

## Chapter 24

### A CITY'S ACHIEVEMENTS, WITH MORE PLANNED

When I retired I asked, "have we finished the job?" We need to take a look at what we have accomplished, what our needs are, and what remains to be done.

What did we achieve in our first ten years as a city?

We formed the largest new city government in world history, and developed a general plan that has been above politics.

To beautify our city we planted 5,000 new trees, made significant progress in creating green belts around the entire city, landscaped the medians of miles of major roads, and passed ordinances which have protected oak trees, hillsides and ridgelines. The extra amenities in Valencia were built by the Newhall Land and Farming Company, and sold to the Valencia homeowners, who paid for them. Many do not understand this, and believe the city has been partial to Valencia. A challenge has been to beautify the entire city without any increase in taxes.

To work on crime problems we acknowledged a gang problem, created the Anti-Gang Task Force and teen court. We increased our contract with the Sheriff's Department to provide Cobra and SANE at a time when the county's policing coverage was suffering from severe budget constraints. The result was our consistent ranking among the safest cities with populations ranging from 100,000 to 250,000 in America.

Culturally, we have developed a very successful Cowboy Poetry and Music Festival. After five more years we are making grants to our orchestras and have completed a performing arts center built in cooperation with College of the Canyons. While our theatre district in Old Newhall needs more public support, the quality of productions is high.

Preparing for disaster was the first concern of the council-elect. When we were hit with the Northridge Earthquake in 1994 the S.E.C.U.R.E. Emergency Preparedness program was in place, and we were ready.

We worked hard on employment, bringing jobs to Santa Clarita so that we could become a balanced community. These efforts cut commuting problems by creating jobs closer to home for many, and have kept the local unemployment rate far below the county and state averages.

The question of human relations has been the subject of the Human Relations Forum, a Youth Alliance program, and the annual Mayor's Conference on Youth and Family, which have resulted in a bias for inclusion and action.

In the area of parks and recreation, we provided a parkmobile, built twelve miles of bike trails, Canyon Country Park, Begonias Lane Park and Creekview Park and a Community Center in Newhall, and saw a 600% increase in recreation programs. To repeat, before incorporation the county had talked about building Canyon Country Park for ten years; we built it in two.

Regarding public transportation, we built a city bus system that for years was fastest growing service in the country. We supported commuter rail by building

the first two of three Metrolink stations. Rail provided our only real connection to Los Angeles after the 1994 earthquake, and is cheap compared to the actual cost of driving, which includes depreciation, insurance, repairs and parking.

The city's efforts at representing the people have been tremendous. In the earliest years an overtaxed staff supported by a city council working under untold pressure never gave up on efforts to stop a dump in Elsmere Canyon. More recently efforts have continued with great success to turn dumpsites into parks.

The question of trash disposal resulted not only in the effort against dumps, but an aggressive citywide recycling program that is seen as a leader.

Although the school systems are legally independent of the city, Santa Clarita worked hard to push for adequate funding of new schools, insisting as long as it could (until state law was changed), that developers bear the brunt of the costs.

Revitalization was an area of some success. Downtown Newhall is changing, and so is Canyon Country.

Our tax rates have not increased to pay for these programs. The one tax increase we have suffered was the result of the federal imposition of the NPDES program, which requires controlling the amount of pollution that can flow into the ocean. The county library levy is not a city tax, but was approved by the voters when the county went broke.

Traffic circulation has been improved by twenty quick fixes; the widening of Soledad Canyon Road and San Fernando Road, and the completion of Whites Canyon and Wiley Canyon bridges. Unfortunately, increased traffic has also resulted in many traffic lights being installed, but at least gridlock is getting local attention.

That was all in the first ten years. All these accomplishments can be credited to tremendous leadership provided by city managers Fred Bien and George Carvalho, and then Ken Pulskamp, the efforts of a supportive city council, the hard work of an absolutely tremendous staff and terrific volunteers like Tom Haner, who led the anti-graffiti effort for years.

What are our needs?

We need more involvement. The percentage of voters who vote in city elections is horrible, and many do not realize that in most cases when they see a problem all they have to do is call 259-CITY and explain it to the city staff.

