

GREEN VERSUS GREEN, OR, ALICE IN BLUNDERLAND

The McGee-Spaulding District, as those of us fortunate enough to live here know already, is a quiet residential area with deep roots in Berkeley history. Most of the District's buildings are over half a century old, and some date from its origins as suburban farmland. Unfortunately, it also constitutes about one-third of Council District 4, which yokes it with Berkeley's downtown. All of which means that, on November 2, our votes for a City Council Member will probably depend on how each of us feels about Measure R, widely advertised as a "community plan" that will make the downtown "safe, green and vibrant."

Well, we in MSHHIG have read Measure R several times, and we confess it still puzzles us. In the first place it's not really a plan at all. Its proponents, when asked, admit that it's more like a "nonbinding resolution" -- a plan to have a plan. Trouble is, since the plan in question doesn't yet exist, it's impossible to tell what the downtown will look like after it's put into effect. There are several plans floating around in some kind of legislative fourth dimension, and one of them is said to be favored by the backers of Measure R. But rather than submit this plan to the judgment of Berkeley voters, as a majority of them requested last year, the City Council has seen fit to withdraw it and put forward Measure R instead.

What's more, the only two provisions of Measure R that could have a definite effect on the final plan bear a suspicious resemblance to the two provisions of the withdrawn plan that caused the most controversy last year. "Curiouser and curiouser," as Alice said when she'd grown so tall she could hardly see her own feet. But not as curious as Measure R's building height limits, which seem to go both down and up according to one's viewpoint.

Measure R's supporters urge us to think of the new plazas, the cafes, the "accessible" parking, the new shops serving the "car-free" new residents in their energy-efficient buildings -- in short, the whole enchanted Wonderland of "green living," in which Berkeley will lead the country. Don't we want all those lovely things? Sure we do. We'd like free ice cream, too. But if anyone offered us any, we'd ask, "What's the catch?"

We agree, the present downtown needs a makeover. Despite a fine public library and a few courageous small businesses, it's becoming pockmarked with empty storefronts. Its chief source of vibrancy is incessant traffic. This dismal spectacle, welcome only to moviegoers and fast-food addicts, is the result of bad planning or, rather, of no planning at all. Something has to be done.

So which of our three City Council candidates can we trust with the job? There is no easy choice here. Incumbent Jesse Arreguin (who was not consulted about the drafting of Measure R) has shown himself to be an independent voice for our District; he is a full-time Council Member with a detailed knowledge of the planning process. Jim

Novosel, running for public office for the first time, is an award-winning architect well known for his commitment to preservation; he not only restored and remodeled but actually made his home in our District's Hunter House, after we landmarked it in 2000. Bernt Wahl, another political novice, also lives in an old house (1901, he told us) and favors preservation; he, like Jesse, resides just outside McGee-Spaulding, but both of their districts, like ours, seem likely to be impacted by downtown development.

All three candidates want the downtown to be greener; all cherish neighborhood values; and all, it should be added, are nice guys. The main question, it seems to us, is which of them has the firmest grasp of what a denser downtown -- 5,000 more residents is one much-touted figure-- could mean for the McGee-Spaulding District, and what Measure R, with its so-called Green Pathway, could do in the way of short-circuiting the preservation process. Because the answers to these questions are by no means obvious. The debate over Measure R is as confusing as a war fought between armies wearing the same uniforms -- a battle of green versus green.

How to make sense of this complicated brawl? Our advice would be, first, after reading the full text of Measure R (which comes last in the voter pamphlet), then the City Attorney's "impartial" analysis, to ask, If we vote in favor of Measure R, are we assumed to be voting in favor of this "analysis" too? Second, we should all visit the websites YesOnMeasureR.info (pro) and FactsAboutMeasureR.org (con). Taken together these two sites give a fair idea of the measure's tangled history and the passions it has aroused.

Finally, let's all remind ourselves that Measure R is not the main event; that will come later, when the City unveils its real plan. Who should represent us, the residents of a district that is already as green as the gardens we cultivate and the trees that line our streets, in the face of developers and organizations that are scarcely aware that we exist? This will be no small responsibility.