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Issue 377 • December 21 - December 27, 2006

## Moving On...It's part of the Plan

The Weekly's exclusive interview with departing Planning Director Mahdi Aluzri



cover story • page 9-10



# letters & email

## To the Editor:

Merry Christmas, all ye developers. Look under your tree. Four members of the City Council have just given you a gift. A gift of critical City assets.

At yesterday's City Council meeting, Councilmembers Delshad, Briskman, Brucker and Fenton in effect directed the Planning Commission to begin the process of changing the zoning of land at the critical intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica in order to enable three developers to build office buildings on land currently zoned for transportation and parking use. Despite ample evidence that this former railroad property might be critical in the future for widening Santa Monica Boulevard to ease unbearable traffic congestion, or for a turning lane onto Wilshire to reduce waiting 4 and 5 traffic signals, or for a future subway staging area, these four—playing Santa Claus with gifts of City assets—preliminarily told these three developers to go ahead and build their office buildings, which will remove any possibility of

using this property for City transportation purposes (for which it is currently zoned).

Relieving the current blighted state of this property was one reason cited. Of course, it is these three developers who have permitted this property to become blighted by simply not cleaning and landscaping it for years.

Adding to City revenues by building more needed office space was another reason cited. Of course, over the past few months, this same City Council has voted to convert Wilshire property currently zoned for offices to mixed use zoning for condos that will result in greatly reduced City revenue!

One of the councilmembers actually concluded that this giveaway would be Okay, if only the City received 4 or 5 feet from the developer for a lane on Santa Monica, despite a warning from the City Manager that this might not be legal. Since 4 or 5 feet is grossly insufficient for a traffic lane, I guess the other footage would come from the "underutilized" (not!) existing traffic lanes or possibly as a gift from the Hilton.

And these four concluded that there was no reason to wait for the new City General Plan. No. Hurry up. The gift must be given immediately, rather than waiting to see what future City needs will be. Somehow they concluded that it was unwise to have these developers (who purchased the property at a greatly reduced price because it was zoned for transportation!) wait to see whether or not this property would be useful to ease transportation at the City's most problematical intersection.

The Chanukah lamp has been lit by these

four Councilmembers and it draws developers like moths to its flame. I can't wait to see what other gifts these Councilmembers will be handing out. After all, it was only the fifth night of Chanukah and there are three more nights left.

*Ken Goldman  
Beverly Hills*

## "Jimmy Carter Bombs"

Rudy Cole makes Jimmy Carter's point that anyone who speaks about the conditions of the Palestinians is accused of "antipathy to Israel" or of being anti-semitic. This is the cheapest form of argumentation.

And Cole fails again by using Iranian politics to smear Carter. The United States was responsible for overthrowing the Iranian government in 1953, and this led not only to the Shah's return but to the reaction against it, which was the Iranian Revolution. Yet Cole suggests that the current "hard liners" in Iran should be mostly linked to former President Carter's inaction.

It is not Carter but Cole who has bombed with his own "one-sided" account. In fact Carter's book is a bestseller whose book-signing appearances attract large audiences due to the fact that many Americans think that their news' coverage of foreign policy is deficient.

*Richard Baker  
Beverly Hills*

*Cole responds in his column to prior letter from another reader who loves Carter.*

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## SNAPSHOT



## "16 YEARS OF SERVICE" NORTH REXFORD DRIVE

Deputy City Manager Tony Dahlerbruch received a proclamation and plaque at the Dec. 19 City Council meeting thanking him for more than 16 years of service to the City of Beverly Hills. Dahlerbruch leaves in January to take a position as City Manager of Rolling Hills. Pictured are Dahlerbruch, left, and Mayor Steve Webb.

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# city & schools

## City Rejects Request to Sponsor Outside Candidate Forums

The City will hold three candidate forums leading up to election. The proposed dates and venue were called into question at Tuesday's council meeting.

By Ryan Vaillancourt

With the City Council election just over three months away, the election ad-hoc committee presented its plan at Tuesday's council meeting to host three candidate forums, two in January and one in February.



Linda J. Briskman

Comprised of Councilmembers Linda Briskman and Barry Brucker, the committee denied a joint request from the Beverly Hills Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association that the city sponsor the groups' own candidate forum, scheduled to take place at Roxbury Park on January 10th.



Barry Brucker

Sponsoring outside forums is a fiscal burden, according to the committee, because of the added cost of sending a video production crew to an off site location. "The cost of doing an offsite video forum is approximately \$2900. In the chambers, we can do all three for \$1500," Briskman said. "In order for the city to sponsor the forums, that in essence is pay for them and absorb the cost, we decided that they needed to be here."

Brucker urged Chairman of the Municipal League Thomas White to "strongly reconsider" bringing the Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association forum to council chambers. Besides being expensive, Brucker said the city would not sponsor a forum that it would have no control over.

