

Can University City handle twice as many people, jobs and homes? That's what San Diego has planned for it.

By David Garrick

SAN DIEGO — The population of San Diego's University City neighborhood would more than double and the number of jobs would sharply increase under a proposal to update the community's growth blueprint for the first time since 1987.

High-rise housing as tall as 10 stories or more would be encouraged in five "focus areas," including three oriented around stations on the trolley line extension connecting UC San Diego and Old Town that opened last year.

Several existing one-story shopping plazas, including two in southern University City, would be re-zoned to allow major redevelopment that could include as many as 500 units of housing at each site.

Most of the community's major roadways would be reconfigured, with some vehicle travel lanes replaced by protected bike lanes to encourage more climate-friendly commuting. And a public promenade would be added to Executive Drive.

More than four years in the making, the new growth blueprint is scheduled to be approved by the City Council late next year after months of community feedback and debate.

City planning officials, who spent most of 2022 honing the land-use elements of the proposal, say the first complete draft of the plan will be unveiled in February or March. That will be followed by a comprehensive analysis of how the plan would affect traffic and other elements of the surrounding environment.

The plan aims to guide growth in University City for the next 30 years. The City Council adopted a similar plan for neighboring Mira Mesa earlier this month.

The two communities are both in City Council District 6, which San Diego officials call an Asian empowerment district because 40 percent of the residents are of Asian descent.

University City is bounded by Los Peñasquitos Lagoon and Sorrento Valley to the north, Marine Corps Air Station Miramar and Interstate 805 to the east and state Route 52 to the south.

Its western border is more complicated and includes Interstate 5 in some places and North Torrey Pines Road, La Jolla Farms and the Pacific Ocean in others. The blueprint doesn't include the UC San Diego campus or Torrey Pines State Reserve.

There has been significant community opposition to the plan's proposed increases in housing units,

population and jobs. But city officials say University City, the city's top employment center, is primed for such growth.

The most recent draft of the plan, which was presented to community leaders last month, would more than double the number of housing units in University City from 27,000 to 57,000.

That surge is expected to boost the neighborhood's population, which is now about 65,000 — possibly even doubling it. That doesn't include nearly 12,000 people now living in UCSD dormitories — a number expected to rise as the university grows.

The most recent draft proposal would swell the number of jobs in University City from about 85,000 to more than 150,000.

Those increases would come despite some significant limitations.

The western parts of the community — areas west of I-5 — are subject to the city's 30-foot coastal height limit.

And high-rise housing is prohibited near the flight path of the Miramar military base, limiting how much new housing can be built north of the university and on the northern fringes of University Town Centre and the Campus Point project.

Chris Nielsen, chairman of the University City neighborhood planning group, said he believes city officials are on the right track with the plan. He praised critical residents for shifting toward a more constructive tone in recent meetings.

"You'll see much higher density, particularly in the focus areas," Nielsen said. "But this is a long-term plan. It's hard to tell how much of it will be built in what time frame."

Critics, including a group called Help Save UC, say the existing infrastructure — parks, fire stations, roads and libraries — can't accommodate so many new residents and that there's no undeveloped land where new infrastructure can be added.

"Of primary concern is the traffic gridlock new development would cause," said Bonnie Kutch, a south University City resident who leads that group. "Increased traffic will impact ingress and egress within our community and impede fire and safety vehicles attempting to respond to emergencies."

Kutch also said city officials are mistaken when they say allowing high-rise housing in University City will help solve San Diego's affordable housing crisis.

"With the cost of land here, developers will simply build more small studio, one- and two-bedroom luxury units that rent for \$4,000 a month and up," she said.

The plan's five focus areas include the North Torrey Pines Employment Center, the UTC Transit

Village, the Nobel Campus Transit Village, Governor Community Village and Campus Point & Towne Centre Employment Village.

The North Torrey Pines area would get a mobility hub — a place fostering convenient connections between buses, trolleys and bikes — in each of its districts, and the entrance to each district would get a small plaza to make it more vibrant.

The high-rise housing would be on North Torrey Pines Road. There would also be new trails and new open spaces for residents to gather.

Similar changes are envisioned for the Campus Point & Towne Centre Employment Village, with the high-rise housing on Genesee Avenue and Eastgate Mall.

In the UTC Transit Village, the area's "megablocks" would be broken down with new streets that would create better mobility for bicyclists and pedestrians. Large and small community gathering spaces would be located within blocks.

Most of the new housing would be built near existing residential development, and density would be focused on La Jolla Village Drive, Genesee Avenue and Executive Drive.

The Nobel Campus Transit Village would have high-rise housing on Nobel Drive and Villa La Jolla Drive, and a new main street would run north-south across the area.

That trolley station would get a new plaza and would be better integrated with the nearby stop on the popular SuperLoop rapid bus route.

The Governor Community Village would include a new east-west street connected to the library branch there. There would be new housing along Governor Drive and in mixed-use projects featuring ground-floor retail.

For details on the plan, visit planuniversity.org.