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Wednesday, May 21, 2014

Industry digs deep to defeat Barrio Logan plan

War rages over Propositions B and C

By Joshua Emerson Smith



A screen shot from a No on B and C ad

"Proposition B and C, it's just a bad plan," says former San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders in a recent television commercial attacking a city-approved zoning-plan update for Barrio Logan, which goes before voters on June 3. Ominous piano music plays over an image of shipyards with red text reading, "Wrong Place for Housing."

"Putting people right next to an industrialized facility is really a bad plan," retired Navy Rear Admiral Len Hering proclaims, followed by retired Navy Rear Admiral Jose Luis Betancourt, who chimes in, "You're losing not only the shipyard; you're losing the jobs that come with it."

While the shipbuilding and repair industry has long expressed concern about residential encroachment, after watching this ad, it might be strange to learn the community-plan update would actually prevent housing from being built next to the shipyard—something that's unlikely but possible under the current zoning. Also, despite what Hering and Betancourt say in the ad, the Navy has remained neutral on the plan, expressing no apprehension.

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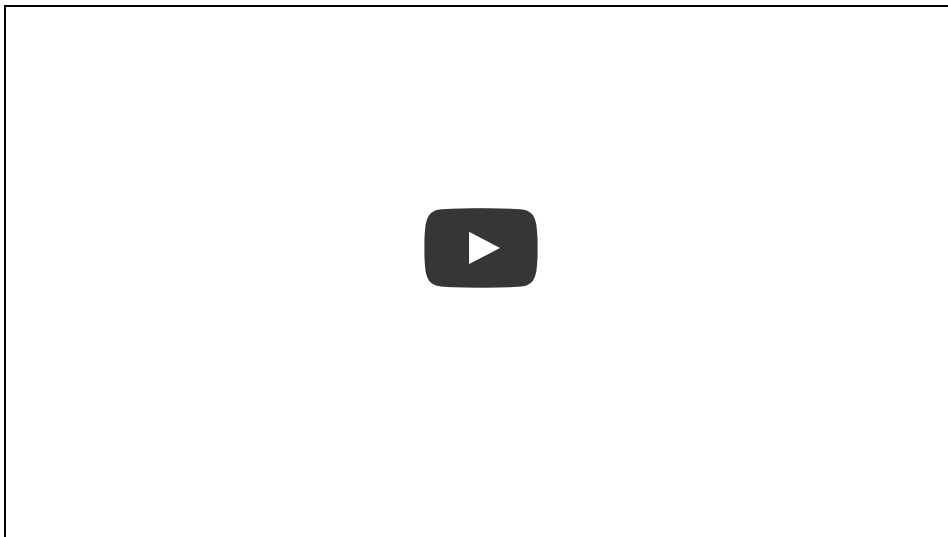
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This attack ad is just the latest in a series of moves paid for by the shipyard industry’s well-financed campaign, which last winter funded a referendum signature drive marked by widespread allegations of deceit. “Yes” votes on Propositions B and C would affirm the updated plan. If the “no” votes win, the city will have to redo the plan update, which was negotiated over five years, costing several million dollars. Or officials could wait a year and reapprove the plan update.

Behind the attack ad is “a group of high-powered, well-moneyed individuals who are used to always getting their way, and they want to get their way at all costs,” said City Councilmember David Alvarez, whose District 8 includes Barrio Logan. “There is no other issue. It’s just the fact that they want to show that they’ve got enough money to do what they want.”

While the shipyard industry has bankrolled the campaign to defeat the community-plan update, grassroots supporters of Props. B and C would have no funding if not for a few high-profile donors, including the campaigns of state Assemblymembers Toni Atkins and Lorena Gonzalez and City Council President Todd Gloria.

To pay signature gatherers and finance commercials and mailers, the independent-expenditure committee opposing the plan update—No on B and C—raised more than \$1.1 million, according to campaign-finance disclosures. Supporters of the plan update— Yes on B and C—have collected just \$56,500.

“Every community in San Diego should be alarmed at the setback to the fundamental planning process that is playing out in Barrio Logan if the all-or-nothing approach of a wealthy special interest can so easily derail a sensible plan that was years in the making,” Gloria said in an email.

“Ballot-box planning isn’t new to San Diego,” said City Councilmember Mark Kersey, an opponent of the plan update. “It’s unclear if and what type of precedent this could set because each community and community-plan update is different.”

