

Hollywood Fault Pits Builders and City Hall Against the Community

Community groups from WeHo to East Hollywood join forces to stop big developments and towers

Gracie Zheng, LA Weekly, 1-16-14

Jim Yeager, spokesman for the House of Blues Sunset Strip, reacting to the Hollywood Earthquake Fault Zone map released last week, quipped to *L.A. Weekly*: "You have to remember, for 20 years the House of Blues has been all about that — rock and roll."

And Joe Furlow, general manager for the owners of the Magic Castle on Franklin Avenue, joked in an email about the map — which shows the magicians club, just like House of Blues, to be nearly on top of the fault: "In [the past] 50 years, two bottles of liquor and three glasses have fallen off the shelf."

But most are not laughing.

Professional photographer Andrew MacPherson, a Hollywood Hills resident, had previously jumped into activism to fight a 16-story complex proposed at the eastern end of the Sunset Strip, which he says "will tower over Chateau Marmont and wipe out its legendary views."

Now, the preliminary state map shows that the proposed 8150 Sunset tower is closer to the fault than opponents were told, and may be just feet away.

"Is L.A. prepared to put profit over human lives?" MacPherson asks. "It is a terrible, terrible position [for politicians] to take: 'We'll be out of office by the time the earthquake hits.'"

Call it Seismic Strip. A major eruption struck thousands of years ago, cracking the earth's surface and lifting parts of the Hollywood Hills. The ruptures left skinny ribbons of flat land, which denizens of L.A. turned into Sunset Boulevard, Yucca Street, Franklin Avenue and Los Feliz Boulevard.

On Jan. 8, before a throng of media, State Geologist John Parrish unveiled a preliminary state map showing that the 9-mile-long Hollywood Fault, which is capable of opening the earth and toppling tall buildings, underlies the heart of Hollywood and is the virtual spine of Sunset Boulevard.

In the heart of Hollywood, where the fault splinters into multiple "traces," the regulatory map will carry the force of law when it is finalized in July. And it has cast into doubt the Hollywood Community Plan, Mayor Eric Garcetti's dream to remake Hollywood with skyscrapers and large complexes.

Activist John Walsh calls the Community Plan "a wish list for real estate speculators, but the state map confirms the death of the Hollywood Community Plan. It's a slam-dunk. This is a holocaust for real estate speculators in Hollywood."

One nationally watched project, the Millennium twin skyscrapers, turns out to be directly atop the fault and illegal to build. And one \$200 million project is nearly complete — Blvd6200 — yet sits precariously atop the fault. Neither project, backed by Garcetti, underwent sufficient geological studies.

The mayor was not available for an interview, but he has publicly called his Hollywood density plan a "template" for the rest of L.A.

Garcetti and other city leaders have yet to publicly explain how the City Council, Planning Commission and Department of Building and Safety all approved the Millennium with an insufficient geological study and allowed construction of Blvd6200 with no seismic study at all. Media reports have repeatedly noted that L.A. officials were not required by law to conduct such studies until the state released its official, regulatory map of the fault.

But West Hollywood City Councilman John Duran points out that his city, while allowing tall buildings to be constructed along Sunset, has required their developers to conduct geological studies such as boring and trenching to find the precise location of the Hollywood Fault.

Duran says, "The failure in Los Angeles — I don't know how it happened, but everyone at the decision level in municipal government here does know the fault is there. ... I mean, the Hollywood Hills? Do you know the reason they are there? Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! They were created by the fault, not by some glacial retreat."

Commercial real estate experts say that, with the map confirming the fault is directly adjacent to, and beneath, chunks of Hollywood that were recently "upzoned" by the city, L.A. politicians are under pressure from angry land-holders to deliver permits.

On Jan. 8, the day the state released the fault map, City Attorney Mike Feuer fired off an argument to a judge in a bid to grandfather in proposed towers and complexes not yet approved by the city, but whose developers have filed preliminary documents used for "plan-check review." Feuer's spokesman said nobody in the office was available to comment.

