



Valley VOTE
Feb.18, 2008
Meeting Report
by
David DeVoss



Zev Yaroslavsky
L.A. County Supervisor

Pulling No Punches

The Gospel According to Zev

The demise of L.A. as we know it began four years ago when the California Assembly without fanfare or debate quietly passed SB 1818. A boon to property developers, the bill essentially voids all local zoning. It says any contractor willing to include a modicum of affordable units in a residential or mixed-use development can demand, as a matter of state law, that he be allowed to exceed existing height and density restrictions. The law permits developers to build more units without providing additional parking. It also allows them to build closer to the property boundary so that neighboring dwellings forever will lie in perpetual shadow.

If you live near a major thoroughfare or close to a corner mini mall you soon may have an out-of-proportion building looming over you. "There's a new regime in L.A.'s planning department that believes densification is the answer to all our ills," says Los Angeles County Commissioner Zev Yaroslavsky. "Of course the city will grow. But in providing density for every person who eventually may want to come here we diminish the quality of life that attracted people here in the first place."

Municipalities must accede to the state law, but they do have some flexibility on how they respond. Unfortunately, says Yaroslavsky, Mayor Villaraigosa, his planning director Gail Goldberg and City Council "development hawks" like Eric Garcetti, Herb Wesson, Jan Perry and Bernard Parks want to approve everything developers request.

"This is not about affordable housing," Yaroslavsky says. "This is an attempt to kill all the master plans and height restrictions and develop the Westside and San Fernando Valley." The problem is the city isn't being honest. "It doesn't go to citizens and say it wants to add height," Yaroslavsky fumes. "If it sent out notices saying it planned to increase building height by 30%, people would go

crazy. So politicians talk instead about affordable housing.”

Of course, an L.A. County commissioner talking about government kowtowing to developers is a bit like the pot calling the kettle. Just ask the residents of Malibu and Calabasas, who had to incorporate to prevent the county from selling their hillsides to the highest bidder. But Yaroslavsky truly seems to like the Valley. And, unlike his successors, Yaroslavsky spent his time on the City Council making the Valley a better place to live.

“I was a City Councilman for 20 years and now all my work is being dismantled piece by piece,” he sighs. “There's no debate, no discussion. Controversial things get zipped through the council on a unanimous vote. Decisions that take away your access to street parking and sunshine are made with a stroke of a pen. The density hawks want height where it's inappropriate. “I'm very focused on the issue of height,” he continues. “Three stories is 45-ft. That's quite high if you live next to it.”

Commercial development along Ventura Blvd is separated from single-family houses by a narrow alley. For this reason, Yaroslavsky suggested, and Wendy Greuel concurred, that the height of commercial structures “adjacent” to houses should be limited. But when the issue came before the full City Council, development hawks substituted the word “contiguous” for “adjacent” so that buildings separated from residential areas by an alley could soar to whatever height the developer wished.

Says Yaroslavsky: “Wendy changed the wording back to 'adjacent', but then the forces of evil amended the ordinance so that any developer who has 20% (affordable housing) can do anything (he wants).”

So what happened to Gail Goldberg, the ebullient city planning czar from San Diego, who appeared before Valley VOTE in September 2006 and proclaimed, “We want to preserve the unique character of our communities... A real plan comes with zoning ordinances so developers know what people want and communities know what they are entitled to get.”

“I drove her around my old council district when she came to town,” scowls Yaroslavsky. “She said all the right things. Either she wasn't sincere in the first place or she's completely changed her mind. Villaraigosa says the building crane is the city bird and she works for the mayor.”

No longer does Goldberg pretend to listen to neighborhood councils or community activists, Yaroslavsky claims. “She says in most cities the value of property is based on its zoning, but in L.A., value is based on what the property's buyer thinks he can get the zoning to be. A guy wants to build a big building, so he pays \$15 million for a piece of property worth \$6 million. Then he goes to the city and complains that his project won't pencil out unless he's allowed to build three additional floors. He offers to make 5% of his units affordable and the city lets him double the density. The city allows the developer to destroy your privacy and cast a shadow over your home and still have 95% of his units at market rate.”

What can Valley residents do to prevent commercial developers from turning their neighborhood into Tribeca? Complain!!! “If you care about land use, then do something,” Yaroslavsky advises. “Elected officials take the easiest course of action. If there are two points of view and I hear from only one side then I go with the side that takes the time to express its views.”

Not Yet New York?

