

Ponte Vista developer releases public-opinion poll

More San Pedro (Torrance, CA)

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A proposed 2,300-home development continued to make news this month with the developer releasing the results of a telephone poll and then firing the mediator he had been paying to sit in on meetings of a citizen's panel reviewing the plans.

The random telephone survey of 500 people in San Pedro, Lomita and Rancho Palos Verdes produced a few surprises.

Among them:

* 63 percent of those randomly polled said they approved of the project (that number dropped to 59 percent after several negative arguments against it were listed);

* 41 percent of the respondents had never heard about the project; an additional 28 percent said they had heard only "a little" about it and 31 percent had heard "a lot."

"Opposition does not run deep, but the opposition is loud," Bisno concluded.

Project critics, not surprisingly, were skeptical of the findings.

Meanwhile, citing billing discrepancies, developer Bob Bisno fired the mediator who had been staffing meetings of the Ponte Vista Community Advisory Committee, a citizen's panel established by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn.

Panel members had interviewed and hired Victor Griego of the firm Diverse Strategies for Organizing in Los Angeles. But Griego's salary was paid by Bisno as part of the package to streamline the planning process with the city of Los Angeles.

Griego could not be reached for comment.

Bisno has offered to pay for another mediator, but Hahn said later she felt the panel could continue on its own.

"I think Victor Griego served his purpose," Hahn said, adding that he helped organize and solidify the diverse panel in its early stages last fall. "I don't think they need a facilitator from now on. The hard work now will be done between the (city) planning department and the advisory group. The planning department has assured me they will be a leader in this process."

Panel Chairman John Greenwood, however, said Griego was a big help in taking care of various housekeeping chores required for the group. Griego also provided a much-needed neutral presence, he said.

"I think he's been doing a good job," Greenwood said. "What he allows us to do is get an outside perspective. We can all get into the heat of it, but he pulls us out, calms us down and says 'Keep your eye on the larger picture.' "

The panel is now meeting every other week in hopes of delivering a set of recommendations to Hahn by June.

Bisno signaled last week that it may be time to begin number-crunching with regard to how many units to build.

"We'll come down on the overall numbers, that's part of the process," Bisno said in an interview.

He later said he is confident that he and the advisory panel can "find a middle ground. It won't satisfy either of the fringes, but we can satisfy those in the middle."

The telephone survey, which cost Bisno about \$30,000, was conducted from Feb. 9-12 by the professional polling firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates.

There was a 4.4 percent margin of error in the results, the pollsters said.

Traffic topped the list of concerns among respondents. But those polled also said there is a need for more housing in San Pedro. Asked about cutting the project density first to 1,900 and then to 1,700, respondents increased their favorable rating by 6 percent with each number drop.

Project critics disputed the findings and some of the wording used in the 25-minute questionnaire -- including one mistake admitted by Bisno that said there would be "single-family homes" included in the housing mix.

One Ponte Vista critic, Pat Nave of San Pedro, happened to be one of the 500 residents called at random to participate. He later called it a "push-pull" poll -- a survey designed to lead respondents toward giving particular answers.

Others said the poll results would have been different had more of the respondents been San Pedro residents. Those called included residents of the 90710, 90717, 90731, 90732 and 90275 ZIP codes.

Pollster Richard Maullin cited the firm's 25-year history of public-opinion polling, saying the poll was designed to scientifically gauge public opinion by using a random sample. The radius included areas that would be impacted by the housing project and the survey was not crafted to produce either favorable or unfavorable opinions, he said.

"There's no point in doing these surveys to fool yourself," Maullin said.

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