

Fact Check: Clearing the Air in Barrio Logan

BY: ANDREW KEATTS | MAY 19, 2014 | 51 COMMENTS



Photo by Sam Hodgson

A view of the NASSCO shipyards from Barrio Logan.

Statement: “(Propositions B&C) increases pollution and health hazards in Barrio Logan,” a campaign mailer against Barrio Logan’s new community plan said.

Determination: A Stretch



Analysis: Many San Diego voters last week received a campaign mailer urging them to vote against Propositions B and C, two citywide measures that, if approved, would uphold the Barrio Logan community plan passed by the City Council last year.

City planners wrote the plan to end a problem that's plagued Barrio Logan for decades: Residents and industrial businesses can be next-door neighbors.

In other neighborhoods, homes and industrial businesses are largely separated to protect residents' health and to safeguard the businesses' long-term prospects. It's a rare case where planning jargon — “incompatible uses” — describes the issue clearly.

Barrio Logan's new community plan seeks to separate the incompatible uses.

It also creates a “buffer zone” between shipyards — home to heavy industrial activity —and an area in the northern part of the community that planners wanted to limit to residential use only. Most of the political battles before the plan was approved boiled down to how big the buffer zone should be, and what sort of businesses could operate there.

The plan was meant to make Barrio Logan a more environmentally friendly place, with cleaner air for its residents, who tend to visit the emergency room with asthma incidents more than almost anywhere else in California.

That's why many residents were surprised to see a mailer claiming the new plan actually *increased* pollution in the community. We received a number of requests to look into the claim.

As evidence, the mailer cites the “Air Quality and Health Risk Technical Analyses” conducted as part of the state-mandated environmental impact report for the new plan.

The idea was to get a sense of how either of the plans on the table at the time might affect air quality.

One plan was favored by residents and certain local nonprofits, the other was championed by shipbuilders and affiliated businesses. The plan that ultimately passed the City Council included some compromises, but it closely resembled the resident-backed plan that was studied for the report.

The analysis offers a pretty direct conclusion: “certain criteria pollutant emissions of concern under the proposed (new community plans) are greater than those anticipated to occur under the adopted community plan.”

That is: There will be more bad air pollutants in Barrio Logan under either new plan compared with the status quo.

Cancer risk in the area would go up also, the analysis says.

The reason, according to the study: Both plans called for new development in Barrio Logan.

In addition to separating homes and industrial businesses, the plan *also* dramatically increases the number of residential homes that can be built in Barrio Logan.

Those pollution increases the analysis found come from all the new development the plan would allow.

With new homes come things like increased use of natural gas and electricity. And even though the study shows total car trips will actually go down under the new plan, there’s still an overall increase in total pollution.

On top of adding to gas and electricity consumption, many of the new homes would inevitably be near a freeway. That’s because Barrio Logan is a narrow community, so you’re never far from a freeway or the shipyards.

“Both alternatives represent a significant adverse impact when compared to existing conditions,” the analysis says.

“The point that we made, and the only point we are trying to make, is that the plan adopted by the city increases cancer rates and health risks in Barrio Logan,” said Chris Wahl, a lobbyist for the campaign to overturn Barrio Logan’s new plan. “The (consultant’s analyses) clearly states that it’s because they’re adding more housing by the freeway.”

No one believes putting housing near freeways is ideal, but building more homes makes the community plan consistent with the city’s general plan, which says population growth should be accommodated with dense clusters of homes near jobs centers – like the shipyards.

But there's a big piece missing from the environmental analysis, said Georgette Gomez, associate director of the Environmental Health Coalition, an environmental justice nonprofit that's one of the most vocal backers of the plan: It focused entirely on the impact of all that new development. Nowhere does it analyze the piece of the plan that was pushed through specifically to improve residents' health: separating housing and industrial businesses.

"The plan is adding residential, and that's the comparison," she said. "But the fact that we are, by not having more industrial where people are living, that didn't get analyzed."

She's saying the plan's emphasis on separating incompatible uses doesn't really figure into the analysis' conclusion on what effect it has on pollution.

"The whole purpose is to not have industrial where people are living," Gomez said. "This takes away that threat."

It's true that the air quality study doesn't address the separation of incompatible uses. Wahl acknowledged that reality, but said it doesn't change anything.

"The question isn't the separation of uses, but of whether it's a good idea to put homes near a highway," he said. "Doesn't the Barrio Logan community and city residents deserve to know all of the information?"

Wahl is right when he says city voters deserve to know the study concludes that increasing residential development means increased pollution and harmful health effects in Barrio Logan, due to its proximity to the freeway.

But he's wrong when he says separating uses isn't part of the question. In fact, up until now, it's been the whole ballgame.

Since the analysis didn't assess what effect separating incompatible uses would have on pollution and air quality for local residents, the study alone isn't enough to answer the question.

Our definition of "A Stretch" is that there's an element of truth, but critical context is missing that could significantly alter the impression it leaves.

The mailer accurately represents the study's conclusion on air quality and health effects.

But without knowing that the study didn't address the effect of separating residential and industrial uses, a reader would come away with an incomplete impression of what the plan would do. That's critical context.

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