"Councilmember Briskman and I are going to be vigilant in insuring that integrity is upheld," Brucker said.

White said the Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association have committed to their date and venue and only sought city sponsorship. The groups' reason to have their forum offsite is to avoid the very control that the election committee seeks to maintain.

"I realize that the council is very much inclined to want to control as much as it

can," White said. "This is beyond the scope of the council's control."

The city sponsored forums are set for January 17, 31 and February 5 and each will likely be associated with and tailored by the Beverly Hills League of Women Voters, the Southwest Homeowners' Association and the Chamber of Commerce. The Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association were encouraged to host their joint meeting in council chambers as well, but they say the venue gives an advantage to incumbent candidates.

"We considered council chambers, but we felt we would give the candidates a more level playing field by having it outside of city hall in a residential area," said Thomas White, Chairman of the Municipal League.

The committee's decision not to sponsor offsite forums does not preclude groups from holding a forum. Any group can hold a forum, so long as they pay for the space and audio video production if they intend to rebroadcast the forum. The forum could then be broadcast on public access television, but unlike the city sponsored forums, they will not make it onto Channel 10. As a non-city sponsored event, according to City Manager Rod Wood, the Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association joint forum will not be permitted to broadcast on the city channel.

"It has been the consistent position of this city and this legal counsel and prior legal counsels that the channel restricted for government use must remain restricted for government use," Wood said.

Though the committee, as of Tuesday's meeting, had planned on holding the city sponsored forums on January 17, 31 and February 5, Briskman conceded somewhat to the Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association by offering the council chambers to the groups on January 10. The groups remain committed to their offsite venue however and they will not accept the committee's offer.

"The community loses the benefit of being able to see [the offsite forum] broadcast, so I don't think that you do the community any service," Briskman said, addressing White on Tuesday. "If it's a control issue, you're welcome to have it wherever you like, but I think you lose a great opportunity to have it rebroadcast."

According to North Homeowners' Association President Robert K. Tanenbaum, the opportunity to broadcast offsite forums was squandered by the city, not his group or the Municipal League.

"It's not the city's business to dictate to civic minded groups of residents where and when they should have their forums," Tanenbaum said. "The city should be putting this on the city channel, and sponsoring all of these forums that people are taking their precious time to put on."

With the Municipal League and North Homeowners' Association opting to maintain their date and venue, the city sponsored forums are expected to take place on the dates presented on Tuesday. But for the same reason the Municipal League and NHA scheduled their forum early in the campaign season, the fresher faces in this year's election say the city's February 5th forum may come too late.

Absentee ballots are mailed out to residents on February 5th and can be cast as soon as they're received. The ballots will take a day or two to reach homes, which leaves only a matter of days for the earliest of voters to review the last forum. This could be a disadvantage to lesser known and less experienced candidates who are likely to be best prepared for the final forum.

"The best run for a new candidate is the third forum," said first time city council candidate Shahram Melamed. "If that third forum is done in such a way that people will see it after some of them have mailed their absentees, we're not going to have the full benefit of it."

And new candidate Lizza Monet Morales said the forums, as well as the one minute video messages that will be available for viewing on the city's website, will be most important "for someone like me, that the community is just getting to know."

The one minute video messages, which had been proposed to start airing in early February, will be moved up at least a week, according to Brucker.

As for the Municipal League and the North Homeowners' Association?

"They're on their own," Brucker said.



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## 2007 BUSINESS TAX RENEWALS

### 2007 BUSINESS TAX RENEWALS

The City of Beverly Hills announced this week that 2007 Business Tax renewal forms are being mailed to all registered businesses in the city.

Business taxes are due, in full, by the January 31, 2007 deadline. Unpaid taxes become delinquent on February 1, 2007. Penalty and interest charges accrue on late registrations at a monthly rate of 10% and 1.5%, respectively.

Section 3-1-201 of the Beverly Hills Municipal Code requires all businesses located or operating in the city to register and pay their taxes each calendar year. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in an estimated tax liability and legal prosecution.

For information regarding business tax renewals/registrations, please contact the City's Administrative Services Department at 310.285.2427.

# briefs

## Judge Issues Detailed Ruling on Oil Well Case

After ruling in favor of the defendants' in the Beverly High Oil Well Case on November 22nd, Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Wendell Mortimer issued a detailed ruling on the same matter last Tuesday. Calling the plaintiffs' allegations that the oil well on the Beverly High campus caused cancer "speculative and scientifically unreliable," Mortimer echoed what has been the city and the district's main line of defense.

"Plaintiffs' experts do not have reliable evidence to establish that the plaintiff's exposure to any or all of the chemicals was a substantial factor in causing any of the diseases," the ruling states, "thus the defendants' motions were granted."

The City of Beverly Hills had issued 12 motions for summary judgment, denying the link between the oil wells and plaintiffs' illnesses.

