

San Pedro residents organize to oppose Ponte Vista development



Al Seib / Los Angeles Times

Doug Epperhart, left, and John Stinson are representatives of R Neighborhoods Are 1.

Neighborhood councils along Western Avenue have come together to campaign for reductions in the project's scope and demand that the city maintain the property's single-family zoning.

By Jean Merl
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The boarded-up duplexes line a stretch of Western Avenue in San Pedro -- decaying relics of an era when the Navy needed housing for its Long Beach shipyard workers. A decade after the yard closed, the property is now home only to a handful of goats brought in to keep down the weeds.

The inactivity masks a heated battle over the massive Ponte Vista development planned for the site, one that proponents say would bring much-needed housing and jobs to the area but also, critics maintain, an unacceptable level of traffic congestion and a drain on services.



Development angst



Bygone era

In 2005, developer Bob Bisno bought the property, which offers views of the Vincent Thomas Bridge, and proposed squeezing 2,300 condos onto its 61.5 acres.

In proposing what officials say would have been San Pedro's largest residential development ever, Bisno unwittingly galvanized potent opposition from within the community's increasingly sophisticated neighborhood councils.

His move to scale back the project to 1,950 units -- with nearly half reserved for seniors -- did nothing to mollify the well-organized opponents. The city planning staff gave the project a thumbs down in December and suggested the site be limited to about 1,200 homes.

Credit Suisse, the bank that had been Bisno's biggest investor, ousted him shortly after that, and its subsidiary DLJ Real Estate Capital Partners is now scrambling to salvage the project in time for an April 9 airing before the Los Angeles Planning Commission.

Since early this year, facilitator Jim Oswald has been interviewing scores of San Pedro residents to help DLJ come up with acceptable revisions.

"I was hired [to find out] what people felt could make a better project," Oswald said Friday, as he wrapped up about a month of interviews with about 60 people.

Community members will be able to get updates on the developers' thinking, and to add their opinions, at an open house from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday at Peck Park Recreation Center in San Pedro.

From the start, Bisno, no stranger to development controversies in other parts of the city, took steps to line up support for Ponte Vista, putting a public park into his proposal, promising to build a baseball field for an about-to-be-displaced Little League team and providing an access road for a nearby Catholic high school. When a cash crunch nearly forced a small nonprofit, Clean San Pedro, to close its doors, Bisno donated \$25,000.

He got labor leaders on board with the promise of construction jobs. He set aside units for residents older than 55 and said Ponte Vista would have homes the community's working- and middle-class families could afford. He offered some improvements to already-congested Western Avenue, the only way in and out of the site.

Business and union interests, as well as residents hoping for affordable housing and an end to the blighted, abandoned housing, quickly lined up in vocal support.

But others, centered in the three neighborhood councils along Western, mobilized to counter traffic and density, among other issues. They gathered some 15,000 signatures demanding that city officials retain the property's current single-family-home zoning, which would allow only about 500 individual homes. They formed a political and fundraising arm, R Neighborhoods Are 1, hired a traffic consultant, handed out bumper stickers and lawn signs and enlisted support from the neighboring cities of Lomita and Rancho Palos Verdes.

"None of this would have happened without the neighborhood councils," said Doug Epperhart, a leader of the Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council. "We got together to decide what to do about this."

Pat and Diana Nave, of the council that represents Northwest San Pedro, hope their organizing can be a model for neighborhood councils across the city and bring about changes in the city's planning processes, including how it calculates a proposed development's effect on traffic and municipal services.

"Nobody should have the right to tell somebody else what to do with their property, but this will have a huge impact" on traffic and on the demand for police, water and other services, said Pat Nave.

But labor attorney and former city commissioner Diane Middleton called opponents "a vocal minority" who are holding up much-needed housing and other benefits.

"It's time for the project to move forward," she said.

Project opponents want the developer to start fresh with an entirely new proposal, but DLJ spokesman Steven Afriat, a veteran of many City Hall development battles, said that is not realistic.

"We're trying hard to hold to that" April 9 date, Afriat said.

If the project clears the Planning Commission, it still would need approval from the City Council and ultimately the mayor, Afriat noted.

"Most are not asking us to start over, just come in with a smaller project, which the developer is willing to do," Afriat said.

Afriat also rejected as unrealistic opponents' calls for single-family homes on the site, citing among other things the high prices they would have to fetch, at least \$1 million apiece.

Both sides have been working hard to enlist Councilwoman Janice Hahn, a longtime San Pedro resident.

Hahn, in a recent interview, said the original proposal was much too big and now developers must come up with a smaller project -- perhaps of about 885 units -- that will offer enough benefits to justify a zoning change.

"The community has followed this very closely . . . and with great sophistication," Hahn said.

"I want this new development team to be very careful about this," she added. "I want to be sure that [a revised proposal] doesn't compromise the community."

jean.merl@latimes.com