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Wednesday, May 28, 2014

San Diego's Barrio imbroglio

Would a community-plan defeat chill public participation?

By John R. Lamb



The Jerry Sanders steamroller - Photo illustration by John R. Lamb

"The best time to listen to a politician is when he's on a stump on a street corner in the rain late at night when he's exhausted. Then he doesn't lie."

—Theodore H. White

The odds seem stacked against the residents of Barrio Logan.

A new mayor, an old mayor and several ex-"Navy mayors" have all ganged up on the neighborhood's community-plan update that was five years in the making. And no one seems able to pinpoint exactly why.

Mike Stepner, San Diego's former city architect who recalls working to create an agreeable buffer zone between residents and the neighborhood's heavy shipbuilding and repair industry 25 years ago, is a sharp cookie, but even he's baffled by the over-the-top flailing by opponents of Propositions B and C on next Tuesday's ballot.

"My personal opinion is that the discussion is way out of whack with reality," he said, "and now everybody has gone to the extreme edge on this. Watching the TV ads with the retired admirals and the retired mayor, Jerry Sanders—I just don't get where they're coming from. What it does indicate is a lack of real dialogue."

That would seem strange, given the length of time devoted to the process that most probably figured had ended with San Diego City Council approval of the community-plan update last October. But for the monied, powerful interests in town, apparently it was only the beginning.

"Five years, 50 meetings, \$4 million," Environmental Health Coalition executive director Diane Takvorian kept repeating. "Opponents say we need a compromise. We kind of thought all of those ideas came up. It wasn't a closed-door process in any way. Industry says they have a better idea. Well, let's hear it."

Instead, community-plan opponents seem content to spend upwards of \$1 million on a campaign fueled by fear, with outlandish, sky-is-falling predictions of a departing U.S. Navy from its Pacific Command location and the hope of low voter participation in the June 3 election.

Supporters of the community plan—with maybe a tenth of the money being spent by Prop. B and C opponents—have been limited in their citywide outreach efforts: a couple of mailers, some phone-banking and an anticipated get-out-the-vote effort. But it may not be enough.

Some local political leaders have put money where their mouths are—Council President Todd



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Gloria donated \$5,000 in campaign funds to the cause, state Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins \$10,000 and Assemblymember Lorena Gonzalez \$2,500.

But when a single major industrial player like shipbuilder General Dynamics NASSCO alone can drop nearly half a million dollars into opponents' coffers, how does a community compete?

"The bottom line is, if lying and money trump the truth, then they win," Takvorian said. "And our hope is that they overplay their hand and voters say, 'Yeah, I've just heard a bit too much about this, and it seems opponents are going a little too far.'"

Stepner couldn't recall a similar ballot measure, although San Diego has seen its share of ballotbox planning dating back to the 1960s, when developers eyed the potential of Mission Valley, then a bucolic stretch dotted with dairy farms, a two-lane road and horse trails.

"We've had Walmart, and Proposition A in the 1980s limiting growth in the northern future urbanizing area, but I've never seen anything like this, where a plan has gone through the process and suddenly we're at a flashpoint where the whole city is voting one way or the other," Stepner said.

Architect Mark Steele, who's worked on his share of community plans over the years and runs an office in Barrio Logan, said he just can't fathom what shipbuilders and their supporters are seeking. "People worked on this plan for five years. It's a plan that works," Steele said. "It just seems to me that the whole referendum idea is a dangerous thing. Does that mean 50 community plans face the same fate? It's all baffling to me."

Steele will take part in a press conference on Wednesday, along with other local influence peddlers, to offer his support of the propositions and the community-planning process. Among those attending will be Richard Ledford, a former mayoral chief of staff who regularly wanders the hallways of power as a pro-development lobbyist.

"Community plans—you can love them or hate them," Ledford said. "But you have to honor the process. I know this won't make me popular on the 11th floor at City Hall—the Mayor's office— "but I think the compromise the council agreed to was exactly the right call. What Sanders and his friends are doing, I think, will have a chilling effect on the public process. Sometimes you have to stand up and say, 'We need to protect the process.'"

If the measures are defeated, what then? Without substantial changes, the plan would be shelved—by law—for a year. Steele said that confuses him because, as he put it, the status quo "allows for more residential-housing construction than the council-approved plan update."

Takvorian noted that while the shipyard interests participated in the process, their executives seemed most interested in building office space and parking for their workers. (NASSCO executives, for example, are currently found not in the barrio, but in Mission Valley.)

That seems like a logical use for a proposed buffer zone that would keep heavy industrial uses away from residents.

Spin's guess? Community-plan opponents simply find Barrio Logan residents a burden who have no business living near toxic industrial businesses. "I think you've hit the nail on the head," Steele agreed. "The irony, of course, is the plan update reduces residential zoning."

Added Takvorian: "Opponents say they agree with 95 percent of the plan. My view is there is no 5 percent—that we're not close. If industries can repeal this plan, then what happens in the next community? Will it be an issue like height in Clairemont? If someone's not happy, somebody will have the money to put out this kind of referendum.

"So, if Sanders and his backers succeed, I think it means the end of planning as we know it."

Got a tip? Send it to johnl@sdcitybeat.com or follow John R. Lamb on Twitter [@johnrlamb](https://twitter.com/johnrlamb).



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