It is true that while the Santa Clarita Valley's future will certainly be exciting, it will not necessarily be the one that many of us want. Population pressures and Supreme Court decisions, as well as the machinations of county politicians over whom we have little control, will foster continued growth beyond the imagination of most residents. In fifty years the young people now living here will be hard put to recognize the valley if they return to visit. I know the feeling, having gone back to the campus of Trinity University, from which I graduated, only to find I cannot make my way around without asking directions, or looking at a map.

I would feel much more comfortable about the future if we had one truly local government in our valley.

The city's efforts at strategic planning are truly significant. Santa Clarita has built a reputation worldwide for planning for the future, and this effort merits a detailed description. Santa Clarita is one of a small percentage of cities in the United States to do strategic planning. Few cities outside our country do anything of the sort.

The city plans with a shared vision, and worked to achieve the goals set by those people who choose to participate in the process, which gave the people of Santa Clarita a chance to come together once every three or four years to map out their future. While the State of California, Los Angeles County and the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) do not pay much attention to our vision, the city does. George Carvalho and Ken Pulskamp set the precedent of calling an all day public meeting one Saturday every few years because they believed that average residents should have a voice in their city's future.

More importantly, the city publishes the results of each conference, and demonstrates the results of the public participation. The success rate for the action plan generated from the program is extremely high, and the city consistently makes astounding progress in meeting the people's goals.

Even the priorities that seem to be off the beaten track have been pursued aggressively. When the people set the establishment of a Nordstrom department store in Santa Clarita as their number one goal some years ago the story made the *Wall Street Journal*. The city went to work with Nordstrom and Newhall Land to make it happen. The result was that Nordstrom said they would come to Santa Clarita, if the city would put up \$40 million worth of infrastructure and facilities. When the people learned this, they lost interest in that goal. However, the amazing fact is that by 2001 "90 percent of the tasks identified in the first three Share the Vision plans, which remained viable given social and political changes, [were] accomplished."<sup>1</sup>

Some of the ideas which were either born in, or gained popular support from, a Share the Vision session include the adoption of a ridgeline preservation ordinance, a master plan to create a core city area, and the acquisition of land for a large central park. Furthermore, the establishment of a cowboy poetry festival which soon attracted an international audience, and a tremendous campaign to defeat the establishment of the world's largest landfill outside of the city's boundaries, gained real popular support in strategic planning sessions. The Share the Vision program was responsible for solidifying support for a Human Relations Forum and creating cultural awareness programs that have helped Santa Clarita, a largely white community, embrace its shifting demographics.

The process has developed. It began in 2001 with a survey in advance of the public session, which is circulated to thousands of community members. This survey asked five questions.

1. The top three issues facing our community now and into the next decade are....
2. The greatest challenge facing Santa Clarita in the next couple of years is....

3. If I had \$1,000,000 to spend in the community, I would spend it on....
4. I feel that the City does the following things well....
5. I feel that the City does not do the following things very well....

What was the process at Share the Vision in 2001?

In October, just after 9/11, Ken Pulskamp and Terri Maus moderated “Share the Vision IV: E-magine the Future.” It was a good session; although attendance was lower, participation was up because of the use of technology, the wave of the future. Input by computer and fax made the difference.

At Share the Vision IV we enjoyed a continental breakfast, and an opening presentation by the Santa Clarita Master Chorale. That was followed by comments from George Carvalho, then our city manager, who remarked that whether a person was a coach or a city manager, it was a lot like being a conductor, getting people to work together. After introductions, Carvalho welcomed the television audience, and referred to previous strategic planning sessions in 1991, 1995 and 1998.

Those of us present had an agenda in hand. Following registration came the kick off, some words about the power of planning as well as the need for identification with the action plan for the future. We then split into small groups, assigned at random, and prioritized ideas. At our second group meeting we refined the issues. Then we made our presentations, and adjourned by 4:00 p.m. The results came later in the mail to each participant, who then had the opportunity to give additional feedback.

