

Analysis - A Revolution is Brewing ... Maybe

By Doug Epperhart

At the Alliance of Neighborhood Councils gathering two weeks ago, Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky criticized developers for being rapacious, the city for enabling their rapacity, and neighborhood councils for letting them get away with it.

Projects all over Los Angeles confirm Yaroslavsky's statements about developers. A long history of business as usual at City Hall demonstrates the reality of government's disinterest in its citizens. But, after five years, maybe neighborhood councils are done accepting the status quo.

Yaroslavsky said he believes a revolution is brewing. Maybe it is.

At August 4 meeting of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress (LANCC), two development projects were the topic of conversation. Representatives from the Sunland-Tujunga area talked about their experience fighting Home Depot. I spoke about Ponte Vista in San Pedro even though LANCC had been honored with a letter from the developer's lawyer questioning whether it was appropriate for the group to have this discussion.

Sunland-Tujunga and San Pedro are about as far apart as you can get in the city of Los Angeles. Yet they—and practically everywhere else in between—are connected by anger at projects that contribute to overcrowding and too much traffic. Neighbors' complaints are often ignored.

In the case of Sunland-Tujunga, Home Depot seeks to rebuild a former K-Mart. That this project is in fact a "project" seems apparent to everyone except the North Valley Area Planning Commission. Their failure to accept the planning department's recommendations energized the community and led to Councilwoman Wendy Greuel's successful motion for the matter to be transferred to the city council for a decision.

The Sunland-Tujunga Neighborhood Council asked other neighborhood councils to support their cause—and they did. At the city council meeting, Councilwoman Janice Hahn held up a sheaf of e-mail printouts and letters and said she read every one of them. She also made an oblique reference to a controversial project in her district.

That project is called Ponte Vista. A developer proposes to build 1,950 units on a site on Western Avenue. The property is zoned for single-family homes (R1), which allows for as many as 724 units if the maximum density bonus is applied. The Northwest San Pedro and Coastal San Pedro councils, which are most impacted by traffic on Western Avenue, oppose any change in zoning.

The Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) has already signed off on the project's traffic mitigation measures. Confronted with their lack of adequate examination of the developer's numbers, LADOT admitted it made a mistake, but said there's nothing they can do about it. Bureaucratic bungling played a role in the Home Depot issue, too.

Two San Pedro councils, a community advisory committee, and Councilwoman Janice Hahn oppose the plans for Ponte Vista; so do more 10,000 area residents who have signed petitions in favor of maintaining the R1 zoning. Despite this, the developer is going ahead with his high-density proposal.

Like Home Depot, Ponte Vista's developer seems to be acting on a belief that an army of lobbyists, fueled by money, can mesmerize commissioners and council members alike with the illusion of support for an unpopular project.

But, like Sunland-Tujunga Neighborhood Council, Coastal and Northwest San Pedro are beating the bushes, looking for help wherever we can get it. We know there's a lot of rising anger and untapped energy.

At the LANCC meeting, several individuals mentioned projects in their areas proposed or built by developers who wanted too much and failed to consult with, or address concerns of, the community.

The real problem, though, is not developers. They're doing what developers everywhere do—build to maximize profit. It's a business, after all.

The problem is our city's bureaucrats whose favorite tool is the rubber stamp: commissioners appointed because of

their fund-raising ability; and political leaders who follow the wrong people.

If your neighborhood council hasn't endorsed the right of councils to appeal planning decisions, do it. If your council hasn't joined the LANCC, do it. If your council has a problem development, talk to the rest of us. We can help you.

For too long, maybe forever, this city's government—our government—has tipped the balance in favor of developers. It's our job, as the voice of the people, to tip it back. *(Doug Epperhart is president of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council He is also a writer/publisher.)* _