

Citizen Planners: Saying ‘No’ to the Big-Box

By Mark Elliot



Sometimes the neighborhood knows best. The recent victory over Home Depot in the Sunland-Tujunga community suggests that the balance of power between stakeholders and developers may be shifting. It definitely does show that local activists are better equipped than ever to describe a vision and then challenge on the merits whatever does not advance it.

Home Depot officially notified the Sunland Tujunga Neighborhood Council (STNC) in October of 2004 that it would close the local K-mart, which it had earlier purchased, to open a Home Depot. The community lamented the loss of a general merchandise store, but it had already prepared because the Daily News had reported it months earlier. STNC asked stakeholders in a survey, “Would you welcome a Home Depot?” Stakeholders overwhelmingly said no. For the community’s “only Main Street,” Foothill Boulevard, they wanted a general store, they said. STNC took a position against a Home Depot there.

The NC was allowed no input because the retailer bypassed STNC to file an application to occupy the K-Mart and downplayed renovations to the site to secure a permit. Then they waited an additional month to bring it before STNC – a snub that encouraged hundreds to attend a town hall on the issue.

By that time, the No Home Depot Campaign led by Joe Barrett and Abby Diamond had entered the fray, partnering with the NC share information and organize stakeholders. Their call: “Shut Them Down! Call Councilmember Wendy Greuel and tell her this project must be stopped Now!” It was Community Organizing 101: focus on a single issue, tap expertise, and work through a coalition to maximize impact. Agility, communication, and stamina were its hallmarks.

The campaign recalled an earlier effort in Northridge, where community concerns included increased traffic and the effects on existing businesses of a proposed Wal-Mart at Nordhoff and Tampa. Yet the Northridge West Neighborhood Council did not take a position against it, and higher elected officials seemed to be in favor. “Our neighborhood council voted not to get involved,” said Jim Alger, a local activist who spearheaded the Northridge effort. “People didn’t just buy a house - they bought the park on the corner, too, and you can’t blame them for not wanting change.” Sentiment coalesced against the project and the Citizens to Preserve Northridge was formed to oppose it.



As in Sunland-Tujunga, opponents claimed that the proposal was insufficiently vetted. Citizens to Preserve Northridge challenged the project's traffic study with a 30 page rebuttal, for example, and hired expert testimony to substantiate impacts. More importantly, though, the Citizens organization succeeded in changing the political dynamic. Given the controversy, NC elections ushered in a new board which took a position to oppose it. The organization also succeeded in bringing Councilman Greig Smith around; with his support it would be more difficult for the applicant to escape full environmental review. Yet his support was tepid: his chief of staff was reported to say, "Hopefully, something will come out that says we can't put the Wal-Mart there."

In Sunland Tujunga, the political stars had already aligned. As opponents stepped up the pressure, Mayor Hahn and Councilwoman Wendy Greuel opposed the new store. The No Home Depot Campaign led the way because the multi-issue NC already had enough on its plate: incoming development and its threat to open space was paramount. "The neighborhood council had multiple issues to deal with," Joe Barrett said, "but you need an energetic community group to put in the time – and it took all of our time for three years." Time indeed: Home Depot was adamant and only vaguely acknowledged the community's concerns. A letter that nodded to cooperation added, "In the absence of consensus...Home Depot will need to proceed...."

Against a well-funded corporation, the campaign needed to keep one step ahead of the opponent. It conducted fact-finding, marshaled opponents, and most importantly argued the merits of the case in the media and in front of decision-makers. High stakes brought the business community, industry lobbyists, and even city neighborhoods on a journey through multiple hearings before administrators, a closely-divided Area Planning Commission, a City Council committee, and twice before the full City Council.

Ultimately, STNC and the No Home Depot Campaign prevailed when opponents successfully called the city to account for what was found to be an improperly issued permit from the Department of Building and Safety. The resulting round-robin finger-pointing included allegations of abused discretion and cast unwelcome scrutiny upon a dysfunctional Los Angeles land use review process, and showed the effect a well-organized effort can have on both a project and the planning process. Like Northridge, environmental review played a key role. The retailer has not spoken of its next move.

The Sunland-Tujunga experience suggests that for councils, success may hinge on a productive partnership. STNC worked hand-in-glove with the Campaign to divide the labor. STNC held committee meetings and town halls to organize stakeholders, and used its soapbox and official imprimatur to communicate its position. STNC was also able to express the stakeholders' vision for a better 'Main Street.' The Campaign handled the back end: raising money, hiring engineers and attorneys, and above all facilitating communication. "My job was media – publicity and poking at Home Depot to keep them agitated." Joe said. "Abbv was the legal eagle."

Second, communication is key. The No Home Depot Campaign pressured officials and played intermediary, too. “We developed a good rapport with the council office and [planning deputy] Dale Thrush,” Joe said, “and we’d report back to the neighborhood council.” Flexibility was key. “We could get together, make a decision, and act immediately like a rapid response team. The neighborhood council could not have stopped Home Depot, nor could we stop them on our own.”

For developers, the defeat in City Council shows that taking an adversarial position generates no good will. Home Depot was found to have conducted extensive renovations and the City Council voted to override the North Valley Area Planning Commission and require full environmental review. This may be payback for the retailer’s cavalier approach, but it shows that bypassing a well-organized neighborhood council may mean missing an opportunity to find a mutually acceptable outcome that gets a project going quickly. (Mark Elliot is a Graduate Researcher at the USC School of Policy, Planning and Development and an occasional contributor to CityWatch.) _