As the session was attended by quorums of the city council and the planning and parks and recreation commissions, city clerk Sharon Dawson convened meetings of those bodies. Mayor Laurene Weste welcomed experts from various segments of our society, and stated that we were all experts on the kind of community in which we wanted to live. We had achieved ninety per cent of the goals we had set in previous sessions within three years. She reviewed the achievements and proclaimed that we care, that we are a great community, and that we were moving into the twenty-first century as a “can do” community.

George Carvalho then pointed out that we were in the midst of a great revolution, a substantial technological change from horsepower to brainpower. People who are involved in the process take ownership of the product. Change is the norm, and now through cable and the internet everyone can get information simultaneously. Solutions to most of our problems require everyone’s input, as well as taking some risks.

Next, he introduced the facilitators, Ken Pulskamp, then Assistant City Manager, and Interim Deputy City Manager and Director of Field Services Terri Maus. Pulskamp said, “If you care where you are going, you must find the right road. Vision with action can change the world.” The first step had been made already. City staff had identified the top issues through a survey. Pulskamp then showed us a short video of the results of past sessions on our parks, roads, transit, public safety and redevelopment, and emphasized that input is critical, that every individual matters.

Terri Maus explained the ground rules we would use.

“Every idea is worthy of consideration.

“Share the time.

“Do not personalize.

“Focus on the issues.

“All players are equal.

“One person speaks at a time.

“We should enjoy the day.”

Ken Pulskamp stated that there had been three hundred responses to the surveys that the city had mailed to 4,300 households, published in the *Seasons* brochure and posted on the city's web site. Then he asked us to identify issues.

Terri Maus shared the results of the community survey, saying that 142 had come in by mail, 116 were completed on the web site, and 47 from the *Seasons* brochure had come in by fax.

After a half-hour break we were asked to describe various scenarios for the future. The best case scenario involved an increase in participation and communication. The worst case involved a lack of planning, and the failure to implement any plan to deal with growth, even though increasing density could help to solve some problems. Added to this was “TMC happens,” which meant that the Transit Mix Concrete facility was approved, resulting in major problems with air quality, water quality and traffic, in addition to some other factors. In addition no roads were built, the schools became more crowded as the result of failure to pass bond issues, the economy turned sour and drugs and violence became big problems.

Ken Pulskamp suggested that the most realistic scenario would be developed in part by putting up a best case scenario and seeing how close we could get to it. We should stick our five dots on the items on the papers hanging from the walls. These lists had been developed as we called out the issues we saw as most critical. This was done as a method to prioritize the myriad of discussion points which had been raised.

After lunch Terri Maus led us in counting the issues and picking the top five. Then we broke into groups to discuss them. Ken Pulskamp asked us to discuss first the issues of transportation, growth and development, design standards, and a beautification plan.

A staff facilitator met with each group, and made it clear that all ideas were worthy. We defined the problem, suggested solutions, and then the facilitators gave the reports.

Then Pulskamp thanked us for our efforts, and said that we had completed the process. Staff would draft the report for council adoption after the participants had received copies and been given opportunities for feedback.

“The process works if we have a caring community. You have cared. As individuals you have made a difference.”<sup>2</sup>

Transportation, growth management and overcrowded schools ranked as the top three issues facing us in 2001. Although the third issue was one for the school

districts to face, the city did not deny any responsibility, and worked with the districts on the problems. The public holds the city responsible for many services actually rendered by the county or other agencies. This has led to close cooperation in solving problems, such as in locating public parks next to school playgrounds.

Growth and development was by far the greatest challenge facing the city, according to the public, but education was the area in which most wanted to spend a million dollars. The public responded by passing bond issues, with the result being the building of a number of new elementary, junior high, and high schools by the fall of 2004, and school construction continued.

Health and welfare, normally a county function, was named by 65% of the respondents, as something the city does well. Here the people were remembering the city's efforts to stop Elsmere dump, to oppose aggregate mining in a nearby canyon, to develop aesthetics and boost community pride. Growth and development was the biggest area needing improvement.

