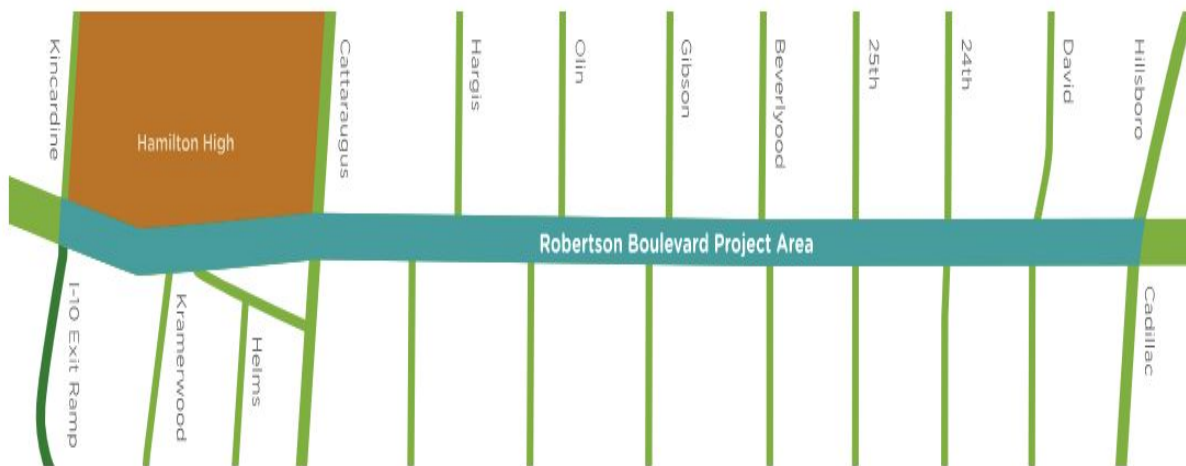


## South Robertson Study Proposal

This proposal seeks approval for a study of South Robertson Boulevard in Los Angeles to re-think the business district's utility and appeal to residents, businesses and visitors in this part of the city. What kinds of uses and features could create a more attractive, pedestrian-oriented and resident-supported business district? What is the feasibility of adding affordable housing to the eight-block-long commercial strip north of Hamilton High School, on both the east and west sides of the boulevard? Are there architecture firms that can work with unconventionally sized properties in novel ways to create mixed use projects that are aesthetically pleasing, environmentally sound, and practical? What will be the impacts of new construction on and near South Robertson on mobility in the area? Can the issues highlighted on South Robertson be resolved in ways that might provide a 'kit of parts' toolbox to enable more robust uses along major thoroughfares in Los Angeles?

### The South Robertson Great Streets Project Area

The project area extends between Cadillac/Hillsboro to the north and Kincardine to the south.

