that the communities surrounding the industrial/manufacturing development, including Oakwood, may have been environmental justice communities since at least the 1940s.

The rest of Venice was designated residential with the vast majority of properties allowing multi-family residential. The R1 “One-Family” sites were larger lots located at the approximate triangular site of the Del Rey Colony with a row located just seaward of that site to Grand Canal and an area just north of the triangle to present-day Mildred Avenue, in the interior of the present-day Oxford Triangle subarea and along the eastside of and within present-day Ballona Lagoon, and within present-day Marina del Rey. The R2 “Two-Family” zones were concentrated in the interior inland half of the present-day Southeast Venice subarea and interior of the present-day Milwood community. In this zone, multi-family buildings with more than two dwellings that were allowed throughout most of Venice in 1930 were only allowed within 65 feet of less restrictive zones (i.e. R1 zones), however, R2 zones did not appear to be located in close proximity to R1 zones.

Oakwood was almost entirely designated R3 “Multiple Dwelling”, which allowed R1 and R2 uses plus group dwellings, multiple dwellings on one lot, row dwellings, and boarding or lodging houses. R3 zones were also found at the northern boundary of Venice, the seaward segment of present-day Southeast Venice, and in the present-day Marina Peninsula subarea. Properties designated R4 including apartments, hotels, fraternities/sororities, churches, museums, and libraries were found surrounding many of the lower intensity residential uses. R5 designations including clubs, lodges, hospitals, and sanitariums mostly existed immediately inland of the row of beachfront commercial properties described above.

Since the adoption of the 1946 ordinance, land use changes have been incremental and starting in the late 1960s were processed in community-specific plans. In 1970, the City of LA proposed the Venice Program for Planning as part of the City’s General Plan. Its opening lines read: “Venice is a unique and exciting part of the City of Los Angeles. It has an even greater potential, but it also has many problems.” It offered three alternative community plans to address these problems and asked the public to weigh in. The document stated that Venice was a community with primarily single-family homes, which suggests that even though the majority of the community allowed for higher density multi-family residential development in the 1940s, mostly single-family homes were constructed.

In its Venice Community Plan, a part of the LA General Plan adopted in 1970, the statement of purpose was to guide development and change to accommodate future population and activities through 1990. This plan aimed to maintain existing uses to the extent feasible and improve urban design standards. The plan included a change in residential density from low and medium density to low or low-medium density, accommodating townhomes with reduced side yards in the Venice Canals to make way for wider streets and the redevelopment of the canals. The plan called out the importance of giving Oakwood “special attention” in terms of meeting the needs of lower-income residents as housing standards were upgraded “so as not to cause unnecessary hardship or severe relocation problems.” The plan also identified the beach-oriented properties north of Washington Street as high-density residential areas for year-round residents and visitors.

In terms of commercial zones, the plan retained existing commercial and parking areas and expanded those uses onto the abandoned railway right-of-way (present-day Electric Avenue). It also proposed to redesignate a segment of Washington Boulevard (present-day Abbot Kinney) from commercial and industrial uses to craft-type industrial and residential use. Industrial development was described as either being phased out, unless existing and approved for retention. In its place, east of Main Street to Fourth Avenue between the City boundary and Brooks Avenue, was zoned for medium density residential (R3) and the area bounded by Pacific Avenue, Thorton Place, Main Street, and Sunset Avenue was to be designated high density residential (R4). Roads were planned to be expanded to improve traffic and access to the area, and development on beaches was prohibited except for recreational and ancillary facilities, temporary parking lots, and a supplemental bike path, and tramway.