Representatives from plaintiff counsels - West Lake Village firm Masry & Vittoe and Dallas, Texas based firm Baron and Budd - did not return calls from the Weekly. Beverly Hills City Attorney Larry Wiener said though that the plaintiffs "have been quoted" as stating an intent to appeal the ruling.

If there is an appeal, Wiener does not

## Beverly Hills Athletic Alumni Association helps school



Beverly Hills Athletic Alumni Association board member Katherine Caulfield, at right, with the newly refurbished Swim-Gym ticket booth. Pictured at left is the ticket booth pre-restoration.

expect it to succeed.

"I think [Judge Mortimer's decision] is a very thorough and thoughtful opinion," Wiener said. "If the plaintiffs choose to appeal it, I believe it will be upheld by the court of appeal."

## Fine Arts Theatre to Host First Annual Beverly Hills Hi-Def Film Festival

The Fine Arts Theatre in Beverly Hills will host the First Annual Beverly Hills Hi-Definition Film Festival. The 10-day event begins on December 22 with a special opening night gala celebration that will

include a cocktail party, a Q&A panel discussion on high-definition filmmaking, and the world premiere of Don Henry's feature horror film *Desert of Blood*. The festival culminates on December 31 with a special awards ceremony and a closing night New Years Eve party.

Attendees to the festival will enjoy an array of 94 feature films, shorts and documentaries including *Cuba: A Lifetime of Passion*, and *Becoming a Family: A Tsunami relief Documentary*.

Tickets to the opening night party are \$20 and include a 7:00 p.m. cocktail party

with food and drinks, a Q&A panel discussion on high definition filmmaking and screenings at 9:00 pm. The closing night party is \$10.

For more information, including a complete schedule and parking information, visit [www.BeverlyHillsHi-DefFilmFest.com](http://www.BeverlyHillsHi-DefFilmFest.com).

## Ticket Booth Gets Facelift

The Beverly Hills Athletic Alumni Association recently completed the refurbishing of the ticket booth outside the Swim Gym. Paid for in full by funds raised

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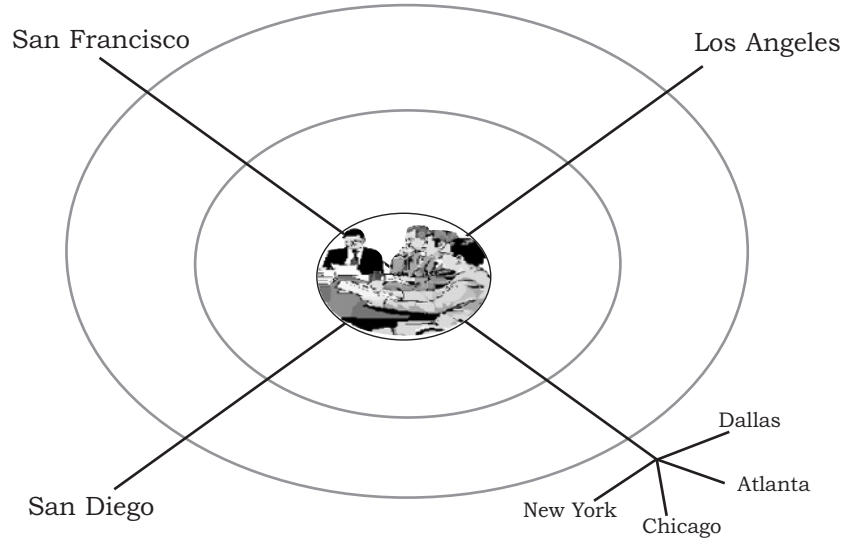
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**Holiday Concert**



Photo: Barry Weiss

The annual Beverly Hills High School Holiday Concert took place December 13th in the K. L. Peters Auditorium. The finale featured the 135 combined voices of the Madrigal Singers, Minnesingers and Concert Choir under the direction of Joel Pressman and accompanied by Brian Michael on the piano.

by the AAA, the ticket booth restoration is part of the group's larger effort to help update and beautify athletic facilities at Beverly High.

**Recycle Your Christmas Tree, Help Reduce Solid Waste**

In an effort to reduce solid waste, the Beverly Hills Public Works Department will recycle your Christmas tree and send them to a composting facility. Residents with green yard waste containers can cut their tree into small pieces and place them in the container. Other residents can place

the tree in the alley next to their trash can. The tree-stand, ornaments and lights must be removed from the tree.

In May 2005, the City of Beverly Hills Solid Waste Division introduced the two-cart system, which utilizes color-coded containers: black containers for all mixed waste, including recyclables, and green containers for landscape clippings and yard waste.

In curbside areas, the blue recycling carts will be replaced as they deteriorate, with black, 95-gallon, mixed-waste carts. In alley areas, blue and brown containers will

be replaced as they deteriorate with black, 300-gallon, mixed-waste carts. All blue and brown containers are collected with the black mixed-waste containers.

