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Diane Takvorian's at the grownups' table now

Environmental-justice leader is finally being heard

By David Taube



Bob Filner and Diane Takvorian at the Environmental Health Coalition's annual awards ceremony in 2012

- Photo courtesy of Environmental Health Coalition

In June 2012, environmentalist Nicole Capretz met with aides to then-San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders to talk about the Quail Brush power plant proposed for near Mission Trails Regional Park. Sanders' chief of staff, Julie Dubick, and senior policy advisor Aimee Faucett listened to her concerns about how the plant should be a sustainable-energy project that doesn't burn fossil fuels.

Later that month, news broke about another possible project, the North City Power Plant in University City. The city had been working for more than 16 months with one bidder, and city staff had compiled a [206-page report](#) on the project. Capretz says Sanders' aides didn't even bother to mention it during their meeting.

Since then, the City Council has stopped pursuing both projects: The Quail Brush plant was voted down last fall, and the city's Rules and Economic Development Committee removed the North City plant item from its agenda after public outcry. Now that Mayor Bob Filner is in office, Capretz says, she feels more comfortable that policy developments won't happen behind the scenes. Instead of having to fight to be heard, City Hall for the first time is reaching out to her for input.

Capretz says the mayoral turnover represents a dramatic shift, where environmental groups are now having their voices heard, including her own organization, the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), a nonprofit that has fought to get lead paint out of homes and diesel trucks out of residential neighborhoods, among other things.

"I've lived through the civil-rights movement and the women's movement," EHC Executive Director and cofounder Diane Takvorian tells *CityBeat*. "We know that people who know each other—which tended to be old white men—that they were the ones that got to talk to each other.

"So, everyone has always fought for access," she says. "But it doesn't work if you just shift that framework to another set of people. I mean... I wouldn't want, I don't think this mayor would want, to say, 'Now there's a new inside crowd.'"

For Takvorian, it's not that there's increased access for her in particular—she's a good friend of Filner, having known him for decades from his time as a member of both the San Diego City Council and U.S. Congress; rather, the difference is that the environmental and public-health issues she cares so much about genuinely resonate with him.

"Having access to legislators who don't share your core values isn't very valuable," she says. "The 20 minutes to half an hour that you get on their calendar, I don't think is really the right indicator. I don't think that's the criteria you use to say, 'Is someone open to these ideas or not?' ... I've been in lots of meetings with lots of legislators who made the time, but that didn't really matter because none of what we had to say seemed to resonate at all."

Nearly three years ago, the City Council created the Environmental and Economic Sustainability Task Force, a group charged with creating the Climate Mitigation and Adaptation Plan, now known as the Climate Action Plan. The plan seeks ways the city could minimize greenhouse-gas emissions, such as reducing cars on the road and diverting trash from landfills. Members of the task force and the environmental community wanted to use the plan to propose numerous environmentally friendly measures with timetables and stringent goals, but Capretz says target numbers were drastically reduced or removed by the city for the final draft. She says the plan just wasn't a priority for Sanders.

But when stakeholders talked with Filner about the plan's shortcomings, Filner decided to redo it, Takvorian says.

"He could have said, 'Well, I guess we're so far down the line now that the climate plan's got to be what it is because now we've done environmental review,'" she says. "But he's saying, 'No, let's get it right.'"

While the EHC often disagreed politically with Sanders, the nonprofit had one particular conflict with him that's nestled in the heart of the organization. EHC, founded in 1980 as the Coalition Against Cancer, has strong roots in Barrio Logan, a neighborhood where houses and apartments are located near shipyards along San Diego Bay and mixed in with metal-plating shops and companies that generate hazardous waste.

Barrio Logan's community plan, which sets the rules for development in the neighborhood, hasn't been updated since 1978, in part because of insufficient city funds. In 2007, EHC convinced what was then known as the Centre City Development Corp. to invest up to \$1.5 million to update the community plan. A stakeholder group came up with a draft.

Then politics happened, Takvorian says: Sanders assembled business leaders, and they drafted another proposal. "And this was totally behind the scenes, outside the public process," she said, "and it was meant to undermine the entire process."

The two alternatives have been working their way toward City Council for approval. Takvorian says Filner's staff has helped push forth the community-plan update that the original group created. The City Council could vote on a plan in late June.

"There was never an administration in the last 20 years that was willing to advance the community plan," Takvorian said. "Even in the Maureen O'Connor era"—from 1986 to 1992—"that was not something we were able to advance."

Ever since gold-rusher and businessman Alonzo Horton set up New Town along San Diego's harbor in the 19th century, the city has been focused on improvements within 20 blocks of the waterfront, San Diego Mesa College political-science professor Carl Luna says. But Filner's approach seems to shift away from a Downtown mentality. Takvorian says the mayor's recently released budget proposal is one of the first times a mayor has highlighted community plans.

When Filner developed a formal vision for the Port of San Diego, which was presented to the city earlier this year, he wanted input before finalizing it, Takvorian said. So EHC offered strategies about how to make the port free of diesel pollution. Takvorian says that kind of planning was groundbreaking, and even though her organization has monitored the port for more than 20 years, no city official has taken that kind of initiative.

EHC, which has an office in Tijuana, takes a binational approach when addressing certain problems, like pollution of the Rio Alamar, a Tijuana streambed. Takvorian says the mayor has taken a similar approach when he opened up a city office across the border. That binational connection was furthered, she said, when Filner raised the possibility of a joint San Diego / Tijuana bid to host the summer Olympics. Although U.S. Olympic Committee officials told The Associated Press that rules prevent such a proposal, Takvorian suggests there's still hope, and the idea represents a positive change.

"Whether it works or not... it doesn't matter," she says. "The fact that we are a bi-national organization, we just see the blocks all the time that don't allow our countries, our cities, to really work together."

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