

How a Nine-Block Area in Barrio Logan Became a Vast Gulf

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A view of the NASSCO shipyards from Barrio Logan.

The city's shipbuilding industry is not ready to let the Barrio Logan community plan – approved by the City Council last month – go.

Industry leaders and Councilman Kevin Faulconer, who's running for mayor, announced Thursday a signature-gathering campaign aimed at overturning the community's new blueprint for future growth.

They even had a novelty oversized petition.

But in making their case for overturning the plan, the leaders gathered might have overplayed their hand.

Specifically, their claim that failing to overturn the plan would jeopardize the city's entire maritime industry is a bit shaky.

“And unfortunately, the plan recently adopted by the Council majority threatens 46,000 of these workers,” Faulconer said Thursday.

His campaign later sent out a press release making the same basic claim.

“Kevin Faulconer joined dozens of local shipbuilders today to announce he is continuing to work toward an agreement that protects 46,000 workers employed at San Diego's waterfront,” it said.

But remember, that 46,000 number refers to the size of entire region's maritime industry, according to a 2012 industry-supported study.

And the industry includes shipbuilding, but it

also includes things like fishing, shipping and construction companies that focus on maritime projects.

The number of actual jobs at the Port of San Diego, according to the report, is 14,950.

But even focusing on the number of jobs at the Port obscures the actual point of disagreement between the shipbuilding industry and those who support the new Barrio Logan plan, which came together in part because of a last-minute compromise by Councilman David Alvarez, also a mayoral candidate.

The new plan doesn't touch the actual Port. In fact, the Port's not even within the city's jurisdiction.

All the industrial area south of Harbor Drive – home to three shipbuilding companies – will remain untouched in the plan.

The real disagreement is over a small area just north of Harbor Drive that is currently home to a number of companies that support the shipbuilders, like vendors and cleaners.

City planners want to turn those blocks into an area for commercial properties so they can serve as a buffer between the shipyard and the residential community to the north.

Industry representatives wanted the area open to those maritime-serving businesses, and they wanted houses and other sensitive properties banned from the area.

The new plan met the second request, banning new homes and other sensitive uses from the area.

But maritime-serving companies can't open in those blocks without getting a conditional-use permit. Those permits could easily be held up by the community.

That's the disagreement: Can shipyard-supporting companies open without a conditional use permit in a nine-block area north of Harbor Drive?

That's it. Everything else has been settled.

That nine-block area isn't home to 46,000 jobs. It's not even home to the 14,000 jobs that take place at the Port. It is, however, home to a handful of small businesses that work hand-in-hand with the shipyard (and those existing companies will be able to stay open, but their expansion options will be limited).

So what's all this talk of 46,000 jobs if we're really talking about whether new businesses can open in a few block area?

Industry leaders say the creep of the residential community toward the Port threatens its long-term existence. Even though the creep is coming from commercial businesses, they're meant to serve a residential community, not heavy industry.

The creep is the first step toward eliminating the shipyards altogether, they say.

“Over time we believe this process will threaten the shipyard’s very existence in San Diego,” said Kevin Graney, vice president of operations for General Dynamics NASSCO.

That could very well be true. Or at least, there’s no way for anyone to say it’s false.

But it’s worth remembering the industry says it’s totally on board with a plan that would do everything the current plan does, except it would let new maritime vendors open in the contested nine-block area.

That means the industry doesn’t think it faces an existential threat from encroachment if it can draw the line outside those nine blocks. But if it fails to do so, everything’s in doubt.

Nine blocks.

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