

Ponte Vista panel redefines goals

PROJECT: Councilwoman says instead of just reacting to developer, citizens group will focus on "what's best for San Pedro" for 62-acre site.

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Embarking on an accelerated schedule amid an increasingly polarized debate, a citizens panel appointed to sort through issues surrounding the proposed 2,300-home Ponte Vista development in San Pedro will resume meeting Tuesday in an effort to finalize its recommendations by July.

The panel also could be looking at taking a new direction as it reconvenes.

Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who appointed the 14-member group to advise her five months ago, said she now wants the panel to broaden its scope and not necessarily focus on the Ponte Vista project that has been proposed by the owner of the 62-acre former Navy property.

"They've been getting a lot of input from (devel-

oper) Bob Bisno and his team, and I think they've been trying to navigate the process," Hahn said. "A lot of what they've been doing is reacting to Bob Bisno.

"So now they're going to start from scratch and create what's best for San Pedro," she said. "He (Bisno) is not going to drive this process; we are, the city is. We're still in the driver's seat."

That could open the way for recommendations that will include more open space, fewer homes and more commercial or retail development on the property purchased for \$125 million by Bisno Development in 2005.

From the time they were announced, his plans to build 2,300 homes — with at least 40 percent set aside for people 55 and older — have sparked emotional debate in the close-knit port community.

The property is zoned for single-family homes, which requires Bisno to seek a zoning change from the city of Los Angeles to build what would be the largest single residential development in San Pedro.

Upcoming public meetings of the Ponte Vista Advisory Committee will take place on Tuesday, March 8; March 22; April 12; April 26; May 10; May 22; and June 7. They are at 6 p.m. at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, 601 S. Palos Verdes St., San Pedro.

Hahn has told the committee that she wants to see recommendations on her desk by July.

To do that, panel members have agreed to meet every other week rather than monthly.

"Our role is really to advise Janice and to give her our best feeling about what's the best project that can go in there that the 14 of us can agree on," said panel Chairman John Greenwood.

What goes on that site, Greenwood said, "isn't (necessarily) Bob Bisno's 2,300 homes. It's what (Los Angeles city) planning decides makes the most sense from a planning process."

Since the panel began meeting last fall, a series of issues — primarily centered around traffic — has dominated much of the discussion.

"Basically, we've been treading water, not focusing on what we were asked to do," said task force member Jerry Gaines, who has put forth a scaled-down alternative for 1,600 homes as one discussion option to consider as part of a future compromise.

While some feel that the committee has lost time with little to show for it, Greenwood said the early meetings of the committee were well-spent.

"I thought this is about where we'd be at this point," Greenwood said of the group's progress.

Critics complain that the developer has dominated and intruded on the panel's work.

But Bisno, pointing to a recent public hearing in which proponents handily outnumbered opponents of the project, said he's been frustrated by what he perceives as a bias against Ponte Vista from the start.

"A condition of sitting on this task force was that you approach Ponte Vista with an open mind," he said. "Every member of the task force, at least on

paper, agreed to that. But many of them aren't doing it."

He believes as many as a majority of the members — among them "dyed-in-the-wool opponents" — are far from impartial and made up their minds long ago against Ponte Vista.

Hahn acknowledged there are members strongly opposed to the development, but said she thought they represented a minority. "I think the majority of them have an open mind, but I think there are some who already have staked out their position," she said.

As for the group's work pace, Hahn said she expects more significant progress to be made in coming months. "I think these first few months have been a big learning curve for the advisory group," Hahn said.

On Tuesday, the panel will hold the first of several bimonthly meetings under a stepped-up schedule designed to meet the summer deadline. Initially, the meetings will be dubbed "Planning 101" as members start fresh with city planners, who will lay out what needs to go into crafting a specific plan for the property.

"What we'd like (the task force) to do is really start to dig into the project" said Alan Abshez, a land-use attorney for Ponte Vista. "We're there as a resource to the group, and we're hoping they'll really get down to brass tacks as we go forward."

Questions about how many people will live at Ponte Vista — and how much traffic they will generate — continue to swirl around the project, which has given birth to a cottage industry of local activists who painstakingly pore over statistics.

"People are looking for a 'gotcha,'" Abshez said.

Opponents counter that numbers used in the traffic studies are suspiciously low.

"This is an unreasonable number on its face," Northwest San Pedro Neighborhood Council member Pat Nave said of the project's calculation that each residential unit will generate

a little over four car trips a day.

"People are not going to believe it, and that's why we're hammering like crazy on it."

In a Feb. 10 letter to Los Angeles Planning Director Gail Goldberg, Nave said traffic counts were taken during a time when the busy Western Avenue thoroughfare was already impacted by sinkhole repairs.

"By his own estimate, the developer will add 29 percent to the average daily traffic on Western Avenue — at a point where the street is the neck of a funnel for all of San Pedro," Nave's letter stated. "We think the project may actually add as much as 66 percent to the total."

But Ponte Vista has its supporters, many of them longtime San Pedro residents.

A public hearing held last month drew a crowd of more than 400 people, with most of them indicating they supported the Ponte Vista plan.

San Pedro needs new housing, supporters said, and the units set aside for seniors will be especially needed in the future. The project, supported by nearly all the area's chambers of commerce, also will bring needed dollars to the local economy, they contend.

Critics believe a substantial majority of San Pedro residents strongly opposes the construction of such a large project.

"There's no question in my mind that the community does not support 2,300 homes, no question at all," Greenwood said. "I'm not 'anti' the project at all. I certainly am not supportive of 2,300 homes, but I think at the end of this, our committee will come up with something that makes sense for our community that we can live with."

In other recent developments:

- An independent consultant hired by three of the area's neighborhood councils to review traffic numbers concluded in his final report released earlier this month that baseline traffic numbers used by the city may be too low.

"The (sinkhole) construction activities caused traffic volumes on Western Avenue to decrease

as motorists began utilizing the surrounding roads in the area," consultant Charles A. Thompson of Torrance wrote. "It is recommended that Los Angeles Department of Transportation re-review the traffic counts to assess their adequacy."

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