



USC Village

USC

THE VILLAGE AT USC
A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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CHAPTER

3

The Vision

In telling the story of the USC Village, a number of landmark moments emerge as crucial junctures in its journey: the laying of the first brick, the hoisting of the signature spire atop McCarthy Honors College, and the unveiling of the Hecuba statue, as more than 2,500 students prepared to spend their first night in the residence halls. But another moment—just four years before the dedication—stands out as equally key: the morning that more than 1,100 community members converged on the Los Angeles City Hall council chambers and rotunda, a legion of ardent voices lending support to the nascent project, and the culmination of two-plus years of advocacy.

Throughout the construction process, President Nikias met with the director of construction, Willy Marsh (pointing at center), as well as the architects, to discuss their plans.

A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

It was December of 2012, and that crowd erupted in broad smiles and ecstatic cheers, as the City Council unanimously approved the project with a 15-0 vote. This cleared the way for USC to redevelop the large parcels of university-owned land—what would ultimately become the USC Village. It would also generate 12,000 new jobs, 8,000 of which would be permanent.

Among those smiling most broadly was Ana Carias, who was a USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative parent at the time. “I asked for time off to be here because this is important to me and my family,” she said. “This center will bring jobs to the community and something nice in the neighborhood.”

In the six months leading up to the vote, Carias was among the hundreds of community members who routinely attended meetings, and later filled the City Hall council chambers as a collective show of support for the project.

Carias stood shoulder to shoulder with Griselda Bonilla, who lived in the neighborhood for more than 15 years. An avid bike rider, Bonilla looked forward to the new bike lanes that would come with the project, as well as significant improvements to street lighting. The project would also spark fresh funding for local parks and community gardens.

It was enhancements such as these that inspired far-reaching support in the community. These benefits also included an affordable housing fund, as well as money for job training and job placement services for local residents.

“This is an exciting moment because it means thousands of new jobs for Los Angeles city residents,” said Jan Perry, a former councilmember who made the motion to approve the USC Village. “This project will also bring quality retail options to a community that still lacks grocery stores, movie theaters, and sit-down restaurants.”

The community benefits package resulted from a series of meetings that gathered USC staff, neighborhood leaders, local residents, and Trojan parents. Their input went straight to university and city officials, and provided fundamental shape to the final list of enhancements.



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CITY HALL





These discussions also ensured that the project would balance financial pragmatism with the most pressing needs of all constituents. “We have all worked very hard for the last four years to get to this point,” Perry said on the morning of the vote. “It makes me enormously proud at the progress that we have made.”

Perry and former councilmember Bernard Parks were particularly keen advocates of the project, along with then-mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, and other local leaders.

“The beauty of this process is that we all came together,” added Tom Sayles, USC’s senior vice president for university relations. “We came together for the betterment of our neighborhood.”



More than 1,100 community members converged on Los Angeles City Hall to show support for the USC Village (previous page). Rosa Donis (raised arms above), the parent of a student, stood among the most passionate. (Bottom right) Herb Wesson, president of the Los Angeles City Council.



(Above right) When the project was approved, Jan Perry represented USC's district on the Los Angeles City Council. (Above) Tom Sayles, USC's senior vice president for university relations, shakes hands with Ed Reyes, a former councilmember. Tom LaBonge, another councilmember at the time, stands next to Sayles. (Bottom left) Humberto Ayuso, a community member.



USC also agreed to provide business assistance for up to 40 local small businesses, and offer relocation assistance to a number of the businesses and retailers that occupied the former site.

Once the project was completed, USC would work with these businesses to help some return to the new USC Village. In planning for retailers, the university agreed to a 15 percent local procurement goal.

Aaron Aulenta, who worked with the Figueroa Corridor Partnership Business Improvement District, summed up the tenor of support: “This is truly an investment in the community that will revitalize this section of Los Angeles.”

“The vote and the overwhelming community support were the result of a long-term and very strong partnership between USC and community stakeholders,” said David Galaviz, USC’s executive director for local government relations. “This process and this project would not have achieved this accomplishment without the years of outreach.”



Quality
Affordable
Retail

To galvanize support for the project, David Galaviz (right), USC's executive director for local government relations, helped organize more than 300 meetings at local schools, churches, and nonprofit organizations.





BRICK BY BRICK

Galaviz's words hold tremendous truth.

Just as the USC Village did not appear magically one morning—its residence halls glowing with lights, its piazza filled with mature trees—neither did this pivotal vote from the Los Angeles City Council.

Indeed, the USC Village resulted from methodical planning, the careful laying of foundation, and years of hard work. So too did the council's approval.

As plans for the project firmed up, Galaviz helped organize more than 300 meetings at local schools, churches, and nonprofit organizations. The university also distributed thousands of brochures and postcards detailing the project.

This groundwork began in earnest in October 2011, when USC sponsored an open house at its Galen Center, drawing approximately 400 community members. The city followed suit, sponsoring two open houses just three months later.

In March of the following year, the City Planning Department held two days of hearings at the Radisson Hotel, just across from the USC campus. This marked the beginning of the hearing process, and on the first day alone, more than 450 community members showed up to express their support.