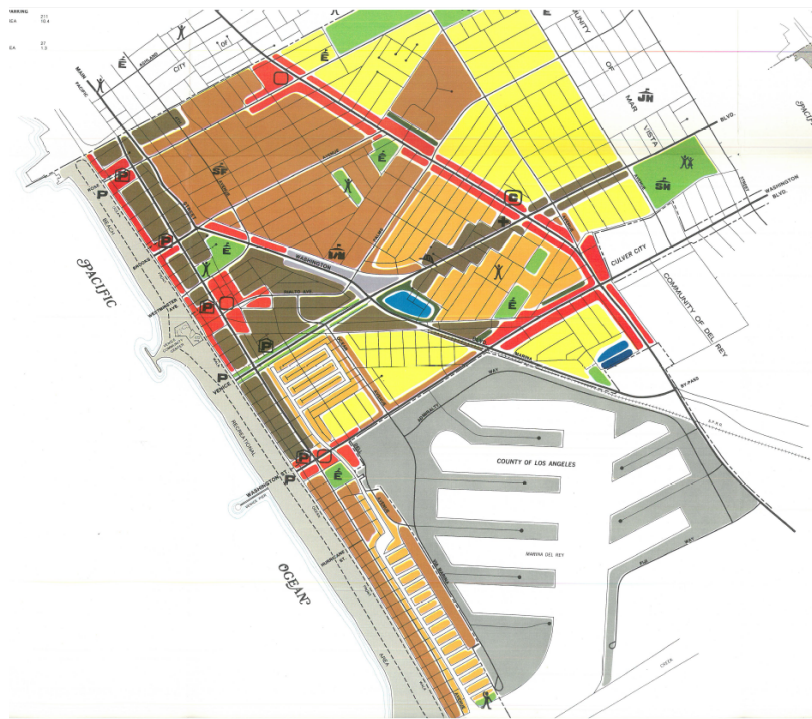


Figure 8. Land Use Map from 1970 Venice Community Plan

Beginning in the 1980s, the City began developing the Land Use Plan (LUP) for Venice with ongoing citizen involvement. After a hiatus, the planning effort continued in 1995 and was

completed in 1999. Public participation continued through the Commission's review of the City's proposed LUP and in 2001, the Venice LUP was formally certified. It includes twelve land use categories: Single Family - low Density, Single Family - low Medium I, Multi-Family - low Medium I, Multi-Family - low Medium II, Multi-Family - Medium Density, Artcraft, General Commercial, Neighborhood Commercial, Community Commercial, Limited Industry, Open Space, Public Facility. The LUP, as proposed by the City, did not expand commercial uses and, in general, maintained the existing uses and designations for each property. However, the Commission suggested three modifications to the City's proposed Land Use Plan that (1) prevented the downzoning of one residential block, (2) required an area in Oakwood with Medium residential density designations to be more clearly called out, and (3) allow second units on the few single-family lots that are larger than 4,600 square feet.

At the time of adoption of the Venice LUP, Venice Beach was one of the most popular beaches in California, in part because of a lively pedestrian oriented commercial area along Ocean Front Walk in North Venice, where dense housing and small stores and restaurants face a wide paved boardwalk. Public recreation facilities and Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHA) were noted in the new LUP. Directly inland of Ocean Front Walk, duplexes and older six to ten-unit "hotels" lined the pedestrian-friendly streets (also known as "walk streets") that are found on the Marina Peninsula and eight blocks inland of North Venice, between Lincoln Boulevard and Electric Avenue in a community identified as Milwood. Residential uses were not intensified in an effort to maintain the existing small scale of development.

As certified, residential density is generally limited to one or two units per lot except on lots with medium density designations and large lots (4,000-5,000 square feet or larger) in some low-medium II areas and medium density zones. Even in the medium density zones, the number of units is restricted by the lot size and 25-30-foot maximum height limitations. There are no medium-high or high residential density use categories. So, it appears that the early residential zoning designations in Venice allowed for far greater residential density than what ended up in the Venice Land Use Plan. For example, R2 uses allowed for up to four families and R4 had no height restrictions. However, both the 1970 Community Plan and the LUP describe the changes in land use from existing conditions as minimal. Thus, while early community planning allowed for higher density, Venice seems to have been developed with more single-family residences than would be expected given the land use designations.

For commercial and light industrial uses, the LUP maintains the commercial zones that existed in Venice for decades and, like the early commercial zones, also allows for other uses, including residential in mixed-use and artist-in-residence developments. The industrial site planned for high density residential development in the 1970 Community Plan was not designated as such and remains light industrial in the certified LUP. The LUP also includes policies that reflect the priorities of past planning documents and the Coastal Act to protect the beach, public recreational areas and facilities, and visitor-serving areas.