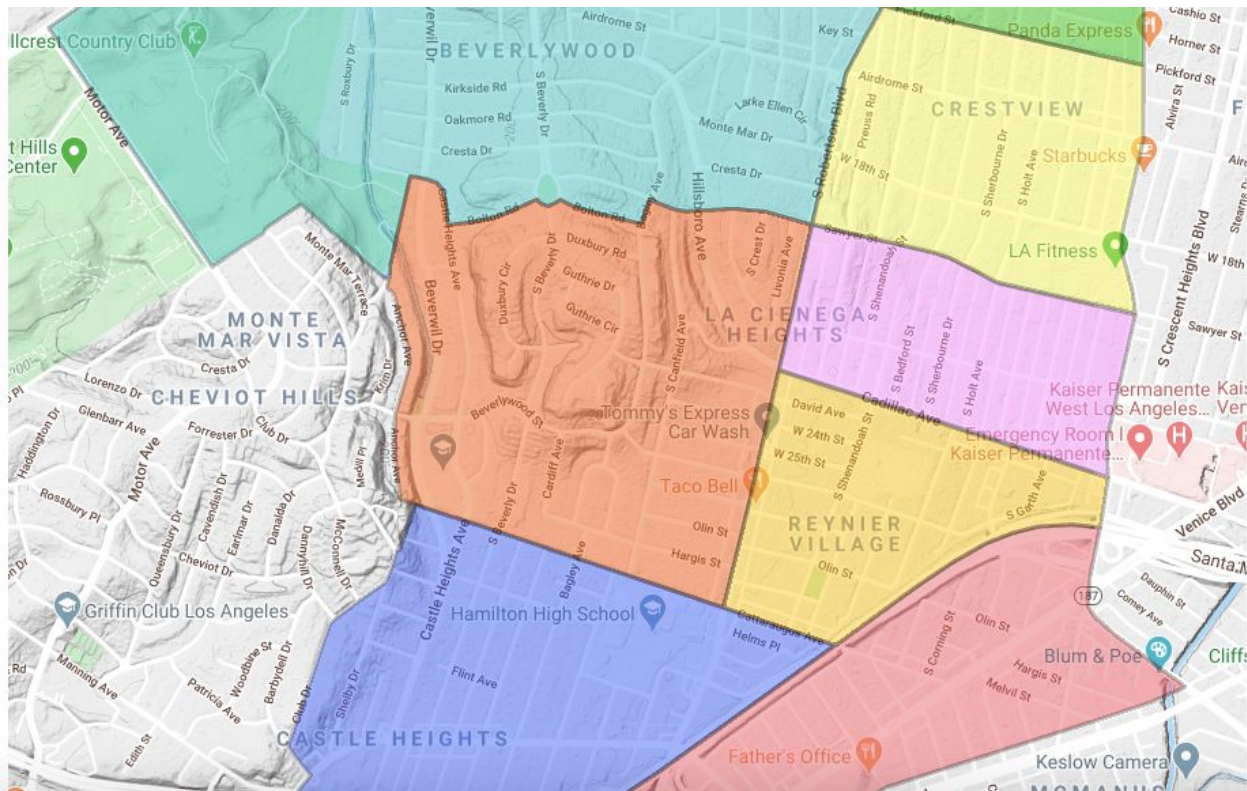


#### I. Street and Location

South Robertson Blvd, which begins in Culver City, runs northward under the Santa Monica Freeway, and passes through portions of the cities of Los Angeles, Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. Century City lies just west of the Beverly Hills section of Robertson. The business district that is the subject of this proposal begins about 1/2 mile north of the Culver City Expo Line Station, and 1/4 mile north of the Santa Monica/10 Freeway. This small commercial district extends along South Robertson for about eight blocks, from Hamilton High School/Cattaraugus Ave. north to Hillsboro/Cadillac. The single- and two-story buildings housing the businesses date to the late 1940's, and many appear tired and run-down. Absentee property owners have in many cases neglected to maintain the buildings they own.

The average size lot in the SORO business district is about 4500 sq. feet, with a building footprint of about 2400 sq. feet. The lots are narrow, with 2-4 parking spaces behind the buildings. An alley separates the rear of the commercial buildings from the single family homes behind them; there is one 16-space parking lot across the alley from a building on the south end of the commercial strip on the west side of the street. The predominant zoning for the business district is C4. Metered street parking along the boulevard in this area is underutilized.

Robertson Blvd. is the boundary between LA City Council District 5 on the west side, and CD 10 on the east. The South Robertson (SoRo or SORO) neighborhoods run from Venice Boulevard on the south to just north of Olympic Boulevard. The map below shows most of the 10 'zones' that make up the South Robertson Neighborhoods Council. (This map may not reflect neighborhood boundaries; for example, the Beverlywood Homes Association boundaries are different than the Beverlywood 'zone' on the map, although the Reynier Village Neighborhood Association boundaries are consistent with the 'zone' on the map.)



### A. SORONC Demographics

White, 73.5%; Latinos, 7.3%; Asians, 5.7%; Black, 5.6%; other, 7.9%.