The pamphlet containing the results of the survey also included some helpful demographics. While the city's population on the day of the incorporation election in 1987 was 147,228, according to the formula of three times registered voters set by the state for funding purposes, the 1990 census revealed that our population was 110,642. Ten years later the census total was 151,088, and in 2004 our population was about 165,000. The 36% growth was due to annexations, immigration and the excess of births over deaths. From 1990 to 2000 the actual numbers of people aged 20 to 34 declined slightly, while the numbers in all other categories grew.

In 1980 the Hispanic population was relatively small, and the census showed that it was indeed the best educated. In 2000 twenty-one per cent of the people were Latino. Asians and Pacific Islanders were six per cent of the total, and those identifying themselves as black or African-American were at two per cent, with those identifying themselves as multiracial were also two per cent.

In 2000 the number of people per household, at 2.95, was slightly below the Los Angeles County average of 2.98. Median household income was \$66,575. Traffic had a major impact on lifestyles, and ridership on Santa Clarita Transit had grown from 500,000 in 1992 to 3,000,000. The city was projecting population growth from 151,088 in 2000 to about 275,000 in 2025, with the totals for the entire valley to go from about 200,000 to 400,000 during the same period.

A major part of the growth problem is the unincorporated county area. In the first fourteen years since incorporation the city's population had grown about 45,978, but 74% of this increase was due to annexations. Growth within the original city limits was 11,065, or 26% of the total. Those considering any new effort to limit the number of units being built in the city would have to consider that only 3,176 residential units were either under construction or approved by the city in 2001. While many of these units will be built over a period of years, some will not be built at all. On the other hand, the number of units approved at the time in the county territory for Newhall Ranch, Westcreek and Stevenson Ranch

alone totaled 25,771. Many have the mistaken impression that growth in the unincorporated area is approved by the city, and many are unaware that the county approved much of the growth in the city prior to annexation.

Strategic planning was approached on a different scale in 2004. Sixty-one community meetings reached more than 2,600 people face to face. An additional response of well over 1,600 came in the form of 700 cards received in the mail, 443 comments made on the city's web site, eleven calls to the telephone hotline and 531 more participating in one hour facilitated meetings.

There was recognition that the city cannot do it all. A healthy community must rely on its citizenry and voluntary associations, ranging from churches to soccer clubs, to help make it great.

The top ten issues of 2004 were listed as traffic, air quality, cultural arts, growth, open space, youth activities, parks, Newhall redevelopment, public safety and economic development, respectively. It was recognized that growth was truly the "most pressing bigger issue," which impacts on all of the others. The issue of growth which was ranked fourth, but the impacts of growth are pervasive.<sup>3</sup>

Traffic was being dealt with by a variety of efforts to eliminate hazards, among them the monitoring of traffic lights through a centralized facility, a red light photo enforcement program, the continued expansion of Santa Clarita Transit's operations, the building of a cross valley connector (a bridge over the Santa Clarita River by itself is a \$50 million project), and work with the state and regional associations on the freeway system. Dealing with getting students to school is a huge challenge.

The city was working hard in 2004 to stop the TMC mining project, which would have several devastating effects on air quality, including the generation of a huge amount of dust and pollution from stalled traffic on Route 14. Incentives to "build green," and projects to promote less polluting paints and adhesives, and to provide public stations for fueling with Compressed Natural Gas and hydrogen are being developed or are in process.

The performing arts center at College of the Canyons enjoyed city funding, while work proceeds on an art park, teen band nights, the Cowboy Poetry and Music Festival and other programs.

The change from a valley of small, rural communities to a rapidly growing urban area at a time when the State of California was not exhibiting the political will to deal with the problems, created much stress. For years the County of Los Angeles allowed development without requiring the provision of infrastructure. By the time Santa Clarita was incorporated the shortfall in roads, public transit, public facilities, schools, treatment plants and the like exceeded \$1,000,000,000. Decisions by the courts and the legislature were not helping.

There were significant constraints limiting the power of government to slow the building, and with Santa Clarita's area limited by the developers' influence at LAFCO, the city had a weak hand in the development game. The Porta Bella area was the one place where the city had a strong hand. Not only was the council able to reduce the rights to build by a couple of thousand housing units, but it had

the right to insist that the pollution had to be cleaned up before building could start. For a time the *Mira* decision allowed the city to defer to the school districts the power to demand funding for schools from the builders. However, the legislature limited that right, and required that local districts contribute significantly to the funding through bond issues.

