

Report on Valley VOTE Meeting on Monday, February 20, 2006

David DeVoss
Newsletter Committee Chair

Valley VOTE members were joined by a broad gathering of community leaders this past week to hear representatives from the Los Angeles Transit Coalition and the Rail Passengers Association outline a vision of the city's future where commutes take minutes instead of hours and airports are be served by efficient mass transit. **Roberto Barragan**, President of the Valley Economic Development Center (VEDC) which offers training and financing to small businesses, also detailed how his organization helps 11,000 businesses a year provide employment for Los Angeles and Ventura County workers.

Prior to the featured speakers' presentations, members of Valley VOTE committees gave their assessment of the past month's events.

Housing Committee chairman **Vic Viereck** noted that while the City Council has reformed LA's business tax, it has done little to streamline administration of the Rent Stabilization Ordinance, which limits the rate landlords can recoup monies spent to improve rental property. "The Mayor and City Council complain about the lack of affordable housing while hastening the deterioration of existing apartments by allowing the RSO to delay for six years an apartment owners ability to pass the bulk of the renovation expense on to the renter," says Viereck.

The City Council says it wants to study the RSO but lacks the funds to do so. That's ironic, says Viereck, since a 2003 study costing LA taxpayers \$400,000 already concluded that the RSO as presently structured has devastated the city's rental housing.

High Flyers

Denny Schneider's report on the region's airports was much more encouraging. "We are the only area in the country that ever has stopped an airport expansion," he said. "Thanks in part to a Rand Corp. study, we prevented (former) Mayor James Hahn from giving \$11 to \$25 billion to his friends. Today we have a regional approach to air travel that will produce a safer, more cost efficient airport."

Because of the new "inclusionary" posture, a revamp of the LAX Specific Plan and the development of a regional approach to a solution to air commerce will proceed in tandem over the coming years with local communities, airport officials, county representatives and the Rand Corp. all having input.

TV cable a la carte?

Richard Bort, Chairman of Valley VOTE's Finance Committee had a busy month. On February 10 he and Valley VOTE President **Joe Vitti** responded to the Federal Communications Commission's request for comments on fostering competition in local cable franchising. They restated the position taken in a December position paper on cable television franchise renewals that Valley VOTE supports competition for the cable user's dollar as a means to reducing the consumers' cost.

"Some activist organizations, especially those apparently supported by the telephone companies, are seeking to substitute 50 statewide franchises for some 33,000 local cable franchises on the premise that telcos already are franchised by the states and that cable operators should be similarly franchised in order to create a level playing field," says Bort. "We're somewhat wary of this

move toward statewide cable TV franchising because it would cause Los Angeles to lose some \$22 million in annual cable franchise fees. Offsetting this, of course, might be a new user fee that the city might levy on cable operators." Presently, telcos collect and pass on to the city a 10 percent user fee, and there would be good reason to expect a new 10 percent cable user's fee if the present five percent franchise fee is discontinued.

The end result would be a level playing field for competitors, which might cause monthly rates to decline. But the saving would be offset by a doubled user fee rate.

Bort also noted that on February 9 the FCC released its study showing that giving consumers the option to buy cable programming a la carte (i.e., selecting only those channels that the consumer wants) would probably result in lower costs to the consumer. Cable companies say they are forced to package less-desired channels together with channels in heavy demand; otherwise, the low-demand channels would not be able to survive on their own.

Roberts Rules of Disorder

Polly Ward monitors neighborhood councils for Valley VOTE. On February 4 she attended the first official Congress meeting of Los Angeles' neighborhood councils. She returned with the observation: "Democracy can be really messy."

Actually, the person sitting beside Polly said that. She is more optimistic. "It took 90 minutes to elect an interim leader," she reports. "It was messy. It was chaotic. But it happened. Many people elected to neighborhood councils have not participated in the political process before. They don't know how to work the system but they'll learn."