Feuer's filing was in response to Judge Allan J. Goodman's ruling in December that the Hollywood Community Plan is "fatally flawed" because L.A. officials used false population data to argue that Hollywood is growing — and that density there is inevitable. Goodman told L.A. leaders to go back to the drawing board.

In fact, U.S. Census data shows Hollywood is suffering a significant, ongoing population drop. (See the *Weekly's* "Hollywood's Urban Cleansing.")

Luke Zamperini, a spokesman for the L.A. Department of Building and Safety, says the city does not have an easily accessible record of the projects proposed near the fault, or of the number of geological studies it has ordered developers to perform in the past decade. Zamperini suggested that the *Weekly* submit an official California Public Records Act request to get the answer.

In not having a ready handle on its own practices, L.A. appears to be years behind West Hollywood and the Los Angeles Unified School District.

West Hollywood immediately supplied the details of the 28 site-specific fault studies it ordered between 1997 and 2009, five of which found active fault traces at the project site. West Hollywood planning manager John Keho says all five developers were ordered to move their projects at least 50 feet to comply with the Alquist-Priolo Act, a state law meant to reduce catastrophic death during a quake.

In LAUSD, where the new state map shows Atwater Avenue Elementary School to be immediately next to, or on top of, the Hollywood Fault, supervising structural engineer Doc Nghiem says its 1,000 schools are assigned precise coordinates. Then, each time a fault is suspected, the district plugs in its school coordinates "and it pops out — showing whether ... a quake-study area [exists] under or next to the school."

LAUSD takes dramatic action if structures are too close to or atop a fault: It spent millions demolishing buildings at Burbank Middle School and shuttering the gym at University High School, then erecting new buildings further away. LAUSD will follow "the same process" to ensure the children at Atwater Avenue Elementary School are safe, Nghiem says.

Community groups along the breadth of the Hollywood Fault have begun exchanging notes and working as a team to fight developments in the quake zone area, vowing to stop L.A. from pursuing large buildings near the fault.

"The city and developers are too strong. We're not an even match. We work together to our advantage," explains Hollywood Hills resident George Abrahams, a plaintiff in a pending lawsuit filed against City Hall and Millennium Towers to overturn Millennium's approval.

One group Abrahams belongs to, Stop the Millennium Hollywood Project, now is working closely with Save Sunset Blvd. — residents and business owners near the West Hollywood/L.A. border who are fighting the 8150 Sunset project proposed for the corner of Crescent Heights and Sunset Boulevard.

The 16-story and nine-story towers would comprise the tallest structure between Vine Street and Beverly Hills, according to Save Sunset Blvd. spokesman Andrew MacPherson, and even Chateau Marmont is quietly involved in fighting the dual towers by letting Save Sunset Blvd. hold a fundraiser at the posh hotel.

The existing site of 8150 Sunset is a low-rise strip mall near the mouth of Laurel Canyon. But the new landowners, John Irwin and Tyler Siegel, formerly with the Related Cos., were successfully sued by the owners of El Pollo Loco, Subway, a foot massage and a dry cleaner, after allegedly trying to starve out the small-business people by installing illegal parking arms and then charging customers \$12 per hour to park and shop.

MacPherson says Irwin and Siegel "act like gangsters." El Pollo Loco franchisee Gershon Wajntraub says, "They wanted us to fail and kick us out so they can demolish the building."

Irwin and Siegel could not be reached. Their spokesman says geological studies by their firm, Townscape Partners, didn't find the fault. But neighbors tell the *Weekly* that Irwin and Siegel's team did soil studies and digging on Havenhurst Drive. The state map, however, shows the fault in a different area — directly beneath Sunset and possibly touching the northwest corner of 8150 Sunset.

Meanwhile, in the heart of Hollywood, density opponent Doug Haines says a more practical issue faces the nearly completed Blvd6200 luxury complex: "Who is going to insure it?"