Three decades ago, when the Eagles were singing about Hotel California and Traffic was the name of a British rock group, Los Angeles was a low-rise city. Imperial palms, not skyscrapers, lined the boulevards. Today's City Council members, who envision a skyline as lofty as their salaries, now are conspiring with developers to remake Universal City, reports **Polly Ward**. The proposed development will consist, within the radius of a single mile, seven projects that cover 14,000,000 sq ft of space with 14,000 sq ft of parking and more than 6,000 residential units. Local residents hope to question the scope of the development at a Town Hall meeting on February 28 at the Beverly Garland Hotel. Attending will be representatives from local neighborhood councils.

Eminent Domain - It Could Happen to You

On the June 3 ballot there will be two statewide propositions regarding eminent domain, says Valley VOTE treasurer **Vic Viereck**. Sponsored by the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, **Prop. 98** protects property rights. Unfortunately, **Prop. 99** does not. "It fails to protect small businesses, places of worship, farmlands, and residences that have not been owner occupied as primary residences for at least one year," Viereck explains.

Proposition 98 would allow eminent domain for schools and other government services. It would prevent government from taking people's property just to turn it over to other private interests. Since 1978, Prop. 13 has protected property owners. Many elected officials want to get around Prop. 13 by confiscating property. Proposition 98 would prevent that.

Warns Viereck: "Protect your property rights and vote for Proposition 98 on June 3."

Noise Abatement At Last?

The LAWA Noise Management Team reported last week that the noise monitoring system being updated to improve reporting will be completed this year, notes **Denny Schneider**. Most of the noise sensors have been sited and are being installed at Van Nuys airport. Unfortunately, the noise limit study scheduled to be completed this year is behind schedule due to the emphasis on the phase out of Stage 2 (noisiest) aircraft at VNY.

Should LA Sell the Department of Water & Power?

That's the question Valley VOTE Financial Committee chairman **Richard Bort** wants to investigate. "We're beginning to compare the L.A. Department of Water and Power's financial profile to those of other California utilities, both municipal- and investor-owned," says Bort. "Our objective is to try to determine if ratepayers in Los Angeles are getting a fair deal compared to what their counterparts in other cities receive.

Bort distributed copies of the project's specifications and invited participation by fellow web-sleuths and number crunchers. He can be contacted at rbort@earthlink.net or at (818) 360-2648.

Las Lomas: Too Big to Swallow

Three weeks ago, the City Council's budget committee held a meeting to debate the fate of the Las Lomas project. Valley VOTE's **George Truesdell** was there. His report:

"It appeared that the committee, headed by Councilman Bernard Parks with members, Bill Rosendahl, Wendy Greuel, Greig Smith, and Jose Huizar in attendance, was astonished at the size of the audience, estimated to exceed 300 people. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the individuals speaking for the project were either employees of the Palmer Group, or tradesmen with a monetary interest in seeing that 5.553 homes get built on 555 acres located at the intersection of Interstate 5

and the Antelope Valley Freeway. Speaking against the project were numerous neighborhood councils, environmental groups, and Valley VOTE President **Joe Vitti**. The outcome of the three-hour meeting was a motion by Councilman Greig Smith to stop the processing of the Las Lomas development. According to the motion, any move to approve a project outside Los Angeles boundaries requires a policy decision by the full city council pursuant to the City Charter. I would not bet on this project going away anytime in the near future though as too much energy has already been put forward for the developer to meekly back off."

And Finally, More DWP

Two weeks ago, the DWP approved a 6% electric base rate increase on top of a 4% energy cost adjustment for the coming year. "The energy cost adjustments are 1% each quarter and are geared to go unnoticed until all of the proposed increases are in place," notes **Jack Humphreville**, a member of the Neighborhood Councils' DWP Oversight Committee.

"A month ago, the City bid out a \$1 million strategic survey of the DWP's operations, finances and management, as well as its infrastructure. It seems incomprehensible that the City Council will consider multi-year increases with the survey results expected in July. The real pity for ratepayers is that this Charter-mandated survey was due last November. The issue now is that the DWP does not want to wait for the results of the survey. Rather, it wants to barge ahead on three, multi-year rate increases without allowing a City Council and ratepayer review, even while it collects its 1% per quarter cost adjustment increases."

The next **Valley VOTE** meeting will be on Monday night, **March 17, 2008**. Councilmember **Dennis Zine** will be our featured speaker.

Valley VOTE has also been informed that **Mayor Villaraigosa** has accepted our invitation to speak at our meeting in May.

Valley VOTE Mission Statement:

Valley VOTE, a diverse coalition of San Fernando Valley business people, educators, community activists, and organizations, is committed to exploring and implementing programs that empower the people of the San Fernando Valley and the city of Los Angeles including opportunities to improve local governance, education and public participation on policy matters.

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