

City Planners Seek Easy Fix to Old Barrio Logan Stalemate, But the Neighborhood Has Changed

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City planners visited the Barrio Logan community planning group Wednesday as part of the latest attempt to separate homes from industrial businesses there.

It didn't go well. Community members said they were confused by the process, and multiple planning group members objected to the city's approach and said it felt like they were being forced to go along with it.

The meeting fell apart after the city proposed a new shortcut approach to the neighborhood's old problem. Staffers wanted to discuss only [the most contested portion of the community](#), leaving the rest to a solution that was broadly agreed upon back in 2013.

That's an unwelcome tactic to community members who say Barrio Logan has changed too much since then, after a sudden surge of recent redevelopment [kicked up dormant gentrification fears](#). They want to start from scratch with a new plan.

Four years ago, the City Council passed a new community plan for the area, which suffers from some of the most polluted air in the state. The new plan scrapped zoning that currently allows industrial businesses to open next door to schools and single-family homes, replacing it with an orderly separation like most neighborhoods enjoy.

Existing businesses could have stayed where they are but over time, if they went dormant, the zoning for their properties would change.

That plan laid out a two-block-wide buffer, just north of Harbor Drive, between the residential community to the north and the heavy industrial shipyard on the waterfront. Commercial businesses could open in the buffer, but not the industrial ones that are currently there.

Planners wanted to create a sizable physical separation between homes in the historic Latino neighborhood, and the shipbuilding area that employs thousands but also produces harmful air pollution.

That's where everything broke down. The plan passed the City Council and became law. But shipbuilding industry leaders saw the buffer as an existential threat. They demanded those blocks continue to allow industrial businesses, and eventually launched a signature-gathering campaign to throw out the new plan at the ballot.

In the June 2014 election, city voters did exactly that. Barrio Logan kept the anything-goes community plan it's had since 1978.

This week, city planners went to the Barrio Logan community to see if there was a chance to take another crack at the problem.

They came with a new approach.

The city would not restart the entire community plan process. It would keep the vast majority of the plan that voters shot down in 2014, since most of it was not controversial. Planners would instead simply reignite negotiations on the contentious buffer area and, if they could find a compromise, slot it into the rest of the previously approved plan.

"This was to gauge whether there was an interest in just that five-block area and see if there's room to work to a compromise for that five-block area," said Brian Schoenfisch, program manager for long-range planning with the city.

He said media reports that called this a kick-off of writing a new community plan, or an unveiling of a new proposal from Mayor Kevin Faulconer, were incorrect. The city just wants to see if the community is interested in finding compromise on the one area.

That's a key distinction. The city hasn't budgeted for a years-long plan update process in Barrio Logan.

By keeping most of the previously approved plan but with a compromise in the buffer area, the city could ostensibly have something approved by the City Council within a year, Schoenfisch said. But that timeline would rely on making few overall changes, so the city could avoid having to go through the time-consuming and costly hassle of doing a new report on the environmental effects of the new plan.

"Rather than start from scratch, the idea was: Let's look at what came out of those five years of planning, all those meetings that everyone attended, keep that, and let's look at only this one focus area," Schoenfisch said.

Planners then asked meeting attendees to participate in a hands-on workshop. They put up poster boards with photos of different types of businesses, and asked attendees to put up stickers showing whether they would be OK with those types of operations existing in the buffer zone.

Attendees had 15 minutes to put stickers on a spectrum from strongly agreeing the business was OK, to strongly disagreeing.

The hurried pace and abrupt direction set off a mix of confusion and anger from the crowd. Three planning group representatives openly objected to the process. Community members milled about, asking for more direction.

“I’m confused, and I feel like that’s on purpose,” said Panchito Martinez, a 20-year-old community member. “It’s like we’re throwing darts, and being pressured into a decision that’s already been made.”

Hector Villegas, a planning group member, yelled to the planners, “Do you guys do this with the other planning groups, or what’s going on here? You’re forcing us to choose something right now.”

