

San Diego to Barrio Logan: No.

BY: ANDREW KEATTS | JUNE 4, 2014 | 56 COMMENTS



Photo by Sam Hodgson

Chris Wahl, who ran a campaign to overturn Barrio Logan's community plan, celebrates at Golden Hall on election night.

Earlier in the day, Councilman David Alvarez had filled the prescription for his asthma inhaler. From the City Council dais, he blamed the ailment on the environmental conditions in Barrio Logan, where he grew up next to a metal plating facility.

He and his Democratic colleagues had just voted, they said, to finally separate homes from industrial facilities in Barrio Logan. Supporters of the new community plan embraced one other, celebrating through tears the culmination

of a decades-long fight to change the types of development allowed in the community.

That was nine months ago. At the time, the shipbuilding industry that opposed the plan had already started talking about overturning it at the ballot box.

And that's just what happened Tuesday night. City voters weighed in after a signature-gathering effort forced the issue onto the ballot, and Barrio Logan's new community plan was thrown out. It's back to the status quo for the community.

Now that the results are in – a conclusive decision from the first set of ballot returns – there's no clear next step in the process of giving the neighborhood a reasonable chance to pass a new plan.

The basic dynamics between the two sides are unchanged.

Mayor Kevin Faulconer was a vocal critic of the plan that got tossed. He stood with the shipbuilding industry that fought to overturn it throughout recent months.

City staff won't come forward with a plan Faulconer doesn't support, because city staff works for him. He'll also be the one to fund any staff time to put together a new plan, if he chooses.

But anything the city puts forward still needs five votes from the City Council, and Alvarez said his Democratic colleagues are unwilling to budge from their insistence on a plan that creates a firm buffer along Harbor Drive to separate homes from the shipyards.

And if the Council wanted to vote on the same plan that just got shot down, rules mandate that it would need to wait at least a year.

Alvarez said the Council will only support a plan that has the community's support. That means the alternative plan favored by the shipyards – and Faulconer – is off the table.

“It doesn't have the support of Barrio Logan, and it is supposed to be a plan for Barrio Logan,” he said. “You can't just impose your will on them as it's been for the last three to four decades. That's why the community is in the shape that it's

in.”

Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition, said there’s no chance her group would ever support the shipyards’ alternative, either.

That plan allows industrial companies to open in the area where they’re trying to build a buffer between the shipyard and the community.

“The basic premise is they need to be separated, homes and industry,” she said. “If you don’t do that, then there’s no need for a new plan, because that’s what we have now.”

And that’s basically the untenable situation the community’s in: The two sides have been reduced to one major item, and it isn’t one that can be split down the middle to give everyone 50 percent of what they want.

You either allow industrial businesses to open in the area north of Harbor Drive, or you don’t.

“If someone is OK with homes being next to industry, then they should just come out and say it,” Alvarez said. “It’s not OK anywhere else, and it shouldn’t be OK in Barrio Logan.”

Faulconer said it’s important to bring a new plan forward soon, but wouldn’t say what the plan might look like or whether there’d be new funding to allow staff to put one together.

“We’re closer to agreement than folks might think,” he said.

Supporters of the plan clearly don’t agree. They’ve reached a point where their one non-negotiable item is the one most desired by their opponents.

It begs the question: Would they prefer waiting for a solution until after November 2016, when there’s a better climate to elect a mayor more likely to support their basic criteria?

“I don’t know,” Takvorian said. “It’s a good question.”

“The mayor can hold up anything he wants, and he can bring up anything he wants,” Alvarez said. “I just hope he supports Barrio Logan and gives them a path forward. I’ll never say outright no to anything, except the one issue, which is no

industrial next to homes. That's not going to be an option for Barrio Logan anymore."

Voice of San Diego is a nonprofit that depends on you, our readers. Please donate to keep the service strong. Click here to find out more about our supporters and how we operate independently.