Beverly Hills' residents have made great strides in reducing the amount of waste that goes to landfills. On a monthly average, 10% more refuse has been recycled since the implementation of Phases 1, 2 and 3 of the two-cart system.

Phases 1, 2 and 3 of single-family residential alleys of the two-cart system are complete. Phase 1 covered single-family properties served by alleys, from Rexford Drive to Wetherly Drive, between Burton Way and Wilshire Boulevard. Phase 2 covered all of the single-family residential alleys, from Clark Drive to Linden Drive between Charleville Boulevard and Gregory Way. Phase 3 covered the single-family residential alleys in the 300 and 400 south blocks, between Spalding Drive and Robertson Boulevard.

**An Afternoon With Santa**

The Tower Beverly Hills Hotel is joining forces with the San Gabriel Children's Center and the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles to provide a festive afternoon for 85 homeless children. On Friday the 22nd, from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m., the kids will gather in the hotel's grand ballroom to enjoy a performance by up and coming rapper Shane Pollac and meet with Santa and Mrs. Claus. Snacks and drinks will add to the afternoon, and each child will receive a special present.

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# from the hills of beverly



## All Around The City

Heard on the streets of Beverly

By Rudy Cole

Not a bad year for Beverly Hills, no really. So, spreading some holiday cheer:

The holiday decorations are better than ever and for the first time in memory, the south lives again. Thanks to the cooperative efforts of the merchants on the street, the Chamber's Marketing Director **Anita Zusman Eddy** and Executive Director Dan Walsh, the street looks wonderful.

There is a history here of not doing for South Beverly what the Chamber and the city made possible for Wilshire Boulevard and Rodeo Drive. New Chamber leadership, more astute merchants and responsive city officials turned it around. Tip to retailers on other streets such as Robertson and Little Santa Monica: Organize. Patience might be necessary though. The South Beverly Drive march on city hall actually began in the 1960s when the late **Corinne Griffith**, a silent film star who created the Four Corners at Charleville and Beverly Drives, decided to fight city hall.

The retail sector is reporting good sales,

there is hardly any un-leased space in the Triangle and more entertainment groups are finding office space than leaving our city. Why are agents more desirable than docs? When was the last time you saw an orthopedist with a patient at Caffe Roma?

Wolf Puck's "Cut" at the Beverly Wilshire has enlivened the whole restaurant industry, the Peninsula's Belvedere is still drawing the food aficionados and the better dressed celebrities, and if **Fred Hayman** still goes there, Puck's other shop, Spago, must be good. On the other hand, it is the Belvedere that has a Hayman favorite on the menu.

\*\*\*

Not quite in time for the holidays, but a film maker I have long admired, **Paul Mazursky** has made a fascinating feature motion picture on a journey by some 25,000 Hasidic Jews to a Ukrainian village called Uman. Mazursky is secular and was able to make the film with considerable objectivity, but he obviously became enthralled by the

incredible spectacle.

The film, titled "Yippee: A Journey to Jewish Joy," tells of pogroms and also the wonder of the Chasidic movement and the incredible Rosh Hashanah celebration finale. There are visits to the non-Jewish sectors of the city, reactions from residents and, of course, good insights into Ukrainian life today.

This is a remarkable film, fun to watch and fast moving. You will enjoy no matter your religious inclinations or lack thereof.

Incidentally, I have always thought that Mazursky was able to bring out Woody Allen's best performance as an actor in *Scenes from the Mall*.

"Yippee" will debut at the 2007 Palm Springs Film Festival.

\*\*\*

Recent column on the Friends of Greystone neglected to credit the fine work of the organization's founding president, **Arnold Seidel**. Surprising neglect since I nominated him for the job when I was president of the Greystone Foundation. Arnold brought in many of the first Friend's board members, established the action plan and gave the fledgling group a sense of purpose.

\*\*\*

A city funded consulting firm study of

communications issues had some valid suggestions, but portions of their report are not realistic. As an example, the group's survey found that many residents "get information" about "the city" from the Los Angeles Times. Yes, if you are a celebrity drunk or involved in a headline making lawsuit, but for regular reporting on the council or schools, the Times is far too full of world and regional news to do any stories on the bread and butter stuff that constitutes "information about the city."

The study was worthwhile if only because it made the city consider how to improve information services. However, a cursory look at the study appears to dodge the most important need: A full time, professionally trained press officer. More on this later. This needs to go back for far more in depth look at how to achieve its goals and more input from the information sector.

