

Ponte Vista: Next Big Showdown?

By Doug Epperhart



First it was Home Depot in Sunland-Tujunga; then the massive Las Lomas proposal. Will Ponte Vista in San Pedro provide the next big showdown between developers and the community?

Three years ago, Century City-based Bisno Development bought 61 acres of property on Western Avenue in San Pedro. The site had been home to several hundred U.S. Navy personnel and their families. When the Navy closed its facilities in Long Beach, the property was declared surplus. Various plans fell through and eventually the U.S. government sold the land to Bisno in an online auction. The property was zoned R-1 (single-family homes), allowing about 540 units.

Bisno first proposed to build 2,300 condos, a density three times anything else in the area and greater than Playa Vista. This would require a zone change to permit the density increase. Councilwoman Janice Hahn appointed a community advisory committee to examine the proposal and make recommendations regarding the specific plan to be created for the site.

A few months after the advisory group began meeting, Bisno cut the number of units to 1,950. Many on Hahn's committee believed this number was still too high and viewed the Bisno move as a slap in the face. Eventually, the committee voted to support R-1 density.

The Northwest San Pedro (in whose area Ponte Vista lies), Central San Pedro, Coastal San Pedro and Harbor City neighborhood councils all voted to oppose the project. Only the Wilmington council agreed (by a narrow margin) to support the developer's proposal.

Meanwhile, a group called RNeighborhoodsAre1 has gathered nearly 16,000 signatures to keep the R-1 zone. By the way, this organization is O.K. with development. They're willing to accept a project that could be as much 700-plus units if the developer takes a density bonus.

Bisno counterattacked with newspaper ads, TV commercials and its own petition drive asking people to sign in support of affordable housing (something the developer is not offering).

On June 26, the planning department held a hearing at the Cabrillo Aquarium in San Pedro. Nearly 500 people showed up to voice their opinions about Ponte Vista. Separated by rows, about 75 opponents and supporters lined up to make comments.

Speakers talked about the fact that the 10,000-20,000 cars a day generated by Ponte Vista will enter and exit on to Western Avenue, the lousy job done by L.A. city Department of Transportation planners in blindly accepting the developer's traffic plan, the project labor agreement Bisno has signed with the building trades unions and the need for the senior housing that the project will provide.

If you caught the Channel 7 news that night, you saw the busload of Inglewood halfway house residents brought in by the developer to bolster his support. There were shades, too, of the Sunland-Tujunga Home Depot brouhaha in the orange shirts sported by some union members touting Bisno's project.

A lot of speakers talked about distrusting Bisno. His track record, particularly regarding Lincoln Place, was offered as evidence of bad faith. Opponents of Ponte Vista also talked about trip generation numbers, lack of adequate infrastructure, public safety concerns and the economic viability of this project.

Proponents talked a lot about "the American dream" and being able to afford a home. Many of Ponte Vista's supporters serve on the developer's so-called advisory boards. Several of these folks are affiliated with organizations that have accented donations from Bisno. Many in the community see this as the classic "divide and conquer"

strategy utilized by developers.

Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who has supported R-1, told the hearing officer that Bisno's application to subdivide the property and amend the community plan should be denied. She called on the developer to start over and work with the community to create a project that everyone could support.

Over the last three years, many of us have asked for public focus groups and workshops to determine what people in the area want and need, not only what is best for Bisno's bottom line. Maybe we could actually "do real planning," as L.A. Planning Director Gail Goldberg has emphasized.

The ball is in the Bisno's court.

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