This change in public policy was not entirely unfair; the birthrate in existing housing was such that new schools were needed in any case. However, the builders had been allowed a free ride for years prior to *Mira* as the taxpayers funded new roads and schools. Putting the onus on the building industry simply meant that those buying new homes would have to pay more, much more. Essentially, our children would find it difficult to buy a new home while our own homes inflated in value. As an example, Chris and I bought in 1966 for \$22,000, traded up at an additional cost of \$3,500 in 1976, and now own a modest home which might have sold recently for over \$500,000.

City staff is working actively to expand opportunities for youth in the areas of transportation, dances, teen centers, a master plan, and an annual youth summit. They also coordinate efforts by the schools, local organizations, churches, merchants, the Boys and Girls Club, Magic Mountain, Mountasia, law enforcement and homeowner associations. Expanding the use of parks through lighting, and development of the Veterans Historic Park are examples of ongoing efforts following the beautiful developments of facilities in Centre Pointe.

By 2004 the city owned or leased (as in the case of Central Park) 2,179 acres of park and open space not only in the city, but also outside. The city's Joint Powers Authority with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy owns an additional 442 acres in Whitney Canyon. The city had been influential in the creation of the Santa Clarita Woodlands State Park, thousands of acres of green belt between Santa Clarita and Los Angeles, a key area which had not been part of the national forest system. During the period from 1987 to 2004 the city had developed 300% more parkland.

While Newhall redevelopment goes slowly, façade improvements and parking have received attention, and more infrastructure improvements will be provided as the Gates project develops to the south of the old town.

Public safety is enhanced by the city paying over \$12,000,000 annually for services from the Los Angeles County Sheriff. As an example, the city provides fifteen traffic cars in the core area while the county provides two for a much larger area with a significant population. The city is responsible for implementing the STTOP program to identify traffic offenders, the Community Interaction Team, and the COBRA unit which has been so effective in dealing with burglaries, robberies and assault. The city has built two Sheriff sub-stations and effectively supports Zero Tolerance for Graffiti, the latter manned by dedicated volunteers.

The city's efforts in the area of economic development have born fruit. As the developers have built housing the challenge to provide a balanced economy with plenty of jobs has been significant. Newhall Land's projects were supple-



mented by large projects at Centre Pointe in Canyon Country, and Gates in Newhall. Auto dealerships and retail have developed at a rapid pace, with great gains for Canyon Country developed. This is a great change since Magic Ford was a storefront in old Newhall, and Kmart was the latest in shopping. However, it has also caused many old and locally-owned businesses to fail.

People find it difficult to adjust to changes in our culture and our economy. Some newcomers do not conform to the behavior patterns of the neighborhood. People lose their jobs because their skills become obsolete, or their employer has moved to a place offering cheaper labor. Others feel less comfortable because as the drive around our city the familiar landmarks have disappeared, or are now tucked between new buildings. Many of the oldtimers will confess they miss the smell of the onion fields which replaced the old Newhall International Airport, and which in turn were replaced by housing.

Sadly this causes a tremendous amount of stress, and many people simply withdraw from active participation in problem solving, complaining of corruption and other malfeasance, when the fact is there are a lot of people really interested in solving problems getting little support and a lot of unjustified criticism.

Note: The city acquired Elsmere Canyon late in 2010, the year Carl Newton retired as City Attorney, at age 79. That year the Newhall streetscape began to take real shape. Further progress came with the expansion of our greenbelt in Agua Dulce, well outside the city.

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<sup>1</sup>[City of Santa Clarita.] *A Community Strategic Plan, Share the Vision IV: E-magine the Future!* 2001.

<sup>2</sup>Notes taken in long hand during the session.

<sup>3</sup>[Draft] *The Big Picture; The City of Santa Clarita 2004-2007 Community Strategic Plan, Summary of Community Participation & Action Plan.* July 13, 2004.