

Ponte Vista developer downplays SP panel's vote

Bob Bisno says the decision was "outside the process" and that he's still confident. Councilwoman Janice Hahn says she doubts the planning commission will be a pushover.

By Donna Littlejohn
Daily Breeze Staff Writer

If you thought the Ponte Vista debate in San Pedro was over, think again.

Developer Bob Bisno brushed off the community rebuke his project received this week from a citizens panel and pledged to press forward with his plan to build 1,950 homes on surplus Navy property in San Pedro.

"We're looking forward to moving the process through what is a more conventional path," Bisno said, dismissing a citizen advisory panel's resounding rejection of his plan on Tuesday. "A group like the advisory committee is outside the process through which a development must go to get the entitlements."

The move isn't a surprise to opponents who say they're already networking with neighborhood councils throughout the city of Los Angeles to bolster their cause when the debate moves to City Hall.

"It just means that the war moves to another arena and the battle continues," said Doug Epperhart, president of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council. "We've already talked about what the next steps are in this campaign. It won't be the first time we've had to go downtown - we did it for White Point."

White Point in San Pedro was declared a nature preserve in December 1999. A land conservancy lobbied to have it protected.

The Ponte Vista Community Advisory Committee, which rejected Bisno's 1,950-home project by a 10-1 vote with one abstention, was appointed last year by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn.

Bisno said he will work with the city's Planning Department with the aim of taking his proposal to the planning commission and then on to the full Los Angeles City Council.

"We've got probably 16,000 (signed) supporters, we have six chambers of commerce, and we have one neighborhood council" in support of the project, Bisno said. "We have an absolute groundswell of support."

But Hahn predicted that Bisno won't get far with city planners.

"The Planning Department has also been at all these (advisory panel) meetings, so they're right in step with what the community is thinking," she said. "I think he's up against a brick wall when it comes to his project of 2,300 or even 1,950. I expect the Planning Department will reject that."

Hahn said the door isn't closed to a project somewhere between the 1,950 number - which includes houses, townhomes and condos - and about 500, which would be allowed under a single-family home plan. But she said Thursday that she hasn't been persuaded to change the property's current R-1, or single-family, zoning.

"He wants to sit down and talk with me, which I'm willing to do, but I don't know what else he can say," Hahn said.

Ponte Vista supporters will gather Saturday at Cabrillo Marine Aquarium for an invitation-only party.

In addition to rejecting the full Ponte Vista build-out plan, the advisory panel, on a second 8-4 vote, approved limiting the 0.5-acre property along Western Avenue to single-family homes. The number of homes that could be built on the property under that zoning depends on several factors, city planners said, but the range could be from 430 to 700 if a developer applied for what's called a "density bonus" that would allow additional low-income housing to be constructed.

Bisno said the vote for the so-called R-1 position by the panel was a mixed message. "I don't think within that group of eight they had formed a consensus, and that's what we saw" at the meeting, he said. "What we heard was that nobody could put together any coalition to support a majority report."

Bisno said he's confident that city officials will support a larger, multi-unit development, citing the need for housing in Los Angeles.

"I disagree," Hahn said. "The Planning Department is going to push for density where we have public transit hubs. I think there's a need for citywide housing, but they'll not force a project that cannot absorb the density because of the location or traffic."

And, she added, "The Planning Department would never push a project the council member (from that district) does not approve of - let's be clear about that."

Part of Bisno's strategy will be to secure formal union support after having pledged to use all-union labor for construction.

In addition, the developer will emphasize the amenities he's promised in exchange for building Ponte Vista, including giving millions of dollars to go toward local traffic improvements and an access road to the new Mary Star of the Sea High School, and providing public park space on the land.

"We're going to take our vision to the community," Bisno said. "We think the longer this stays out there, the more the community will understand the benefits this density will provide."

Bisno said he is meeting with his architects and other members of the Ponte Vista team this week to plan the way forward.

Opponents are also consulting with one another, saying they realize that despite their victory this week, the fight isn't over. They'll continue their petition campaign in favor of limiting the property to R-1 zoning. With 10,400 signatures so far, backers say their goal is to collect 20,000 signatures.

Bisno said his group has about 16,000 signatures, but critics charge that they were collected by paid workers who misrepresented the project.

Many business interests support Ponte Vista, saying it would boost regional stores and shopping centers.

But the increasingly heavy traffic on Western Avenue and other local streets as well as other effects of high-density housing have dominated the debate in the two years since Bisno bought the property.

"I think we've all gotten to the point where we're sick and tired of sitting in traffic, and I think we've all made the connection between building thousands of condos and adding thousands of cars," Epperhart said. "This isn't rocket science."

donna.littlejohn@dailybreeze.com