

Report snubs Ponte Vista, complains about flawed data

By Donna Littlejohn
Staff Writer

Flawed data and an inflexible developer were blamed this week by an advisory panel as it issued its final report giving a thumbs down to Ponte Vista, the largest housing development ever proposed for San Pedro.

A minority report, issued by five of the panel's 13 members, also criticized Los Angeles traffic and planning officials, saying the lack of information provided by the city left the task force "rudderless."

Ponte Vista is far from dead, however, with the proposal now moving to the city planning stage over the next six months.

Developer Bob Bisno is working with planners on his latest 1,950-home proposal, hoping that his proposal for a multi-unit development on Western Avenue will proceed despite the panel's lack of support. The Bisno Development team said it also plans to continue community outreach efforts to garner support.

The yearlong process, task force members said, highlights a need for more regional planning when it comes to development and traffic issues. The Harbor Area, part of the city of Los Angeles, should find a way to join with South Bay cities to address the growing concern in a regional process, members said.

Appointed by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, the task force has officially finished its work, but will remain on call to reconvene if needed, Chairman John Greenwood said.

The signers of the minority report - titled "An Alternate Opinion" - said they were "extremely disappointed" that a compromise somewhere in between the developer's proposed 1,950 homes and the single-family development (429 to 525 homes) finally approved by the task force could not be reached.

"Like most of Southern California, San Pedro is in need of high-quality, reasonably priced housing for seniors, young people and middle-income families," the report states. "Ponte Vista could supply this housing and also benefit the community in many other ways: new public amenities, including open space and recreational facilities, new traffic

mitigations for a broad area surrounding the project, an access road for Mary Star of the Sea High School, a 'San Pedro First' preferential buyers program" and other benefits including a developer-provided shuttle service, tax revenues and jobs.

The Ponte Vista task force appointed last year held its final meeting Monday night, nearly a month after voting to reject the 1,950-home alternative put forward by Bisno who earlier had proposed 2,300 homes.

While indicating it would have entertained a compromise number had adequate information supporting that been available, the task force in the end voted to keep the existing low residential zoning for the 61.5-acre former Navy property in place. That would limit the construction to 429 to 525 homes.

The so-called R-1 recommendation, Hahn said, "makes sense for this part of San Pedro."

Hahn is out of town but in a written statement issued Tuesday the councilwoman said she hoped the planning department would "reflect the recommendation of the advisory group."

In a written statement, Bisno said his supporters will study "all of the ideas" from the advisory group as they continue to work to build a new residential community.

"I remain committed to providing housing for the diversity of the Harbor Area," Bisno said.

A single-family home development, he said, would not support many of the added benefits to the community, including the public road for the new Mary Star of the Sea High School.

"These features would be eliminated under a single-family development scenario," the developer's statement said.

Task force members gave the developer credit for some aspects of the plan, including the proposed Mediterranean architecture and resort-like amenities such as open public park space, clubhouses and pools, outdoor plazas, bike paths and walking trails, a 2-acre water concourse and needed senior housing along with a senior community park.

"It was a splendid project for some other piece of property somewhere else," member Dan Dixon said. "This was not the property for many reasons, most of which have to do with traffic."

Indeed, concerns that the project would add to traffic woes along Western Avenue dominated discussions at the 24 meetings that began nearly a year ago.

"That, to me, was just flabbergasting," Dixon said of traffic numbers, calling the process city officials use to forecast traffic impacts "a shell game, just pushing numbers around."

"We're talking about bad traffic becoming lousy traffic, untenable traffic," Dixon said.

Task force members were wary of city traffic forecasts, arguing that the system is in dire need of updating to give communities more realistic planning numbers.

Even with improvements funded by the developer on Western Avenue, the housing would funnel thousands of cars into adjacent South Bay cities and onto roads unable to handle the influx, critics said.

Saying run-away development is becoming a region-wide problem, Ponte Vista opponents said a new approach needs to be taken in which existing infrastructure is assessed before developers are allowed to push plans forward.

Ponte Vista supporters on the task force who signed the minority report countered, saying more housing is desperately needed in the region. They also said that traffic improvements that would be funded by the developer such as synchronizing signals and providing ingress and egress lanes for shopping centers along Western will be lost with a downsized project.

A single-family development, they said, also would be beyond the financial reach of most seniors and other home buyers of middle-income means.

"In short, by failing to suggest a reasonable compromise, we are missing an opportunity to improve traffic on Western Avenue and to provide needed housing for people to come to or remain in San Pedro," the opinion paper said.

donna.littlejohn@dailybreeze.com