Brent Beltran, another planning group member, said he disagreed with the entire premise. He said the city should restart the process and write a full plan that considers the entire community.

Schoenfisch encouraged Beltran and anyone else in the group to fill out comment cards expressing their opinion, emphasizing the city had not made any final decisions.

“It’s been four years, a tremendous amount of change has happened,” Beltran said. “Beyond homelessness and gentrification, we’re now dealing with major parking issues and other planning issues. We need to open up this process, and not just focus on one zone.”

It’s true that Barrio Logan has undergone substantial change since the city passed a new plan in 2013 – and that change wasn’t at all like what the old plan envisioned.

Back then, planners had emphasized sparking new development to create a transit-centric village near the Mercado del Barrio project on Cesar Chavez Parkway and in the northwestern part of the neighborhood closest to downtown.

Instead, artists, business owners, architects and developers have created exactly that sort of walkable environment on the other side of the community, along Logan Avenue, an area that was largely an afterthought in the old plan. The grassroots development there has become a victim of its own success, sparking concerns that long-time residents are being pushed out by escalating rents.

“That’s where the renaissance in Barrio Logan started, and even more change is happening here – we need to manage it through this plan update,” Beltran said.

And there’s no doubt that change is happening, fast. Later in the night, the planning group approved a new project on Logan Avenue that would have been unheard of back in 2013 plan. A private developer bought multiple parcels, including an old used-car dealership, at Logan and 26th Street, to build Barrio Flats, a four-story project with 28 apartments, a 10-room boutique hotel and ground floor retail space that might include an art gallery.

Mark Steele, chair of the planning group and president of an architecture and planning firm based in Barrio Logan, said he agreed with Beltran.

Steele said he met with city staff a few months ago and told them he would be happy to focus on the contested buffer area, since doing so was essential to passing a new plan, but that there were other issues that need attention, too.

“We have much more information now on issues with parking, with truck delivery routes. I have taken the position that we will look at other things, too,” he said.

As polarized as the disagreement of the buffer zone was back in 2013, both sides agree the city needs to take a holistic look at the community.

For instance, David Duea is a planning group member and owner of Fire Etc., a business that sells fire hoses and other equipment to the shipyards. It’s in the buffer zone and would have been re-zoned under the 2013 plan. His business would have been grandfathered in and been able to stay.

He's not ready to let the old fight die, but agreed the city's approach is off.

"We already did this – we won," he said. "Why are you only picking on my block, and not looking at the whole community? That's why they call it a community plan."

The premise behind the city's approach, though, is largely accurate: After years of meetings, which many community members put time and emotion into, there was consensus around much of the last plan.

At the time, the shipyards and community ran into an irreconcilable fact. The community refused to allow industrial businesses in the blocks just north of Harbor Drive. The shipyards said the businesses operating there were essential, and warned of a slippery slope: First, rezone those blocks; next, shut down the shipyards entirely.

If the city rejects the community's argument that Barrio Logan has changed too much and needs to start from scratch, it'll still have to answer a big, outstanding question about its approach.

During the last time through this process, the city reached a simple stalemate over the buffer area. Neither the shipbuilders nor the community was willing to budge over what should be allowed in a handful of blocks north of Harbor Drive. That being the case, why should anyone expect the fundamentals driving that dispute to have changed in the last four years?

Steele, for one, thinks they might have.

He said NASSCO, the largest shipbuilder on the waterfront, has new administration and has shown more respect for and willingness to cooperate with the community. Plus, Barrio Logan didn't have a full planning group at the time, and the group it has now has a balance of different interests and has proven capable of working together.

"As long as people don't just assume it's the same old fight, I think it's resolvable," he said. "There are some residual effects of that, and we can deal with that. But some of the issues were, you know when a husband and wife have been together forever, and they start arguing but can't even remember what the fight is about? It was a lot like that in some cases."

Written by Andrew Keatts