



Local News

Santa Barbara's Public Works Director Talks Transportation, De La Guerra Plaza and State Street

Rebecca Bjork tells business leaders that parking requirements downtown hurt design flexibility



Santa Barbara Public Works Director Rebecca Bjork said Wednesday that she would like to re-envision De la Guerra Plaza and make it the heart of downtown. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

By Joshua Molina, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@JECMolina](#)

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Santa Barbara Public Works Director Rebecca Bjork said Wednesday that she would like to re-envision De la Guerra Plaza and make it the heart of downtown. Bjork spoke to a group of business leaders at former Mayor Hal Conklin's Santa Barbara Leadership Team virtual forum.

It was one of several statements Bjork made in a wide ranging talk to the group of about 30 people in a Zoom webinar.

She said she's looking forward to re-envisioning De la Guerra Plaza, transforming the library plaza, taking a new look at public transportation and re-examining State Street and its street furniture.

"If we are looking to transition to a more pedestrian friendly plaza or re-envision the way we manage State Street it would be prudent to take a look comprehensively at the way the street is used," Bjork said.

She said that the city has to work with the Historic Landmarks Commission to change the street furniture, such as planters, benches and other areas.

"Street furniture has been a challenge for us," she said. "Anyone who has a business on State Street knows the challenge that it represents.

"We didn't have an immediate need for that money."

She also said that housing downtown would help reduce some of the traffic congestion problems, but that parking is a challenge on many of the lots.

"The real limitation, particularly on State Street, is there's no space for driveways," Bjork said. "You really can't have parking on the site. The parking limitation is a real one."

If developers did not have to create parking at the site, she said, it would give them much more flexibility.

On the issue of transportation, Bjork said the Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District runs public transportation, but her own opinion is that light rail and trolleys would be "fun," but a "huge, huge project," with all sorts of issues and challenges.

She said transportation is in the process of changing and "developing."

"I think really looking at alternative types of transportation, and particularly watching the public transportation field, it has really evolved amazingly since Uber and Lyft came along, and I don't know what is going to be on the horizon for MTD," Bjork said.

"Will they completely shift to an on-call type of process where they are having smaller vehicles and picking people up at their homes or close to their homes, rather than bus stops.

The city is also considering multiple plans for De La Guerra Plaza in front of City Hall.

The wide swath of land is used infrequently for events, but is not the city venue that officials and activists would like it to be.

Bjork said she is excited about De la Guerra Plaza and "really re-inventing the heart of our community."

"Not only doing the landscape, but doing it with a purpose, and understanding our vision and intention for that space so that we can give ourselves the best opportunity to be successful and really make it a place that is the heart of downtown, where people want to come and congregate at," Bjork said.

Bjork also said that Measure C revenues, funded by sales taxes, are expected to drop \$10 million this year and next because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The city needs a new police station, and a proposed site at the corner of Cota and Santa Barbara streets is currently undergoing environmental review.

"The existing police station is unsafe and not really feasible to keep our police force or any essential function in that building," Bjork said. "Whereas we don't expect it to pancake, we don't think it would be operational, and certainly after an earthquake is when we really need to rely on public safety."

She said that she has empathy for the business community, and reminded them that some of the infrastructure work they see is done by utility companies, not necessarily the city.

"We are not going to be able to do it without interfering with what you do, we just can't, but we will try to address those interferences when we can," Bjork said.

— *Noozhawk* staff writer Joshua Molina can be reached at jmolina@noozhawk.com. Follow Noozhawk on Twitter: [@noozhawk](https://twitter.com/noozhawk), [@NoozhawkNews](https://twitter.com/NoozhawkNews) and [@NoozhawkBiz](https://twitter.com/NoozhawkBiz). Connect with *Noozhawk* on Facebook.