

Fighting Political Battles from Ground Level

A Guide to Grassroots Influence

By Doug Epperhart



The recent Los Angeles Times article (March 11) about the fight over the proposed Ponte Vista development in San Pedro focused on the area neighborhood councils and their “sophistication” when it comes to these kinds of political battles.

How did councils get sophisticated about this stuff? Mostly experience. Especially the previous experience of many who joined councils after years with their homeowner or resident associations. For others, it’s experience they gained after getting involved with neighborhood councils.

The most critical thing now for councils is that the experienced share their knowledge and expertise with others. No matter how much we know, we can always learn something. In that spirit, here some of what I’ve learned as a resident association foot soldier, neighborhood council officer, and community organizing activist.

Understand the process. Before you start your campaign, learn all you can about the legal process. This includes what must be done, when it must be done, who must do it, what regulations govern it, and who can influence the outcome. Don’t be afraid to ask questions of bureaucrats. It’s their job to respond. If you don’t get an answer, keep asking. Never assume you know the answer or that because something was done a certain way last time means it will be done the same way this time.

Develop your message. Decide what outcome you are seeking and determine the most straightforward way of telling people about it. In the case of Ponte Vista, we boiled it down to one letter and one number: R1. Our goal is to hold density of the project to as low a number as possible. The key to that is to keep the current single-family zoning. Also, focus on the message. Don’t get off on tangents or get bogged down on side issues.

Control the agenda. Don’t react to the opposition. Make them react to you. Determine where they are vulnerable and go after it.

Identify your allies and invite them to join your coalition. You don’t have to do everything yourself. The R1 group includes individuals and groups not only from San Pedro, Harbor City, and Wilmington, but also Rancho Palos Verdes, Lomita, and Torrance.

Keep a high profile. It’s a campaign. Act like it. Don’t assume people are reading your

mind. Get out there with bumper stickers, yard signs, volunteers gathering signatures on your petition. Spread the word. Don't be afraid to talk to people and if they offer to help, take them up on it—immediately. Cultivate the media. Send out press releases and call reporters. If they write something you don't like, shut up and take it. Maybe next time, you'll think they're brilliant.

Communicate with everyone as often as possible. Make sure everyone involved in your effort understands their role and tells the others what they are doing. It's a problem, for instance, to have more than one person calling the same reporter or setting up meetings with officials. Coordination is key to not duplicating efforts. When everybody is a volunteer, efficiency is critical. Don't waste people's time. Communicate, too, with city officials, elected officials and their staffs. You should also talk to opponents whenever you can. You never know what intelligence may be gathered during a friendly chat with the other side.

Don't make stuff up and don't get personal. There's usually a lot of heat generated during these campaigns. Stick to the facts and you'll always have a stronger case. Whatever you do, don't call people names and don't make it personal. When it comes to public meetings, my rule is "He who shouts the loudest usually loses."

You're going to need money. Unless you have a rich uncle with a conscience, plan on asking for contributions. As soon as you can, figure out how much you'll need and start raising funds. It's not fun, but if your cause is just and you have a clear message, people will donate.

Numbers matter. If you think your opponent will show up at a hearing with a hundred supporters, you had better work like the devil to get 200. Commissioners and council members pay attention to who—and how many—show up. The same goes for letters, emails, and telephone calls.

Be realistic. If your chances of winning are less than 10 percent, you might not want to waste your time. If, on the other hand, your chance of success is greater than 10 percent and you can rally some troops, go for it. You might be pleasantly surprised. (*Doug Epperhart is a publisher, member of the Coastal San Pedro NC board and is a contributor to CityWatch. He can be reached at Epperhart@cox.net*)

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