



General Public Comment

Name of Sender	Distributed prior to hearing	Distributed after the hearing
1. Sullivan Israel	x	

Dear Commissioners:

I have read through the comments sent in about the De la Guerra Plaza remodel and have come away totally disheartened. It seems to me that a small group of very motivated individuals (dare I call them NIMBYs) has convinced you that the design is unsalvageable, worthless, or will somehow ruin our whole city (which definitely seems like an exaggeration).

Perhaps many of them have a point when it comes to keeping some lawn space. Beyond that, however, most of the comments are completely misguided.

As the 21st century progresses, cities across the world, and especially in this country, are “taking back” their public spaces from the cars that invaded them about 100 years ago. The trend started early in the Netherlands, and has spread from there. A great early example not too different from our beloved plaza can be seen in the city square of Delft, in the Netherlands:

BEFORE:



AFTER:



Here, the city square went from being a lifeless, loud car park to a bustling, pedestrian and bike-friendly gathering place. If a European example seems too far-fetched a comparison, then there are many more examples close to home. Perhaps the most famous town square in America, Times Square, had a significant remodel in 2017 in which car traffic was eliminated to create seating and walking areas:

BEFORE:



AFTER:



In fact, one need not look any further than Market St. in San Francisco, which has removed cars completely and is in the planning stages of a major remodel.

The important thing is this: the pedestrianization of our public spaces is not a trend or a fad. It's not even a new idea. Before the automobile, all the spaces I mentioned above and our own Plaza de la Guerra were crisscrossed by people on foot every day for hundreds or even thousands of years (depending on the city, of course). The introduction of cars onto our streets a little more than 100 years ago took those spaces away from us, and now we are simply taking them back.

Cities across the country are taking the same steps to bring back pleasant, quiet, and enjoyable streets for walking and biking only. In many of those places, the decision makers face the same misinformed fury and confusion that you have experienced here. Please, please don't let a few angry people cause Santa Barbara to be left behind with an inadequate yet important public space.

Many of the concerns voiced in public comments made little to no sense, and I'd like to address a few:

- Loss of parking will cause people to stop shopping—as the city traffic study stated, there is more than enough parking in the numerous lots, some of which are only a half block from the plaza, to accommodate the extra cars. Also, this is a false claim that has been voiced the world over but in numerous studies across various cities has been proven to be totally false. In most instances, foot traffic actually increases due to the more pleasant nature of the area. Here is an interesting group doing something similar in Hong Kong: [What is the Walk DVRC Initiative | Walk DVRC Ltd.](#)
- Closing the street will create more traffic elsewhere—again, a false claim. After Market St. in San Francisco was closed, there was nearly 0 increase in traffic on parallel roads. The same goes for 14th St. in New York and many more cities. Refer to this video for more: [What Happened When They Banned Cars - YouTube](#)
- De la Guerra Plaza is used well today—this is absurd. I lead local tours past the plaza nearly every weekend, when it should be busiest. The most activity I have ever seen there are a couple of homeless people and someone parking a car. People who make broad statements about the plaza being “well used” but don't offer any examples should not be believed. I actually see the plaza on a weekly basis and can prove otherwise.
- There shouldn't be features to attract children—this is perhaps the saddest claim of all. In the US, we have a distinct lack of mixed-use public spaces. We have parks with playgrounds isolated in neighborhoods but far from businesses, and businesses isolated from large gathering spaces. In Europe, and even on the East Coast, this is not the case. Placing something to attract families right next to State St. will make the plaza a destination of its own. Currently, there is no reason to go there other than to “pay your utility bill” as one commenter put it. I remember once while walking though the hot summer sun in Jerusalem, I came upon a splash pad in a small public square. Children ran, screaming joyfully through the mist while parents sat in the shade on nearby benches and conversed. In restaurants nearby, people were watching and hollering at a soccer game on TV. This place felt *alive*. Contrast that to the dead quiet and engine noises of De la Guerra Plaza today. Here's a great video on kid-friendly urbanism: [Why We Won't Raise Our Kids in Suburbia \(and moved to the Netherlands instead\) - YouTube](#)
- Perhaps the most important false claim to address: “De la Guerra Plaza has always been this way, so that's how it should stay!”-- First of all, this is just untrue. For thousands of years, the plaza was just an unmarked patch of grass in the middle of a huge, grassy, field that is now downtown Santa Barbara. As far as we know, the local Chumash did not consider this particular rectilinear

location anything special. Once the town began to be formed in the early 1800's as small landowners built adobes within walking distance of the Presidio, De la Guerra Plaza took shape as a dusty space between the haphazardly placed adobe homes around it. There was no grass square, palm trees, or benches. Then, from 1874 to 1923, city hall itself stood directly on top of the plaza's current open space, and two palm trees mark its boundaries. In the 1920's, architect Barnard Hoffman, who planned the famous El Paseo and restored the De la Guerra adobe, actually proposed plans to redo the plaza replete with a grand fountain. George Washington Smith, Luta Maria Riggs, and James Osborne Craig also proposed designs, some including a central bandstand. With the 1925 earthquake shifting focus to rebuilding the city, the many plans for the plaza were never realized.

What makes this claim most upsetting to me, however, is not its historical in-accuracy. Using the fact that something has always been a certain way as a reason that it should stay that way is generally ridiculous, but even more so in city planning. Should the Brooklyn Bridge not have been built because "Manhattan and Long Island have always been disconnected?" Should State St. have been rebuilt in a mixture of Victorian and Old West styles after the earthquake because "that's the way it always looked?" Should De la Guerra Plaza remain a lifeless, empty space with a mismatch of pavement types and no attractive features because "that's how its always been?" For some people, the answer is "yes" apparently.

Finally, I'd like to suggest some great Youtube channels about city planning and pedestrianization that you (but mostly some of my fellow townspeople) would enjoy:

- City Beautiful, the go-to channel on Urban Planning created by a Cal-Poly professor: [City Beautiful - YouTube](#) He has videos about great public spaces, like this one: [How Chicago Built an Amazing Lake Shore - YouTube](#)
- Not Just Bikes, perhaps the most popular urban-planning channel, created by a man who grew up in a Canadian suburb but moved to Amsterdam for the superior quality of life: [Not Just Bikes - YouTube](#)
- Strong Towns, created by an American Urban Planner and author to promote getting rid of car-centric thinking in US cities: [Strong Towns - YouTube](#)

Sincerely,

Sullivan Israel

Longtime Santa Barbarian, Civil Engineering Student, and Local Tour Guide