

The Villain of Western Ave.

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The past year I have had the interesting experience of serving on Councilwoman Janice Hahn's Community Advisory Committee (CAC) for the Ponte Vista property on West-ern Ave. I felt that being on the CAC should preclude me from making public comment about the project until our role was completed. That time has finally arrived.

During this process proponents and opponents of developer Bob Bisno's proposed project came out in fell voice to offer the CAC their opinions on what we should recommend. At some point at every public meeting somebody would inevitably get up and vilify Bisno as the personification of an evil greedy developer.

The finger was being pointed in the wrong direction.

In my humble opinion, it is grossly naive to expect a developer or any businessperson to voluntarily not maximize profit on their investment. I would imagine if any of those people screaming greed at Bisno were to put up their own property for sale they wouldn't allow their neighbors to lower the sale price. However, what the neighbors could reasonably expect is that the jurisdictional body that establishes and enforces the planning rules for the community would do its job of adequately balancing the rights of the property owner with the rights of his neighbors.

The jurisdictional body that is the rule maker and rule enforcer for the Ponte Vista property is the City of Los Angeles - and that's where it all starts to go wrong.

At one of the very first Ponte Vista CAC meetings I was shocked to learn that LA City Hall has mandated the need for 9700 new units to be built in the Harbor Area over the next few years. It seems that every year millions of shivering East Coasters wake up on January 1 to watch the Rose -Bowl in sunny Pasadena and spontaneously decide to move west "The resulting population explosion has created a housing crisis that has made Barstow a suburb of Los Angeles and caused California to require each city to identify where new housing can be built.

And so our city picked 9700 as the number of units for the Harbor Area. Okay, fair enough, but when I asked representatives from LA City Planning and the LA Department of Traffic (LADOT) what the infrastructure plan was to accommodate all of these new homes, they hemmed and hawed and mumbled

something about a couple of new turn lanes. It became quickly obvious that they didn't have a plan.

Like a dog with a new bone, I made it my duty to ask at every CAC meeting about these 9700 units. I have; to admit that maybe I'm not the quickest study because it took me a long time to realize that they themselves didn't even believe in the 9700 number in their own plan even though they were employed by, um, the City Planning Department.

How were we supposed to use data to make a recommendation when City Planning didn't seem to have faith in their own planning data? This brings us to, Saint Gail.

Gail Goldberg, the new director of LA City Planning, has been so widely praised by admirers for her approach to doing "real planning" that if a city bureaucrat were eligible for beatification, Ms. Goldberg might be joining Mother Theresa in getting her profile done in stained glass. Call me the devil, but I think the jury's still out on ol' Gail.

My first red flag was a statement attributed to Goldberg in Andrea Alderman's column in *More San Pedro* where she acknowledged that in every other city in the country zoning means something, but that in LA everyone knows that the zoning will be converted and so the price developers pay for the land is much higher than the zoning should seem to allow. Even though in one breath Goldberg acknowledges this, in the next breath she is quoted as saying this about developers, "They didn't pay \$20 or \$30 (per square foot), they paid \$ 100. And I say to them, can you spell speculation?"

Huh?

On one hand Goldberg acknowledges that a planning department she now heads allowed de facto rules to develop that drastically increased land prices, but on the other hand she blames the developers and seems fairly cavalier about their monetary losses. I know she has inherited this mess, but that attitude seems a bit hypocritical to me. And, by the way, it is that mess that all of us in San Pedro were forced to step into when Bisno purchased the Ponte Vista land in the uncertain environment of LA planning.

Although I am not in favor of letting developers act as our city's planners (make your own lunatics running the asylum comment here), I also know that it is extremely difficult to do business in this city. Just ask people like Jack and Cathy Bagliazo, the owners, of Godmother's Saloon on 7th Street, who had to jump through every hoop imaginable over nearly two years to just add one small room to their

establishment. This unnecessary strain on owners trying to improve their businesses is how areas become blighted and how blighted areas never recover. Quite simply the owners give up and leave.

Maybe Saint Gail gets her shine because next to the mucky mucks at LADOT she positively glows.

As everyone that is interested enough to have read this far already knows our CAC voted 8 to 4 in favor of recommending that the property's zoning not be changed from R1. This was something of a shock because most people expected some sort of compromise between Bisno's bid for 1950 units and the current zoning that allows for 535 homes. I was out of the country on business on the night of the meeting and did not vote. Although I favored a mix of single-family, multi-family and senior housing at around 1200 units, I can now absolutely point to the night things started to turn in favor of R1.

The single biggest issue Bisno faced in garnering support for the development was traffic on Western Ave. People in San Pedro and the east side of RPV are rightly concerned that our quality of life might begin to suffer if we start getting caught in the type of gridlock that the unfortunate souls in West LA have taken for granted for years.

For the first three months of public meetings we were repeatedly told that Bisno would pay for measures that would mitigate the traffic impacts caused by Ponte Vista. However, on a stormy night in November LADOT employee Mike Bagheri let it slip that those very same measures were already slated for installment before Bisno ever stepped foot in San Pedro. The thing that made me and most of my CAC members furious was that we were not given the straight shot by the city and only received this information because we were forced to treat Bagheri like a hostile witness on cross-exam. On the day after that meeting the CAC learned in the newspaper that LADOT had sent a letter of approval for Bisno's development, something which Bagheri completely failed to mention at the meeting.

This became a pattern that created a sense of mistrust for LADOT and repeated itself in our interactions with their officials, which quite frankly is unacceptable. It was only after community member Pat Nave began poking around in municipal guide manuals on how to study traffic trip generations that we learned that the formula being used to measure Ponte Vista's traffic was not the truest one and that the traffic projections would significantly increase if we changed it to something more closely resembling how the property was slated for development.

Our CAC was made up of well meaning lay people trying to do our very best and we should not have had

to pull LADOT's teeth to get information and we certainly should not have had to rely on citizens like Pat to do their work. On the contrary, LADOT should have guided us to the best of their abilities so that we could use the best of our abilities to make a good recommendation for the community. It seemed to me that somewhere along the way the bureaucrats at LADOT forgot that it is the citizens of Los Angeles that they are paid to serve and that our CAC members represented those citizens.

I entered into this CAC with a healthy lack of faith in how San Pedro is served as a part of the City of Los Angeles. That obviously did not change. Bisno may be criticized for proposing a development that is larger than most in this community can bear, but he will come and go. Our city officials will always be with us and they must do better.

So what is the solution?

This is my recommendation to my friend, Janice: We all know that you will be running for office again in a couple of years. I would suggest that in lieu of a candidacy for LA City Council, you run for mayor... of San Pedro. We've already had a Mayor Hahn in these parts - maybe this time it could be for a town we actually care about - and one that cares about us.

We can all dream, can't we?