

Voices of the people counter big-money interests

By Doug Epperhart

Plato described democracy as "a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike." This may not be a rousing endorsement, but Plato got it right. Democracy is about equality.

Fast-forward about two dozen centuries to Los Angeles 10 years ago. Appointed and elected commissions were reforming the city charter while a burgeoning secession movement gained momentum.

Janice Hahn and Jerry Gaines represented the Harbor Area on those commissions. Both believed in, and fought for, neighborhood councils as a way to bring people and government closer.

What's striking, though, is their comments on the primary purpose of these councils. Both said councils were established to counter influence exerted by lobbyists who swarm through City Hall every day, representing a host of special interests.

The biggest of these big-money interests is developers pushing the idea that urban obesity will not clog our traffic arteries.

Hahn, Gaines and their fellow commissioners established the neighborhood council system to speak for the people, to be a voice for the unequal — and so they are.

The Sunland-Tujunga council is spearheading the fight against The Home Depot. The megastore operator seeks to skirt the law by having the city declare that its major work at the site of a former Kmart on Foothill Boulevard is not a "project." Projects require mitigation for things such as additional traffic.

The Home Depot's tactics include paying people to show up at hearings to speak in favor of the company's position. There's also a phony group claiming those opposing The Home Depot are

bigots trying to keep Latinos out of the neighborhood.

On a 3-2 vote, the area Planning Commission ignored the city Planning Department recommendation and sided with The Home Depot. Councilwoman Wendy Greuel heard the voice of her community and brought this matter before the City Council. Her motion asserting the council's jurisdiction over The Home Depot's project passed unanimously. Councilman Bill Rosendahl said, "We work for the people." Hahn stated, "things have changed" and called on developers to "tell the truth about your project and then mitigate the impacts."

Another project, in the Universal City area, would add thousands of new residents and untold cars in an already overcrowded region. Councils are gearing up for this fight, too.

Referring to this project in a speech to the Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky talked about how developers operate against the public interest. He pointed out that even though two-thirds of the Universal project is under the county's jurisdiction, the developer filed its paperwork at City Hall; This is because the city is viewed as being more friendly to big projects and less demanding when it comes to mitigation measures. By making the city the lead agency, the developer is stacking the deck against the community.

There's that project in our own backyard known as Ponte Vista. The RI coalition and recent vote by Hahn's advisory committee in support of single-family zoning provides more proof that councils can be effective.

Just this week, City Council-members Greuel and Rosendahl called for a study of how L.A. looks at traffic statistics. They suggest it's time for the city to stop using generic numbers provided by a national group. Instead, planning should study how many car trips projects generate in L.A. and establish a realistic database that's meaningful.

But, the battle on this and other planning and development issues is only beginning. Neighborhood councils and other groups are

starting to come together to demand that the cozy relationships between developers and politicians end. People in this city want government and its leaders to stop bowing before big-money donors and their lobbyists.

Good leaders, such as Yaroslavsky, Greuel, Rosendahl and Hahn get it. They understand what British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli meant when, 150 years ago, he said, "I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?"

Keep leading, people. Keep leading. It's the only way you'll ever get equality.

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