### B. Crime

West of SoRo's business district: low rate of violent crimes, moderate rate of property crimes;

East of SoRo's business district: moderate rates of violent and property crimes

<http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/beverlywood/crime/>

<http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/beverlywood/crime/>

## **II. Opportunities**

### **A. Expo Line impact on small business activity**

The advent of the Expo Line in Culver City raised hopes that new small businesses might be attracted to lower rents on South Robertson, and in fact several new businesses have arrived. The mix on the boulevard is slowly becoming more attractive to neighbors on both sides of the street. More new shops (4) have opened on the west side of Robertson than on the east (1). New businesses include a neighborhood coffee spot and cafe that serves as an increasingly popular gathering place for residents; an ice cream and sweets shop that just opened; a tiny, award-winning bean-to-bar chocolate-making enterprise; and an as-yet undisclosed shop, the sign for which spells out COOL. The Ivy Restaurant's bakery opened a few years ago and includes a cafe that has become a draw for the high school students (pizza by the slice, gelato) and young and older residents and visitors.

The variety of existing businesses on both sides of the street is an asset and hopefully rents will remain stable enough for them to stay there. These businesses do not attract a lot of foot traffic. They include but are not limited to: a lighting store, an architect's office, an insurance agency, a real estate office, several upholsterers, a tattoo shop, a small, run-down hardware store, a heating and air conditioning repair shop, a deli, a cooking school, a vintage swim school, a Taco Bell, an empanada shop, a cleaners, an acting school, mini market, donut store, an eccentric local artist's gallery, a junk shop, a men's suit shop, a smog check location, and two small car sales lots.

Architecturally, the buildings are undistinguished, but in one section of the business district, shown below, some lively efforts to spruce up the storefronts are underway.



## **B. South Robertson Neighborhoods Council**

This active Neighborhood Council has been an asset for residents of South Robertson for over 10 years. An annual street fair, summer activities, inclusion of students, businesses, homeowners and renters on the council, engagement with local government officials and departments as well as law enforcement, ensures that decisions are made with a diversity of opinion.

## **C. Other neighborhood organizations**

<http://www.soronc.org/about/neighborhoods>

## **D. Great Streets grant**

In 2017, the SORO Neighborhoods Council was awarded a Great Streets grant that allowed it to utilize the services of a consultant to conduct outreach to residents to determine what amenities they would like to see on South Robertson in the business district. As a result of that robust months-long effort, several improvements are currently underway in a three-block section of the business district, including installation of bump-outs, additional lighting and crosswalks. The three sets of bump-outs (one of poured concrete, two outlined by bollards) were placed at street corners where there were red curbs, meaning that no parking spaces were lost when the bump-outs were installed.

SORONC will need to seek additional funding sources for other desired improvements such as seating, plantings, trees, facade or awning standardization, etc.

## **E. Affordable housing and South Robertson's underutilized potential**

Housing and business activities attract pedestrians, and pedestrians activate sidewalks. Automobiles do not generate a sense of place - people do. Mayor Garcetti unveiled the city's Great Streets program in 2013, and SORONC gained the support of the CD 5 and 10 Councilmembers on each side of South Robertson to apply for a \$50,000 grant. That sum funded a consultant to conduct outreach and gather input from the SORO communities on what amenities residents would like to see on the boulevard. A few years later, some of that vision is coming to life. More needs to be done. A logical extension of street improvements and transportation planning would be to add affordable housing above the businesses on South Robertson.

Looking for precedents around the city of LA, a recent effort to re-activate a portion of Central Avenue in the heart of the former 'West Coast Harlem' jazz scene was catalyzed by Thomas Safran & Associates' 2014 renovation of the historic Dunbar Hotel and development of Dunbar Village. The hotel was transformed into a 41-unit senior housing community, and the addition of 42 new units of Section 8 family housing created a multi-generational community that includes green space, trees, a children's play area, a gym, laundry facilities, parking, and a community facility with an active programming schedule. The slow process of enlivening a boulevard was given a lift with the opening of this project.

[http://www.tsahousing.com/affordable\\_housing.php?property=1598&name=Dunbar\\_Village](http://www.tsahousing.com/affordable_housing.php?property=1598&name=Dunbar_Village)  
<https://www.findinglostangeles.com/all-content/2019/1/29/hotel-dunbar-and-club-alabam>

In the absence of a distinctive or historically significant building on South Robertson, it would be up to a creative architecture firm to elevate housing in the business district. One could imagine a two- or three-story set of cubes like those of Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67 in Montreal, punctuated by small green spaces or terraces, creating a focal point for this part of the thoroughfare - and a less monolithic 'wall' appearance for residents of the single family homes and apartments looking toward South Robertson. Safdie's project, built as a part of Montreal's 1967 Expo, or World's Fair, was intended to be "a building which gives the qualities of a house to each unit - Habitat would be all about gardens, contact with nature, streets instead of corridors" (each cube has access to a roof garden built atop an adjacent cube).

