

Planners Put Ponte Vista on a Diet

Progress Report

By Doug Epperhart

“Does this development make me look fat?”

That’s the big question Harbor area residents have been asking about the proposed Ponte Vista project. On April 9, the planning commission’s answer was, “Well, yes, it does. But, with the help of city planners, you can slim down in no time.”

“No time” being the 120 days commissioners gave developer DLJ Capital Partners, planning staff, and the community to forge a compromise.

Here’s the story in a nutshell: Developer Bob Bisno buys 60-acre site zoned R1 (single-family homes) in San Pedro; developer proposes 2,300 condos—too big, too much traffic; neighborhood councils oppose project; Councilwoman Janice Hahn forms advisory committee; community activists form RNeighborhoodsAre1 anti-Ponte Vista coalition; developer downsizes to 1,950 units—still too big, still too much traffic; Hahn advisors endorse R1 zoning; planning department recommends much smaller project (775-886 units); Bisno ousted by lender Credit Suisse First Boston; new project lead DLJ Capital Partners proposes 1,395 units, promises no density bonus; and then we all go before the city planning commission last week.

The developer presented its current plan for 1,395 townhomes and condos and asked for time to work out a compromise. Planning staff offered its recommendation for a smaller project which allows nearly 1,200 units if a density bonus is used.

Project proponents were mostly union personnel and members promoting the need for construction jobs and area chamber of commerce executives touting the benefits for business owners.

Project opponents included the adjacent cities of Rancho Palos Verdes and Lomita, homeowner groups, and the Northwest San Pedro, Harbor City, and Coastal San Pedro neighborhood councils. They cited inadequate environmental work, the project’s noncompliance with the community plan, and, of course, traffic.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn called for a new traffic study, fewer units, and voiced concern about the density bonus allowed under state law (SB 1818).

Ponte Vista’s developer has said no density bonus will be used and they are willing to sign a legal agreement to that effect. However, the assistant city attorney advising planning said “there’s too much uncertainty” whether such a contract would be legally enforceable. In other words, it’s a “trust me” situation in which the community could be left holding the bag.


The other elephant in the room is the traffic Ponte Vista will generate and whether it can

be mitigated. The unique geography of the area means the site is essentially an “island on the land” where there’s only one way in and out. Even at R1 density, the project will result in thousands of additional car trips on Western Avenue, an already crowded thoroughfare. Commissioners made clear they want a new traffic study that takes into account the special circumstances in the area.

Commission chair William Roschen also told the developer, “Do not use senior housing for traffic mitigation.” Ponte Vista’s claim that residents 55 and over would generate far fewer car trips has been a bone of contention.

Commissioner Michael Woo objected to the portion of the project that would be closed to the public. “Gated communities are an antisocial act,” he said, pointing out he couldn’t ever recall voting to support a gated project.

Referring to what the new vision for Ponte Vista might be, one planning official said, “The ball’s in their court.” In other words, the department is in a holding pattern until the developer submits a new proposal.

So far, planning staff has done a good job of understanding the community’s stake in this project and responded by doing “real planning” according to city policy. If they can keep Ponte Vista on a diet, we’ll all be benefit. *(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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