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San Diego residents fight for community plan

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By Marty Graham

Environmental justice advocates throughout California are watching the battle between the San Diego neighborhood of Barrio Logan, where residents have lower incomes and higher asthma rates, and the shipbuilding industry on the barrio's western edge.

That's because the newly approved Barrio Logan Community Plan — crafted to create a buffer between heavy industry and the residents of the neighborhood — is being dragged to a citywide ballot challenge after a signature gathering campaign paid for by industry organizations.

"Big, out-of-state corporations flaunted their money and lies to undo a plan that would benefit a long-neglected part of San Diego, including the workers of the maritime industry," said Diane Takvorian, the executive director of the barrio-based Environmental Health Coalition. "Everyone has the right to live in a neighborhood free of toxic pollution, and we will fight those that want to silence the community's voice."

Barrio Logan, the home of Chicano Park, has about 4,300 residents in a 1,000-acre area. It is a largely poor and Hispanic neighborhood. Its western edge, on San Diego Bay just south of the 32nd Street Naval Base and downtown San Diego, has long been home to the commercial shipping, ship building and ship repair industry – one of the three largest sites on the West Coast.

The waterfront west of Harbor Drive – about 450 acres of Barrio Logan – is governed by the San Diego Unified Port District and is not subject to the Barrio Logan community plan, so none of the port tenants, including the big ship repair companies and the U.S. Navy are directly affected by the plan. But east across Harbor Drive, the neighborhood grew up with a school next to an industrial plant and diesel trucks that move goods to and from the shipyards driving through on a route between the maritime zone and Interstate 5.

"We don't really have zoning. We have industrial uses sited next to homes and the school,"

said Georgette Gomez, a local resident and coalition employee. "It's not the safest or healthiest for the community. Our asthma hospitalization rates are nearly three times higher than the county average."

Starting in 2008, Barrio Logan began updating the community plan (last done in 1978), assembling a group of 33 stakeholders, including business owners, the shipyards, local residents and environmental justice advocates. The group met 50 times in five years, and reached compromises that laid the basis for separating homes from the more toxic businesses in the area.

The planning group created an area nine blocks long and two to four blocks wide as a buffer zone between the residential neighborhood and the working waterfront. Because the residents couldn't reach an agreement with the heavy industry representatives on how to designate the area, they structured the transition zone so that each new business would have to obtain a conditional use permit from the city. Existing businesses do not have to seek permits.

"The idea is to create a healthy and usable space that the residents could live with and where the waterfront would thrive," Gomez said. "We increased the heavy industry footprint – it is away from the residential area.

"The fact that we created more industrial land just minutes away from the maritime use got lost in the arguing, but that's what we did," Gomez said. "All we're asking is that they don't put these heavy industries next to where people live, where kids go to school, next to playgrounds."

In October, the San Diego City Council, including neighborhood Councilman David Alvarez, voted 5-4 to approve the plan. Alvarez grew up in Barrio Logan and has many times said he believes his asthma is a result of the high levels of airborne toxics in the neighborhood.

The plan barely passed the council amid opposition from the shipyards, who claim their suppliers will have a hard time keeping their business locations or finding new ones.

Port of San Diego Ship Repair Association President Derry Pence said that his group is concerned that businesses that want to open in that buffer zone would have to go through the city permit process.

"The way the plan is currently structured, it makes no provision for a maritime zone," Pence said. "We agree that Barrio Logan needs to be rezoned and we're not adverse to that. We wanted a buffer zone between heavy industry and residents too."

"But we need to be able to keep our support contractors and suppliers in that area," he said, conceding that all the existing ones will be grandfathered into the new community plan.

After their arguments failed to win a majority vote at the city council, shipyard industries launched a citywide petition drive to collect signatures to take the neighborhood plan to the ballot – first hoping to get the city council to rescind the community plan and send it back for revision.

The 52,000 signatures they gathered – largely outside of Barrio Logan and with paid signature gatherers – have been turned over to the San Diego City Clerk for verification, Pence said.

“The city council can rescind their vote or face a ballot referendum in June,” Pence said. “We believe if it goes to the voters, it will be set aside.”

To community planners, the process looks like bullying from outsiders. Community members have collected videos of signature gatherers telling people that the plan will shut down the maritime industry and threaten the U.S. Navy’s readiness.

“The out-of-state corporations couldn’t get voters to sign the petition by telling the truth, so they resorted to outright lies,” Takvorian said.

In December, the Environmental Health Coalition filed a lawsuit challenging the ballot initiative, saying that the paid signature gatherers actively lied about what the plan calls for and what effects it would have.

While the suit is headed to trial, the community plan is headed for the June citywide election where supporters fear it will lose.

“Imagine what would happen if Barrio Logan voters decided they should have a say in the La Jolla Community Plan,” Borak said. “It strips the purpose out of working on a community plan when people who don’t live or work there can set it aside – if someone raises enough money to hire signature gatherers to lie to people.”

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