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/may/13/habitat-67-montreal-expo-moshe-safdie-history-cities-50-buildings-day-35?page=with%3Aimg-2>

While the Montreal Habitat project was never intended to be affordable, helpful planning tools like eliminating parking requirements in favor of public transportation, and building a smaller scale project of prefab housing using today's improved building materials, with careful attention to financing could make affordable apartments on South Robertson on a Safdie-like model a reality.

The experience of the residents of Eagle Rock who reached consensus on street improvements to support a walkable main street benefitting local businesses and residents may also be instructive. Their 'Take Back the Boulevard' initiative in the heart of that community's business district focused on Colorado Blvd. This a 6-lane thoroughfare, and the local Chamber of Commerce, The Eagle Rock Association and others "wanted to transform the local portion into a much slower main street that also serves the interests of pedestrians, bicyclists and others. In 2013, a lengthy public process began that resulted in a \$12 million Colorado Blvd. Improvement Plan; the

improvement project broke ground in November 2019.”

<http://tera90041.org/2019/07/>

<https://www.lamayor.org/taking-back-streets-people>

### **III. Challenges**

#### **A. 79 property owners**

Data from the LA County Assessors Office reveals that on just five blocks of the South Robertson business district (both sides of the street), there are 79 separate property owners. One is in Northern California. Another is in Glendale. Others are LLCs. Some owners are shrouded within several corporate entities. The likelihood of a small housing developer investing the time, energy and resources to bundle enough parcels together to make a multi-family or transitional or bridge housing project financially feasible is debatable; one can imagine the developer successfully making deals with two or three owners, with a fourth holding out because he or she knows that his or her property is necessary for the developer to proceed. A larger development company with affordable housing expertise might have more staying power to finalize acquisition, financing, permitting and development of buildings for a project. Of note: buildings on this portion of South Robertson seldom come up for sale - but recently, two buildings were on the market. One was taken off the market and spruced up with paint and some plumbing and HVAC improvements, the other may have sold. A third property was for sale earlier this year, but the buildings on the property now appear to be for lease.

#### **B. Beverlywood Homes Association**

On the west side of South Robertson, a neighborhood of 1,354 single family homes was built in the 1940's when Jewish families could not buy homes in adjacent Cheviot Hills. In something of a paradox, it was one of the first neighborhoods in the country to institute CC&Rs. In recent years, CD 5 Councilmember Koretz succumbed to local pressure and exempted the homes in the HOA from the anti-mansionization ordinance enacted by the City of Los Angeles. As a result, many of the smaller scale single-story homes have been bought, razed and replaced by lot-line to lot-line, two-story, 5-bedroom McMansions for large families. The principal concern of the HOA is cut-through traffic, which has increased with traffic-frustrated motorists' use of Waze on the residential streets between Motor Ave. and South Robertson Blvd. The prospect of multi-unit housing on South Robertson might raise alarm bells for residents for whom traffic is the main concern, especially if parking requirements are eased. A concern about impacts on residents' property values, crime and safety should apartments appear on South Robertson would likely be unfounded, since businesses and foot traffic, even at night, tends to reduce crime, while housing above businesses would tend to increase pedestrians on the street. Still, residents' fears would be a factor to consider in seeking support for housing along the boulevard. It would be instructive to look at the experience of other neighborhoods on the borders of which multi-family projects have been built along main thoroughfares: Mid-City/Wilshire Blvd., Culver City/Washington Blvd., Los Angeles/Overland Ave. and Motor

Ave., and others.

### **C. Caltrans I-10/Robertson/National Traffic Circulation Improvement Project**

Caltrans has conducted an environmental impact review of several options for relocation of the Robertson Blvd. I-10 on- and off-ramps. The results of this study should be out in Fall 2020. There is not yet funding to build the project option that will be selected by Caltrans. “The complicated road configuration creates traffic circulation problems and poor driving conditions for motorists and adversely affects transit users, pedestrians, and people on bikes.”

