

# May Company Comes to Mission Valley

*San Diego by nature offers the finest spot in the United States for tourists. And tourism is our largest non-government business. [Mission] Valley is part of the Planning Department's future plan for the tourist, and we are considering throwing it down the drain . . . should a decision be made before considering these consequences, we may as well tattoo on the Council walls right here, "Thus died planning in San Diego."*

--Arthur Jessop, downtown merchant, June 26, 1958.

Controversial decisions in city planning are not new in San Diego. But perhaps no action has ever been more consequential than a City Council vote in June 1958 to rezone 90 acres of farmland along Interstate 8. The decision green lighted construction of the Mission Valley Shopping Center, and launched a development boom in the Valley which as never stopped.

The idyllic open river valley of farms and dairies had long been considered a future Mecca for homes, recreation, and tourism. But development projects slowly encroached: the Town and Country Hotel and Mission Valley Inn in 1953; the Padres' Westgate Park in 1958. When the city's Planning Department frowned on the new projects the City Council overrode their objections and rezoned the properties.

On October 9, 1957, department store magnate David May II announced an ambitious project in a joint meeting of the San Diego City Council and the Planning Commission. His company would build San Diego's first regional shopping center on land it had acquired running parallel to Highway 80 (now Interstate 8). A May Co. store would anchor the new mall as the largest department store south of Los Angeles.

The project promised booming tax revenues and excited San Diego politicians and many businessmen. It alarmed others. James Britton, architecture critic for *San Diego Magazine*, headlined a column with "Don't Kiss the Valley Goodbye." Britton accused city officials of "lying down like a carpet for the May Company to enter town on." "Full-flood commercialism" will follow rezoning, he warned, "as surely as neon night follows billboard day."

With the public's good will in mind, May Co. commissioned an opinion survey. Pollsters showed 1,500 San Diegans a summary of the project describing the "large May Company department store and more than fifty other stores and shops [with] parking spaces for more than 5,000 cars." Attractive sketches of the shopping mall were also shown before the pollsters asked, simply: "Do you favor or oppose construction of the Mission Valley Shopping Center?" The respondents answered "yes" by a ratio of 20-1.

Less certain were members of the city Planning Department. The department's proposed master plan for Mission Valley encouraged tourist hotels and single-family residences. Planning Director Harry Haelsig believed the shopping center project would not be compatible with the master plan.

Downtown business interests were also hesitant. Worried that the new center “would make the downtown area a secondary shopping section,” department store owner Guilford Whitney argued that the proposed shopping center “would live off what now supports our stores.”

But other downtown businessmen feared that a united front against May Co. would backfire with the public. Mission Valley would pose a “competitive challenge” to downtown, admitted George A. Scott, president of the Walker Scott store at 5th and Broadway. Scott vowed to meet the challenge by improving and expanding his own operations, which included a new department store at the planned College Grove shopping center.

On June 9, 1958, the city Planning Commission voted 3-2 to support the May Co. request for rezoning the 90 acres in Mission Valley. The vote came over the opposition of the city’s own Planning Department staff, which warned, “once Mission Valley is paved with commercial enterprises it will be lost forever to the community as an open area within the city.”

An historic City Council hearing followed on June 26. A packed house in the council chambers listened as the shopping center proponents pointed to the economic benefits coming to San Diego, including a shopping center payroll of nearly nine million. Downtown would not be hurt, they argued, because additional trade would come from a wide area and benefit all of San Diego. Unconvinced, Guilford Whitney warned that downtown property values would plummet and Arthur Jessop decried the death of planning in San Diego.

May Co. proponents would carry the day. After 3 ½ hours of public testimony the seven council members discussed the issue for ten minutes and then voted unanimously to approve the rezoning.

Groundbreaking for the Mission Valley Shopping Center came two weeks later. Actual construction began on December 1, followed by fifteen months of construction. The \$25 million “city of shops” opened on February 20, 1961. Covering 80 acres, the new mall featured 60 specialty stores, flanked by May Co. and Montgomery Ward.

As many had predicted, the success of the new shopping center came at the expense of downtown San Diego. As the retail business core of the city moved to Mission Valley, San Diego’s historic business district went into decline. Renewal would come in 1985, with the opening of a new shopping Mecca: Horton Plaza.

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Opening day, Feb. 20, 1961. *Courtesy of Dan Soderberg*