In May, the City Planning Commission held a hearing on the project, and it drew more than 400 supporters from the community.

The voices of these women, men, and children—heard collectively through this suite of meetings—gave texture and clarity to a view held by USC officials: the neighborhood's residents understood the revitalizing power of this project. In looking ahead, they foresaw the fresh injections of jobs and commerce, as well as the sheer beauty and daily ease that would accompany them.



A HURDLE CLEARED

Before the project could go before the full City Council, though, it needed a green light from a key committee: the council's committee on Planning and Land Use Management, or PLUM. In August and September of 2012, it held two hearings: the first brought out approximately 250 to 300 supporters, and the second drew as many as 450.

This support accurately augured the committee's approval: in October, the PLUM committee voted to move the project forward, with yes votes cast by city councilmembers Mitch Englander and Ed Reyes.

"It's a win for the community," said USC's Tom Sayles. "It's a win for the city, and it's a win for the university."



Some community members dressed in cardinal and gold to show their support. (Above) Rosa Donis (at left) and Malva Yorke.

In the weeks following this vote, the *Los Angeles Times* published a thoughtful editorial that endorsed the project, focusing on its benefits to local housing, while noting the project’s significant increase in student beds.

“It will relieve much of the pressure on neighborhood housing stock even as it enhances students’ academic experience by allowing them to live in USC housing,” the writer argued, pointing out that the new project would not displace any residents. To support affordable housing, USC agreed to give \$20 million to a city fund. The university also established a legal clinic at its Gould School of Law, one that would help local residents with tenant-landlord disputes.

“No big university can fully control its impact on a neighborhood,” the piece concluded. “But USC and its neighbors are offering a good template for how to work together so that both communities thrive.”

With the PLUM committee’s approval, the project quickly and steadily advanced. By the time it passed in the full City Council, local enthusiasm had swelled exponentially.

Said Humberto Ayuso, who lived in the neighborhood for more than 35 years: “This is a giant leap for a better future for the community.”



To mark the formal approval of the USC Village, Nikias and Antonio Villaraigosa, the mayor of Los Angeles at the time, held a signing ceremony. Standing are Jan Perry and Ed Reyes, both former councilmembers.



FULL STEAM AHEAD

With approvals in hand, USC held a public gathering to sign the development agreement. It was a bright day that brought out the media, as well as USC and elected officials, including the former mayor of Los Angeles—and a staunch friend to the project—Antonio Villaraigosa. Appropriately, everyone gathered at an entrance to the former University Village, a spot traversed by—quite likely—every USC student since 1975.

President Nikias hosted the event, and warmly acknowledged the crucial support it had received from elected officials, notably Villaraigosa; Jan Perry, a councilmember in whose district the project resided; Ed Reyes, chair of the PLUM committee; and the entire Los Angeles City Council.

Nikias reserved special praise for the hundreds of community members who had pushed so passionately for this project’s approval, giving up Saturdays and rearranging their work schedules to serve as its ambassadors.

“All of us at USC are very aware that we would not be here today if not for the tremendous dedication and support of thousands of our friends and neighbors,” said Nikias.

At the top of this group, he placed the scores of impassioned parents. “We are especially grateful to the hundreds of parents of local elementary and high school students who demonstrated their unwavering support for this project from the very first day.”

His gratitude was directed at individuals such as Malva Yorke, who grew up in one of USC’s surrounding neighborhoods and was raising her children there. Two of her children participated in the Neighborhood Academic Initiative.





“We never thought that we would be able to get into USC,” Yorke said, when asked about her support of the project. “And now to see my kids being on that campus every day, and they’re giving back to the community, is really, really good.”

Nikias went on: “These parents saw the USC Village as an opportunity to improve their community, and they took the lead by taking action. They attended meetings. They talked to their neighbors. And they spoke on our behalf.”

Their enthusiasm was matched by the university’s sense of commitment: USC would advance the project on its own land without any public subsidies or taxpayer funds.

Before closing, President Nikias reflected on the gathering’s significance: “As we sign this historic agreement, it is very important to remember that just as the history of USC and this community have always been connected, our futures are forever linked together. And together, we will continue to work for what is best for all of the people who share a history and share this community.”



A COMMUNITY CELEBRATES

In April of 2013, USC sponsored a community dinner to thank long-term supporters of the project. Less than four years later, echoes of this gathering could be heard at a similar event, honoring the same group. That event, held in 2017, would take place amidst the completed USC Village: its residents delving into the first assignments of the semester, its retailers filling customers' bags with groceries, and its trees' roots finding their place in the new soil.

As these roots took hold in the ground, a sense of optimism filled the air. Perhaps no one could capture this feeling better than a local resident, one who lived five blocks from USC, and who had lived in the neighborhood for 20-plus years: "They'll be pumping money into the local economy—our economy," said Joseph Michael Franco. "I love my community, and I love what USC has done for our community."

It was in this spirit that the USC and local communities awaited the first bloom of new leaves on the trees—and the revitalization of an entire neighborhood in Los Angeles.



Throughout the planning process, Tom Sayles worked closely with the local community. He often championed the project as a win for everyone: the community, the city, and the university.