\*\*\*

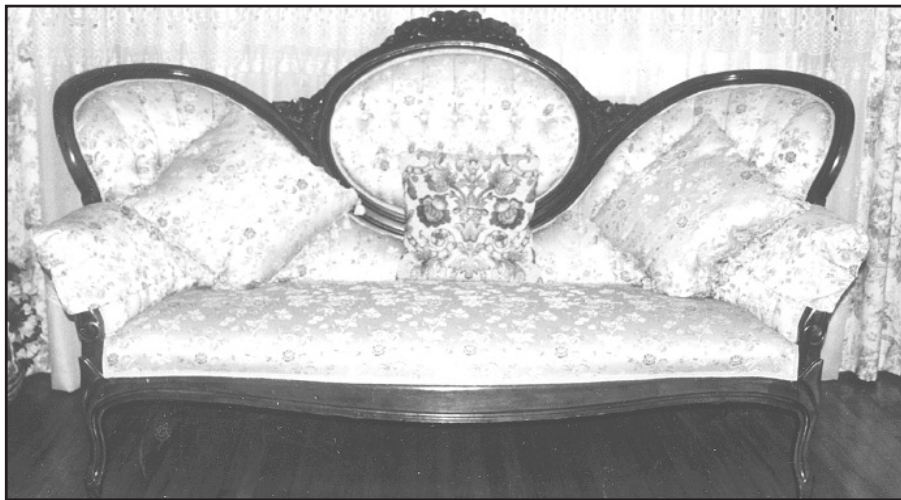
Some recent mail, which we finally received after weeks of not being able to access email following either the breakdown of the home computer or the "migration" from Adelpia to Time Warner. (Remember those ads of the rapid repainting of the Adelpia trucks?)

A Beverly High counselor took strong exceptions to my comments about **Jimmy Carter's** new book. He wrote: The only thing more inane than Jimmy Carter's comments about the Arab-Israeli issue is your own inane nonsense." (At least we agree that Carter's treatise was "inane.") He con-

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tinued with "He has done more for international peace as an ex-president than any former president in recent memory." Again, no argument. Jimmy has been a good "ex-president."

Now consider what this educator finds offensive: "To slam him for his opinions is unfair at best." That sort of goes to the heart of press freedom and even book review obligations, something I hope the counselor does not pass on to school students. Basically, Carter's book, in my judgment, was very counterproductive to achieving peace in the region and so biased toward the hard-liners in the Middle East as to disqualify the whole book as an objective look at a complicated continuing problem.

I found the school advisor's admission more revealing: "I have not read President Carter's book," he said. Incidentally, "semitic" is spelled with a capital "S"

An earlier letter, and we do receive some that agree with these offerings, challenged our views on a publication of the Beverly Hills North Homeowner's Association. Among other failings, the writer chastised me for not using the full name of the organization in each reference. I know, often I even refer to our country as "America" or the "United States" and not always as the "United States of America." So, no more NHOA or any shortening.

However, the reader did not even respond to my main issue with their newsletter and that was the list of "consultants" involved in major development projects, many of them former mayors. Included was **Vicki**

**Reynolds** as "consultant" for the "Cultural Center." The reader-letter writer made some good points, but this bit was a below the waist shot and one she should have her group correct.

She also did not include my point that homeowner groups, including the Beverly Hills North Homeowner's Association, do play an important role in land use issue decision making.

\*\*\*

Although we haven't done a historical, statistical analysis, it does seem to this writer that the city council has overruled this planning commission more often than any commission predecessors.

Two significant mixed use projects were denied by the commission and approved by the council, although one was sent back to the commission for further examination.

Without judging the merits of the disagreements or the abilities of the commission, many of whom have served with distinction and real concern for the real interests of the city, the time may have come to restudy the appointment process.

For many years, each councilmember had the ability to appoint a member of each city commission in turn. No member could have more than one. That system appeared, to some, as a variation of the "spoils" system and the feeling was that supporters and friends without regard to ability would be named.

In its place, a former city council adopted a very different method. Any person could

apply openly, a council and commission subcommittee would interview the candidates and make a single recommendation to the whole council. Almost always, those recommendations were followed.

To think this negates political influence is naive. But there is a more important consideration. A new councilmember may clearly reflect a new view on issues and win an election because he or she did not approve actions of the previous council. Shouldn't his or her point of view also be reflected on commissions? Isn't that democracy in action? But if this councilmember remains in the minority, no views they reflect will become part of commission actions.

In West Hollywood, a city very sensitive to participatory democracy, each councilmember appoints members of every city commission and the community knows how the appointment came about. Of course, residents are free to ask to be appointed by any member.

At the very least, it might be wise to make terms of appointments coincide with council terms. The only important argument against is to protect the political independence of all commissions.

*Rudy Cole served for eight years as a member and chair of the city's Recreation & Parks Commission. He was also President of the Greystone Foundation and served on three other city committees. Rudy can be reached at: Rudy@bhweekly.com.*

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## Norman Girls' Soccer Team Edges Torrance, Lawndale, Routs Narbonne

BHHS boys' soccer team defeats El Segundo, 3-0.

