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New Direction for Old Town

By Dorian Hargrove | Published Wednesday, March 17, 2010

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National City residents crammed into council chambers on Tuesday, March 16, for a meeting of the city council. An additional 40 residents sat in a lobby to watch the meeting on a large flat-screen TV. A majority of those in attendance wore turquoise tees, with Environmental Health Coalition written in large yellow letters on the front. They were there to support the certification of the final environmental impact report and adopt the Westside Specific Plan.

More commonly referred to as Old Town, the Westside of National City stretches 100 acres and is home to 727 residences and 159 industrial and commercial businesses. According to the Environmental Health Coalition, in recent decades the area has become a "dumping ground for polluting industry and warehouses."

In 2005, the city hired a professional planning firm to address the environmental and safety concerns raised by the environmental activists and Old Town residents.

During the council meeting, staff outlined the initiative to improve the quality of life for Old Town residents by rezoning the area, restricting industrial business and high-rise buildings, and restoring it back to a residential neighborhood.

After the staff's presentation, Mayor Ron Morrison held up a stack of speaker slips for the audience to see. "We've got us a list of speakers here. We've got three hours worth of speakers."

The majority of speakers, many speaking Spanish, urged the council to adopt the specific plan. Some gave details of their children's respiratory illnesses from breathing in asbestos particles and paint fumes. A few business owners pleaded with the council to grandfather in those nonpolluting responsible businesses.

When it came time for council comment, councilmember Alejandra Sotel-Solis, who grew up in Old Town, reflected on her experience of living near industrial and commercial businesses, of falling asleep with the smell of paint in the air.

"I am very proud of all the residents and of my colleagues," Solis said in a near-sob. "It is a step in the right direction."

Councilmembers unanimously agreed to adopt the Westside Specific Plan and accept the final environmental impact report. Applause from the crowd filled council chambers.


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Well done to the Environmental Health Coalition! :)

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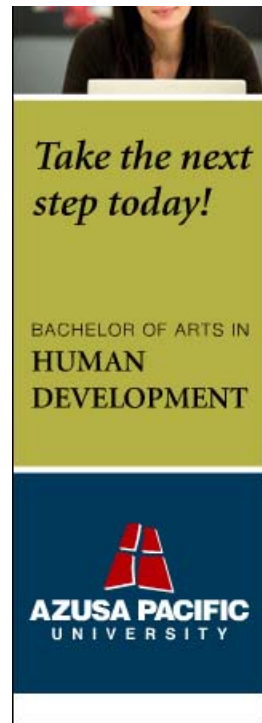
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