Some neighborhood councils are wary of participating in the Los Angeles Neighborhood Council Congress, but Ward says they should send a delegate to the March 4 meeting. "The Congress is directed at city-wide issues," she explains. "It takes no power away from a local neighborhood council."

Before the featured speakers took the floor, Valley VOTE heard from **Robin Gilbert**, San Fernando Valley coordinator for the California Clean Money Campaign that is supporting legislation to have full public financing of state wide elections. The cities of Albuquerque and Portland, OR. already have full public financing of campaigns. In December the city council asked the city's legislative analyst for a study of a Clean Money system for Los Angeles City elections. Joe Vitti added that he is a supporter of Clean Money and has been since the Valley Cityhood campaign in 2002. Joe commented "It may not be a perfect system but it is much better than what we have today"

Also making brief comments were **David Hernandez**, a candidate for the County Board of Supervisors District 3 who hopes to replace Zev Yaroslavsky, and **Clark Baker**, a former LAPD officer running for the 42nd Assembly district seat. Clark grew up in the Valley and worked as a Valley News & Green Sheet paperboy. He's running as a Republican despite the fact that he's "disgusted with the way the Republicans have been running things in this state and the nation." Neither does the former Marine have much love for Democrats whom he deems "politicians who got in the way of me and the people that I served (while with the LAPD)."

Beyond Petticoat Junction

Antonio Villaraigosa said he wanted to reduce traffic when he ran for mayor. Now he wants to build a multibillion dollar subway to the sea.

Last week, Rail Passengers Assoc. of California president **Paul Dyson** and **Bart Reed**, executive director of The Transit Coalition put forth a more constructive vision of a city that advances the self-evident notion of first getting people to the BUR and LAX airports.

First on their combined agenda is extending the Orange Line busway to the Burbank Airport. (see attached map of proposed extension) “We have a \$380 million express busway (see attached photo) that stops three and a half miles short of Bob Hope Airport where there is a Metrolink stop to Ventura County,” says Reed.

The good news is that rail transport is growing, albeit slowly. “When we started there were three trains a day between LA and San Diego,” says Dyson. “Now there are 12. There are five daily trains to Santa Barbara and a 160-mile Metrolink network with 55 stations.” The problem, says Dyson, is that Metrolink was set up as a peak-hour commuter service. There are no trains in the middle of the day or the evening. Says Dyson: “Metrolink should run seven days a week for 16 hours a day.”

Another affordable idea The Transit Coalition has is to build pass-through tracks at Union Station so that passengers can travel through the station in all directions without having to change trains. Union Station is busier today than when it was built in 1939, but because it's a “stub station” where tracks terminate, passengers have to change trains when traveling to different points of the compass.

“Imagine if Metrolink worked properly,” muses Reed....

Preserving Industrial Jobs

There are 70,000 registered businesses in the Valley, but many of the smaller ones are in jeopardy, says **Roberto Barragan**, president of the Valley Economic Development Center, the largest small business development association in Southern California. “We are losing 200 to 500 business annually,” Barragan told Valley VOTE. “They are not leaving the state but closing permanently. I don't dream of bringing in a new Amgen but keeping the businesses already here viable.”

VEDC exists to help people start businesses or acquire businesses from those hoping to retire. It offers consulting services, guarantees bank loans and organizes workshops for newly minted executives.

Ironically, one of Barragan's biggest frustrations is the City of Los Angeles, which allows industrial property to be converted to big box retail use without a variance. “We need to hold on to our job-producing industrial land,” he says. “With a change in zoning and the political will we can stop this.”

Barragan speculates that one way to create more jobs in the San Fernando Valley would be to have a Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau that would promote the Valley as a tourist, business and convention destination. Seventeen percent of the money collected from Los Angeles' hotel tax comes from Valley hotels such as the Sheraton Universal, but little of the money is used to promote the Valley. “We'd like 4% of the hotel tax money the Valley sends downtown – about \$500,000 – be returned to the Valley for promotion. We have tourist destinations like Universal and Warner Bros., but LA doesn't want the Valley to do anything on its own.”

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