By Steven Herbert

The Beverly High girls' soccer team's first goal of the season was enough to get it its first victory of the season. Alex Pop put in a rebound of a shot by Amanda Brandeis in the 13th minute as the Normans ended a three-game losing streak with a 1-0 victory over Torrance in a nonleague game Dec. 4 at Nickoll Field.

Becca Gold made five saves for her first shutout of the season.

Beverly Hills had been outscored 11-0 in its first three games, including 2-0 in a Nov. 29 loss at Torrance in a South Bay/Westside Tournament game.

An apparent second goal in the second-half by Tess Callner was nullified when the referee awarded the Normans a penalty kick rather than allowing play to continue under the advantage rule, Beverly Hills coach Ryan Franks said.

The Normans missed the penalty kick.

### Manhattan Beach Mira Costa 3, Beverly Hills 0

The Normans allowed two goals in the first half and one in the second in a nonleague game at Nickoll Field Dec. 8.

Beverly Hills sophomore Susanna Davidov "played exceptionally well" in her assignment of marking the Mustangs' Long Beach State-bound midfielder Lindsay Bullock, while Pop also drew praise from Franks.

### South Holiday Tournament South Pasadena 3, Beverly Hills 0

After playing to a scoreless tie in the first half in what Franks called "probably our best half" of the season's first three games, the Normans allowed three goals in the second half of a first-round game Dec. 2.

Pop fired a shot that was narrowly wide on a breakaway in the first half, Franks said.

Sweeper Jocelyn Karlan, defender Ashley

Menzies and forward Emily Litvak drew praise from Franks.

### Beverly Hills 1, Lawndale 0

Litvak scored off Pop's assist with 12 minutes to play in the 70-minute game and Gina Hendron made three saves for her first shutout of the season in a consolation bracket game Dec. 9.

The Normans led in shots, 9-3.

Karlan played "another great game," Franks said.

### Beverly Hills 6, Harbor City Narbonne 0

Pop scored four goals and Litvak had two goals and an assist in a consolation bracket game Dec. 9.

Pop opened the scoring in the 10th minute off Litvak's assist. Rachel Kove scored an unassisted goal in the 20th minute, the assisted on Litvak second goal two minutes later.

Pop's second goal came in the 47th minute off Joey Sundry's assist. She scored again three minutes later off Brandeis' assist. Pop's final goal came with 10 minutes to play in the 70-minute game off Alexa Block's assist.

Hendron made two saves in the first half and Gold one in the second to combine on the shutout.

The Normans (3-4) led 13-4 in shots.

The tournament is played at South Torrance High School.

### What's Next?

The Normans are scheduled to play Indio Tuesday and Palm Desert Wednesday in Palm Desert Tournament games.

### Boys' Soccer South Bay/Westside Tournament Beverly Hills 3, El Segundo 0

Jack Tiryakan and Erik Munzer scored for the Normans in the first half and Alex Lichtenberg in the second in a pool play game Dec. 5 at Nickoll Field.

Tiryakan headed in a cross from Jake Weissberg in the fifth minute in what Beverly Hills coach Steven Rappaport called "a beautiful goal."

Munzer headed in a cross from Daniel Kohen in the 30th minute.

Alex Lichtenberg scored in the 70th minute when a throw-in by Kohen throw-in was mis-played by the Eagle goalkeeper and the ball went to Lichtenberg who scored.

David Roston made eight saves for his first shutout of the season in what Rappaport called a "nice game."

The Normans led 12-8 in shots. Weissberg played "really, real well" Lichtenberg "really controlled the midfield for us" and Munzer had "a solid game" with four shots on goal, Rappaport said.

Additional coverage is available on [www.bhweekly.com](http://www.bhweekly.com).

*Steven Herbert also covers sports for the Los Angeles Times and The Associated Press. He welcomes feedback and suggestions. He can be reached by e-mail at [StvHerbert@aol.com](mailto:StvHerbert@aol.com), by telephone at (310) 275-7943 or by fax at (310) 273-4519.*

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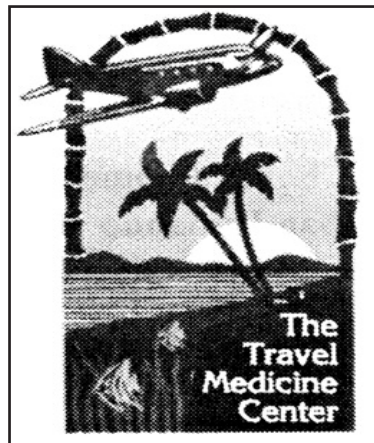
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# coverstory

## MOVING ON...IT'S PART OF THE PLAN

The Weekly's exclusive interview with departing Planning Director Mahdi Aluzri

After 17 years with the City of Beverly Hills, Planning and Community Development Director Mahdi Aluzri is leaving the city for a new position as Deputy City Manager in Rancho Cucamonga in San Bernardino County. In an exclusive exit interview with the Weekly, Aluzri reflects on the changes he has overseen and foreshadows the most critical challenges that his successors will face.