<https://ladot.lacity.org/sites/g/files/wph266/f/Press%20Release%20LADOT%2C%20Culver%20City%2C%20Caltrans%20to%20Host%20I-10%20Circulation%20Improvement%20Update%20Meeting.pdf>

Robertson Boulevard’s status as the access route to and from the 10 Freeway has posed obvious problems for SORONC’s efforts to create a more pedestrian- and neighborhood-friendly environment on South Robertson. More than 45,000 cars use the four Robertson Blvd./I-10 freeway on/offramps in the area, and more than 80,000 people live within a one-mile radius of the project area. Without coordination with the SORONC, the outcome of the Caltrans study could be antithetical to the goal of SORONC residents, which is to create a pleasant, walkable business district that safely and conveniently connects with the Culver City Expo Line station to the southeast. It is worth noting that the westbound offramp from the 10 Freeway ends across the street from Hamilton High School.

### **D. Gentrification**

The businesses that currently exist on South Robertson have been able to stay, or move in more recently, because rents are relatively low compared to Culver City to the south, or Beverly Hills to the north. Finding ways to both retain these businesses, and encourage more service-oriented small businesses to locate here, would be a worthwhile endeavor. In addition, an effort should be made to attract residents from both higher and lower income levels on both sides of the boulevard to patronize new and older businesses. Some of this already happens with food service-related businesses because of the high school students, construction crews, maintenance workers, homeowners and renters who find coffee, pizza slices, snacks and meals along South Robertson.

## **IV. Transportation impacts of new development**

Rush hour at Venice Blvd., Robertson Blvd and National Blvd. just south of the SORO business district is already gridlocked, and new development in Culver City hasn’t even been completed yet. Projects in the area include the \$350 million, 500,000 sq.ft. Lowe Real Estate Group development at the Expo Line station (148-room hotel, 200 apartments, offices, 3,000 underground parking spaces)

<https://www.bisnow.com/los-angeles/news/mixed-use/a-look-at-culver-citys-ivy-station-94400>);

a new Amazon campus; an Apple campus, and more).

LADOT lists the following ways to access Hamilton High School, at the south end of the SORO business district:

Metro Local 17 and 33, Metro Rapid 733, Santa Monica Big Blue Bus 17, Culver City Bus 1 and 7, Metro Expo Line 806, and Commuter Expo 437

Metro Bus 17 runs from downtown LA to Culver City via Third Street and Robertson, and has two stops on South Robertson - one at Monte Mar and one at Hamilton High School. It runs every 30 mins during peak hours during the week, and every hour in non-peak hours.

Big Blue Bus Route 7 from Santa Monica has two stops in Beverlywood on Monte Mar and Airdrome.

An overlay map of all of the bus routes, and an assessment of frequency and accessibility of the buses, would be helpful to determine if mobility via bus could be more useful for the population of the SORO area. A route that runs with frequency up Robertson from south to north could be very helpful given the draw of several locations near the boulevard: a Trader Joe's and Santa Monica Co-op store; cinema, shopping and dining attractions; the Helms Design Center; various tech offices; the Expo Line station (all at the south end of Robertson in Culver City); synagogues serving a large Orthodox Jewish population; a large Sikh temple; medical office buildings, Cedars Sinai Medical Center; Beverly Hills and WeHo shopping and dining. The most critical aspects of public transportation for people who consider using it are frequency, on-time performance, cost, cleanliness and safety. The use of other modes of transportation, including bikes, scooters and taxi or ride hailing services, has probably been studied by LA County Metro, ridesharing companies and bus companies to consider their utility for residents of, and visitors to, SORO.

## **Summary**

Stark challenges, including finding funding resources for new development, must be overcome with creativity and vision in order to meet Los Angeles' dire need for affordable housing, as well as to address climate change with new mobility pathways, and reduce the role of cars in urban living settings. All of these challenges - as well as opportunities - converge in South Robertson. A class study of this business district could provide a roadmap for ways to sensitively navigate development of housing and street improvements on this and other underutilized major transportation corridors.