The 1946 land use designations in Oakwood were industrial, commercial, and residential along its borders and entirely residential in the interior. The residential areas were entirely R3, which had minimum lot areas of 5,000 square feet with a minimum of 1,650 square feet per dwelling unit and maximum height allowances of generally up to 35 feet. The 1970 Community Plan maintained the R3/Medium Density designation. The LUP, however,

designated the majority of Oakwood as low-Medium II and designated other areas within Oakwood for commercial, public facilities, and limited industry with six properties at the northwest corner designated medium residential. This use allows for one unit for every 1,200 square feet with additional units allowed on larger lots and heights up to 30-feet. The height maximum is five feet less than what was allowed for medium density in the 1940s, but the number of units allowed per square is slightly greater. However, most lots in Oakwood are under 5,000 square feet. During the LUP certification process, community leaders from Oakwood expressed concerns about the scale of development being constructed in the community and the pressure for gentrification. In response, the Commission allowed for density incentives to construct low and moderate cost housing. There have been no modifications to the certified Land Use Plan since 2001, however, the City is currently working on a comprehensive update that will be submitted to the Commission for certification in the near future.

V. City and Commission Actions

Commission staff collected and analyzed data on City and Commission actions on CDPs and appeals to better understand if the land use changes from the Venice LUP were reflected in the subsequent development projects reviewed and approved and whether those approvals are leading to cumulative changes in the community. A preliminary analysis of 20 years of City and Commission coastal development permit data for Oakwood between 2001 and 2021 identified two simultaneous trends: 1) an increase in the number of residential dwelling units (DU) in the coastal zone, and 2) a general increase in dwelling unit size.

The Coastal Act has public access and development policies that allow for residential growth and development in urban infill areas like Venice. The certified LUP, which provides guidance for coastal permitting decisions, has similar policies. The Commission oversaw 167 actions in Oakwood between 2001 and 2021,⁴⁹ resulting in a net increase of 122 DU and an increase of 0.73 DU per Commission action. On the other hand, the City oversaw 574 residential projects in Oakwood, resulting in 353 DU, nine of which were accessory dwelling units (ADUs). In other words, there was an increase of 0.60 DU per City action. As such, the Commission's actions approved slightly more dwelling units per action than the City's. There is no implication that there were substantially different approaches to permitting approvals leading to residential unit growth between the two entities.

City Dataset Analysis

The City's data shows that less than 20% of actions led to a decrease in dwelling units, nearly 35% led to an increase, and approximately 45% of actions saw no change in unit density. In other words, there were more cases where a permit approval may have led to an increase in residential units as compared to a decrease. Furthermore, many of the City's permitting approvals were for repair and alterations of existing development, rather than additions, demolitions, or new builds.

Nonetheless, where permitting actions approved additions to existing residential units, the average increase in size (floor area) of a single-family residence in Oakwood was 1,400 square feet. From the City's data, it was difficult to discern the original or resultant square

⁴⁹ While some of these actions are more recent appeals, the number of actions is high because the Commission used to have permitting authority in Oakwood. When/why did that change???

footage of each structure, however, the size of structures (floor area) has also increased. If previous research conducted by Commission staff is to be considered, then the order of magnitude by which floor area increased might be quite large, since estimates for a typical single-family residence in Venice are between 2,000 and 3,000 square feet.

Commission Dataset Analysis

The Commission’s dataset, which can be considered a subsample of the City’s dataset because the Commission only processes permits for projects in the Dual Jurisdiction Area and projects that were successfully appealed, was further analyzed. Development projects were catalogued based on the changes permitted, so that, for example, new builds could be categorized in greater detail (one single-family residence to two, vacant to single-family residence, or so on), and likewise for other types. A summary of Commission actions yields that nearly 40% involved the expansion of existing single-family residences:

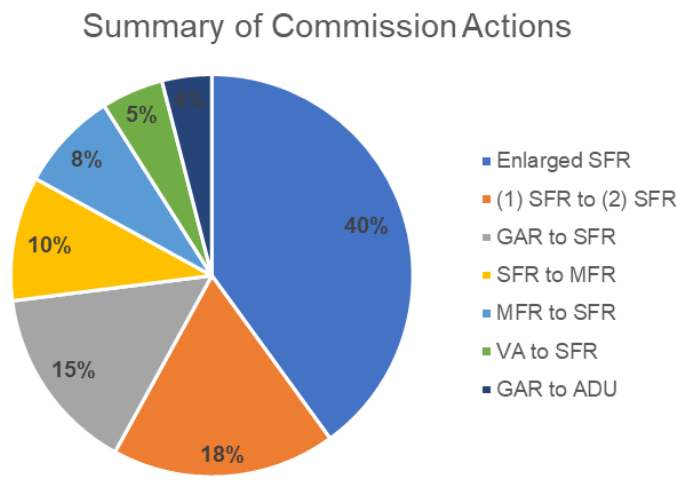


Figure 9. Summary of Commission Actions. SFR = single-family residence, GAR = garage, MFR = multi-family residence, VA = vacant lot, ADU = accessory dwelling unit.