**Looking back at 17 years in Beverly Hills, what were some of the key moments and key projects that you were a part of?**

The first project that I was heavily involved in was [the] Barneys of New York [project on Wilshire] when it was going through the entitlement process. The challenges that we underwent, getting the process through the public hearing review and then through the construction, was quite a difficult project because of its proximity to the nearby residential neighborhood. We worked very closely with the developer to make sure that the impact was minimized. That was quite a



Mayor Stephen P. Webb (left) presented a proclamation to Director of Community Development Mahdi Aluzri at the Dec. 19 City Council meeting. After 17 years with the City of Beverly Hills, Aluzri is departing next month to take a position as Deputy City Manager of Rancho Cucamonga.

challenge and I'm very glad that it turned out to be an excellent example of a successful

project. Another, of course, very difficult project that took a lot of effort and a lot of involvement on my part and my staff's part is the Montage. We're very happy it turned out the way that it did because staff all along believed that it was an excellent project for the city and we're quite happy and satisfied that the community also felt that way.

**Tell us about the challenges you faced with the Montage?**

Throughout the entire process, throughout the public hearings, the preparation of the environmental documents, the questions that came up during the review and after the council made the decision to approve the project, there were a lot of questions that came out from the community. We had to do two informational sessions that we put together to invite the community to, to field the questions that the community members had and trying to answer them to the fullest extent possible. So there was a lot of effort

*cover story cont. on page 11*



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*cover story cont. from page 9*

and challenges in making sure that we put all the facts out there and making sure that folks fully understand the issues associated with the project, considering all the other rumors and allegations that were floating in the community.

**Not specific to the Montage, what overall have been the most difficult challenges?**

The most difficult challenges that I've faced as I became the director were [with] the project that went through the conversion of that commercial building on Stanley and Wilshire. Interestingly enough, staff at that time was considering expanding the adaptive reuse concept all the way through to the east side of Wilshire. It was interesting looking back and trying to understand where the neighborhood [residents] were coming from in terms of their concerns. Looking back I realize that staff was way too ambitious in trying to expand the concept rather than focusing it on an individual project to see how that project is going to work before that concept is introduced on a wider scale. I think the input from the community was very valuable. I had a couple of informational sessions that were put in place to gather information from the neighboring property owners to see where staff did the right thing and where it did not and I think it was very valuable to me to understand where the community was coming from with their concerns about substantial change. It was quite an informative period that allowed us to look at the overall issue and have a better understanding of where the neighborhood was coming from.

**Speaking of community input, there has been a lot talk in the community lately about Beverly Hills having too much development. Where is Beverly Hills going with development?**

There is no question, over the last couple of years we have seen an unprecedented increase in requests for development in this city. Of course we have seen the biggest two projects that have come before the city in a long long time and those are the Hilton and Robinsons' may project. This is not unique to Beverly Hills. I think the entire Westside, given the fact that it's a desirable place for employment and to live and economy that is thriving and growing, Beverly Hills clearly is going to experience the same kind of tendencies as the rest of the Westside does. Folks want to build and have jobs and work and live, so that's not unexpected. I think Beverly Hills though has taken a real smart look at development. We have not approved projects willy-nilly. We have considered all projects very carefully. The Planning Commission and the City Council look very carefully at projects that are really in the city's interests and benefit the city and those are the projects that have been approved. The general plan process of course is going to be quite important because it will dictate the development pattern over the next 10 to 15 years for the city. I think that overall, Beverly Hills looks at development in a very

smart way. This council is very well-informed and they understand the implications of growth and what it means to the city, so I think they're going to consider from a smart point of view and look at smart growth rather than growth for the sake of growth. The bottom line is I think we all need to recognize that like most cities in California, if Beverly Hills wants to keep the level of services that the community expects, growth will probably be to a certain extent necessary.

**"Smart growth" is a term that's been thrown around lately. What are some examples of smart growth?**

The Montage project is the perfect example of a smart growth project. Hotels have low impact compared to other commercial type developments, but at the same time provide substantial amounts of revenue to the city. That allows us to continue to run the level of services that we offer at this point. Also, hotels become focus points for commerce and business. Clearly they are more dependent on the swings in the community than on external influences but overall in terms of its effects on the community, it's probably the best kind of use that you can have. The city though, if you look at the kind of hotel development that we have encouraged, have highly focused on the five star kind of hotels and amenities that we offer and that's clearly the type of hotel service that this community has become synonymous with, something definitely we want to encourage because the demand is there and we're a lot better off having those visitors than just go nearby in Century City, where if there were any traffic impact, we would still get it anyway but at the same time we won't get the benefit of the development.