Mayor Kevin Faulconer and the shipyard industry initially claimed the updated plan threatened to eliminate about 46,000 jobs, even though city planners estimated that it would likely *create* about 4,800 jobs.

While continuing to claim the updated plan threatens the viability of the shipping industry, opponents of the plan backed down from that hyperbolic jobs number after significant scrutiny.

“This bad plan represents the first step toward the closure of San Diego’s shipyards, threatening the loss of more than 7,000 good paying jobs,” said Chris Wahl, spokesperson for No on B and C, in an email. “Adding 2,000 more homes, including six-story high-rises, in Barrio Logan will limit the future expansion of the industrial base that supports the shipyards and the U.S. Navy.”

Georgette Gomez, associate director of the Environmental Health Coalition, which supports the plan update, said if shipyard vendors’ and suppliers’ expansion needs were so great, then wouldn’t Barrio Logan see far fewer vacant lots and empty warehouses? She pointed to a car-storage company that recently moved into a warehouse space adjacent to a shipyard supplier.

“They could have fought it and kept [the warehouse] empty, yet they didn’t oppose it,” she said. “They want to continue protecting these empty lots.”

The three shipyard giants—General Dynamics NASSCO, BAE Systems and Continental Maritime of San Diego—have expressed concerns that as the neighborhood grows,



homeowners and renters will increasingly complain about noise and pollution from industry. Community residents have long voiced concerns about pollution from industrial businesses located next to homes.

In response to both concerns, Alvarez helped broker a deal that included a buffer zone restricting residential use located next to the shipyards along Harbor Drive and Main Street between Sigsbee and 28th streets. The rules would grandfather in the fewer than a dozen maritime-related businesses located in the zone, allowing them to expand by up to 20 percent without a new permit. New industrial businesses in that area would have to go through a permit process.

Despite concern on both sides, compromise seemed imminent. The San Diego Planning Commission unanimously approved the updated plan, and the City Council passed it on a 5-4 vote. However, amid the public process, the industry abruptly pulled its support and launched a campaign aimed at controlling the buffer zone.

"The primary blocks in front of the shipyards are currently zoned for heavy industrial use," Wahl said. "We believe these blocks should continue to allow maritime suppliers to locate and expand by right, without politically charged permits, to ensure that the shipyards can continue to grow and support the U.S. Navy's continued expansion on the West Coast."

If voters rescind the community-plan update, Alvarez said, it's not only a bad deal for people suffering from industrial pollution; it also sets up potential residential encroachment at the shipyard.

"If this fails, and there's a developer out there that wants to build some residential development in Barrio Logan, he's going to have a blank slate of where he can go, and I'd be interested in hearing their proposal," Alvarez said.

In a recent twist, the shipyard industry has started expressing concern about residents' health. Hemmed in by the maritime industry to the west and Interstate 5 to the east, Barrio Logan's children are hospitalized for asthma at 2.5 times the county average.

"We believe it's important that voters understand that cancer rates will increase in Barrio Logan if this plan is approved because it adds 2,000 new homes next to Interstate 5, which is the true source of pollution in the community," Wahl said.

Housing development resulting from the updated plan would increase air pollution, according to a 2012 study contracted by the city. The version of the plan that the shipyard industry supported would have caused less, but still significant, increases in pollution.

"The city did not fully disclose the results of their Air Quality and Health Risk Assessment prepared for the Barrio Logan Community Plan Update," Wahl said. The full study was publicly available during the plan-update process and is currently on the city's website.

Joy Williams, research director with the Environmental Health Coalition, isn't buying the industry's concerns about pollution. "It's clear that their concern seems to be specious," she said, "because if they were really concerned about impacts to the community from pollution, they would not be arguing to include industrial land uses in the transition zone."

Throughout the planning process, the industry has changed its reasons for opposing the plan "multiple times," Alvarez added. "Now, apparently they're concerned about health, which they've never been concerned about. It just shifted every single time."

If Props. B and C don't pass, Alvarez said, he's prepared to push forward an even more aggressive community-plan update.

"If this fails, everything remains the same in Barrio Logan," he said, "and if they're so concerned about people's health, we're going to have to find a way to eliminate some of those uses that are in the community so we can protect people's health."

Write to joshuas@sdcitybeat.com or follow him on twitter at [@jemersmith](https://twitter.com/@jemersmith).

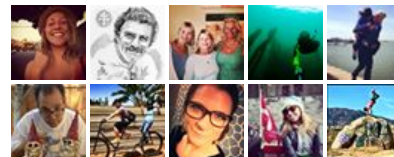
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