In summary, since certification of the Venice LUP, dwelling units have been added to the housing stock in Venice. However, as seen in Table 1 of this report, the total population in Venice has actually declined in recent decades in Venice. Commission staff do not have information regarding housing vacancy rates and, therefore, cannot state that the additional units are resulting in an increase in the residential density in Venice or why the population is dropping. There was a lack of specific information on the number of affordable units in Venice over time and if that has changed in recent years according to the general datasets gathered. However these forces are burdening the community by pricing lower-income people out which has accelerated in the past decade.

VI. Conclusion

The goal of the Coastal Commission is to protect California’s coastline, and the Coastal Act provides a framework for development planning and resource management policies. The Coastal Act specifically established, in Sections 30251 and 30253(e), the protection and preservation of community character, especially for special coastal communities. Venice has

been identified as a special coastal community by the Commission since at least 1975. Through the analysis of contemporary academic literature and planning documents, review of land use designations, examination of permitting actions, and historical information, a better understanding of the Venice community has defined the character of the community. It should be acknowledged however, that some important stakeholders are not and have not been historically represented in these types of conversations and studies and, thus, the exploration of community character and social diversity should continue.

Community character is not limited to physical characteristics of a place but, especially in Venice, is also influenced by people and their interactions with the place. The definition of Venice's character in this thesis has been informed by the 1975 Coastal Plan, staff reports on Commission actions, the certified Venice LUP, and through historical analysis. While many characteristics are neighborhood-specific, in general, Venice is a diverse, inclusive, artistic/creative, community-oriented, coastal-dependent, pedestrian, and small-scale residential community that has centered around coastal and recreational uses since its inception and attracts visitors from all over the world. In addition, the Oakwood neighborhood, which has had a historically higher proportion of Black residents as compared to any other coastal community in California due, in part, to racial covenants and redlining and continues to have more people of color (especially Latino residents), has contributed to the character of Venice since its establishment. Oakwood was also part of the intention behind the Venice Land Use Plan's inclusion of social diversity as one of two characteristics explicitly protected as those that make Venice unique and a special coastal community under the Coastal Act.

However, as suggested by this thesis, the socioeconomic and demographic environment of Oakwood and the greater Venice area has drastically changed over the past few decades. In the case of Oakwood, it is evident that the community and long-term residents have been disproportionately affected by development and social changes over time. Historic accounts of police gang injunctions that targeted community members, mainly Black and Latino low-income residents of Oakwood, in addition to targeted arrests, real estate speculation, and land use planning decisions, have all greatly contributed to population displacement and gentrification in Oakwood and throughout Venice, and has resulted in impacts to community character such as a loss of both social and architectural diversity and inclusivity.

As discussed in this thesis, the construction of new uncharacteristically large single-family homes and more conglomerate businesses with higher-cost services has been linked to the loss of built and social character, architectural integrity, and community interactions that was historically prevalent in Venice. In addition, the trend towards larger homes, along with market forces, has led to increased property values, housing costs, and overall cost of living thereby diminishing affordability, inclusive economic participation across the community, and socioeconomic diversity. Design elements like higher fences and walls, rooftop decks (as opposed to, say, front porches), and smaller yard areas have also contributed to the loss of Venice's sense of community. While it does not appear that land use changes caused any of these trends, government-developed and implemented plans have allowed for these changes to occur.

These changes are cumulatively and adversely affecting the unique characteristics protected under the Coastal Act and Venice Land Use Plan that have made Venice a popular visitor destination. Further, this research indicates that beginning with the native Tongva peoples and continuing with Black, Latino, and lower-income populations, coastal development has resulted in harm to and marginalization of these communities and continues to exclude and prevent them from maintaining lives and residences in coastal Venice. The Coastal Commission's EJ Policy states that "[c]oastal development should be inclusive for all who work, live, and recreate on California's coast and provide equitable benefits for communities that have been historically excluded, marginalized, or harmed by coastal development." Therefore, given the renewed understanding of Venice's community character provided by this thesis, steps should be taken to equitably protect and, if feasible, restore the unique characteristics of Venice that have made it an inclusive and inviting recreational destination.

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