**Speaking of traffic, how do you expect the planning department to address traffic and transportation issues?**

I think that is the biggest challenge that Beverly Hills is going to face, given the fact that we are in the middle, that is a problem that we are going to continue to face until some form of mass transit system is developed. Beverly Hills will always be challenged with traffic, because as one consultant at one time told us, "Beverly hills, you guys are in the way." And we are literally in the way of folks that need to go from the central area to the Westside and back. I think people have difficulty recognizing how big of an employment center the Westside is. There is a substantial number of jobs, yet at the same time the housing market has not grown at the same level, so a lot of people are going to commute. They have to pass by Beverly Hills so the growth is going to continue. Until we find a feasible and desirable mass transit system, we're going to continue to have these problems. Folks in neighborhoods want to somehow close out their streets and there are some advantages to that but there are a lot of disadvantages to that because it also delays public services and safety personnel from going where they need to go.

**If dealing with traffic is going to be the**

**biggest challenge, would you say that a mass transit system, specifically a subway, will be the top priority?**

Probably, planning for that system is definitely one of the top things that this city and community are going to have to consider. Folks are concerned with development and associated traffic. They think that a commercial on Wilshire Boulevard is going to impact and generate so much traffic that its going to exasperate the situation that we have. If you look at the big picture though, given the type of commercial development that we have allowed in this city in terms of its size and scale, it's really minimal compared to the overall growth that's happening around us. That's the point - even if we don't grow, even if we stop commercial development, traffic around us is still going to grow. We have very little control over that because other communities around us, specifically LA, will continue to grow. They will continue to add employment centers around us which means that it will increase traffic in the city.

**How does the Planning Department and the City work with surrounding cities to deal with these issues?**

The council works very closely. In fact, a couple of years ago we formed the Westside Council of Government, which is an organization that has representation from councilmembers from Westside cities, West Hollywood, Culver City, Santa Monica and representation from LA as well, and they work very close on regional issues. I think we all recognize that you can't work in isolation. Beverly Hills must work with surrounding cities in order for us to address issues of mutual interest because the most difficult things we face are regional, not local, whether it's housing or transportation, they're all regional issues. I think this council does a great job in working with neighboring cities' councils and making sure that we address issues of common interest.

**Why did you decide that it was time for you to leave?**

My career goal is to be a city manager and in order for me to move in that direction I felt that it's important for me to be working in that capacity, or at least close to that capacity. The opportunity came up in Rancho Cucamonga where they have a deputy city manager position that came available and it will be in charge of all community activities, including planning, building and safety, public works and engineering. That gives me the opportunity to learn more and gain experiences in the city manager's office, while at the same time using my skills. My skills have been focused on community development so I have that baseline experience that I can use while it's giving me the chance and level of experience that I need to obtain in order to move in that direction.

**When you leave office on January 5th, the acting Community Development Director will be City Planner Vince Bertoni. What advice will you give to Vince?**

Be involved and include the community

input in the decision making process. That is something that we have done a good job at in this city. In the years that I have been here and throughout the different planning department leaders, they've all been quite involved in listening to the community and making sure that their issues are addressed. We don't necessarily agree with everything they bring up, but we listen to them and take into account what they say in the decision making process. One thing I've been hearing a lot of concern about is that the inclusive approach to the general plan has not really been as open to the public. I think the problem we have faced is that our messages and our external communications are sometimes lacking. We don't sometimes let people know what we are doing. It's good to remind folks that the public involvement process in the general plan was the first step that we embarked on. In the Fall of 2001, which was quite some time ago - and that's the problem, people forget after a while - we had over 300 applicants that participated in the process. The council selected 150 folks that were appointed on seven committees that worked for 24 months with this staff debating issues, considering certain aspects of the city and certain land-use development and then we came up with a set of recommendations that were submitted to the council. Those were used as the baseline for the development of what we're working on at this point. Unfortunately, in order for us to develop the baseline we needed to do the technical work and that took over a year and a half to complete. So the process was on hiatus between the public participation and then the technical aspect. People forget that we had a huge participation process, but it took a kind of side-track to do the technical aspect.

**What is the best way for the community to be involved in the planning process?**

Show up for the public workshops and the Town Hall meetings. Quite often we send out massive amounts of invitations and mailings and we have little participation. I understand people have their own lives and their own things that they need to do, but there needs to be more participation. The message we get is that we're not hearing but we are reaching out to the extent that's possible; we're including messages on the website, we're sending out mailers to every household in the city but the response level has not been as we hoped it would be. There were a lot more responses at the time when the committees were working on it and I think because the committees themselves generated that level of interest because each committee member was talking to their neighbors and family members and that's why there was a lot more response. Now that the job has turned over to staff we're having a lot more difficulty reaching out. We're hoping that those folks that participated in the initial process would get back the level of enthusiasm that they had to begin with. I know it's been a long time but we hope that we can reach out to them and we have been trying to reach out to them to bring them back into the process.

*Interview by Ryan Vaillancourt*

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