SAN DIEGO — A planner, an environmentalist and a shipbuilder walk into a coffee shop — there’s no punch line. They simply met to avoid yet another delay to the long-waited Barrio Logan community plan update.

For several years, three different but influential groups in Barrio Logan have been working to revive an update to the neighborhood’s land use plan. A coffee shop meeting in 2018 snowballed into dozens of...
others, until all the affected groups reached an agreement recently on how land in a five-block area will be used.

They plan to take that agreement to Councilwoman Vivian Moreno, who represents the neighborhood, and the city's Planning Department in the next couple of weeks for the city to consider updating the community's plan, again.

The plan involves identifying four land uses for the five-block transition zone: “maritime commercial,” “community commercial,” “neighborhood commercial” and residential.

Maritime commercial would allow commercial and marine-oriented uses for the land but would prohibit residential uses. It also would prevent automotive services, machine shops, recycling centers and more from locating in that area.

Community commercial would prohibit residential and marine-oriented commercial uses in the area. And neighborhood commercial would allow residential uses and open space but would prohibit industrial uses.

The current businesses in the zone today would be grandfathered in, according to the plan.

In the past, permissive zoning in a 1978 community plan for Barrio Logan allowed for homes to be located next to industrial and commercial businesses. Environmental advocates for years have pushed to update the area’s zoning to improve the health of residents in the area.

A five-block area was identified as a “transition” area to separate homes from industry. The transition zone extends from Evans Street to South 28th Street.

Those five blocks later became the focal point of a dispute among community members, environmental advocates and shipbuilders.
Proposed Transition Zone in Barrio Logan

Members of the community planning group, environmental advocates and the shipyard industry proposed a compromise on the use of land in the community to lessen the effect of pollution while addressing the needs of the shipyards.
Initially the city council adopted an update to Barrio Logan community plan in 2013 which was supposed to separate houses from industry. Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition, said last week that getting the 2013 plan approved was a huge victory for the community at the time. The plan update addressed zoning for the entire community.

But the ship-building industry and allies, including then-mayoral candidate Kevin Faulconer, gathered signatures to overturn the community plan at the polls.

Maritime industry leaders argued that the 2013 plan’s transition zone, which zoned those five blocks as “community commercial,” would have cost them thousands of jobs. The industry poured $969,870 into opposing the plan update, according to campaign disclosure documents.

Industry leaders were successful, and efforts to update the community were halted.

“To have that overturned was more than disappointing for the community — it was highly disrespectful and really a devastating blow for a community that has endured so much for so long,” Takvorian said.

Mark Steele, chairman of the Barrio Logan Community Planning Group, said the city attempted to revisit
updating the community plan in 2017, but nothing happened. In the meantime new developers and businesses were coming into the community that would not have been able to if the 2013 plan had stayed in place.

“In the planning group we could see people coming in and taking advantage of this open zone and degrading some of the residential areas because they could, and there wasn’t anything that we could do to stop it,” Steele said.

Barrio Logan is a predominantly Latino community located south of downtown and west of Interstate-5. The median household income is estimated around $30,500, according to the San Diego Association of Governments.

Its environmental problems affected residents’ health. Barrio Logan has one of the highest rates of asthma-related hospitalizations in the state.

The Barrio Logan Community Planning group created a committee involving all three parties —community members, environmentalists and shipbuilders — to see if they could work together, Steele said.

“People started to get to know each other.... Nobody really has horns and a tail; nobody is spitting fire; they are all just regular people,” Steele said. “Everybody had the same objective, which was to get the plan up and running.”

Members from the planning group, the Environmental Health Coalition, and some shipyard and maritime industry representatives set their differences aside, he said, understanding that the community is in dire need of an updated community plan. Steele said they recently agreed on a plan that brings the community to the “same level of standards that all the other communities in San Diego have.”

The planning group, which serves in an advisory capacity to the city’s planning department, unanimously approved the agreement between all parties on February 19. The area they focused on includes the five blocks and 32nd Street, to protect an exclusively residential area.
Takvorian said she thinks there was miscommunication about the transition zone in the past, but now she is optimistic that, given the specificity of the new proposal, all sides will be able to avoid misunderstandings.

“Everyone understands that having an update is important not only to community but surrounding industry,” Takvorian said.

San Diego’s maritime industry includes three key players: General Dynamics NASSCO, BAE Systems and Continental Maritime of San Diego. NASSCO alone employs more than 3,100 people and holds building and repair contracts with the United States Navy.

Dennis DuBard, NASSCO manager of government relations, said the shipbuilder’s priority was to ensure that vendors who support the industry can continue to operate and grow under the community plan. He said some vendors are coffee shops, print shops, flower shops and other businesses in the community.

“I think the plan is a good plan, and we’re fully behind it,” said DuBard. “We want to be good neighbors, we want to cooperate and support getting a plan forward and getting it adopted.”

The zoning recommendations are not the whole plan but rather an agreement over the potential uses for the land that all parties support. Updating the community plan requires a public process involving the city council voting and community meetings.

City Planning Director Mike Hensen said Tuesday that the city may be ready to move forward with a new planning update “if a compromise ... respects the will of the voters and meets community planning goals.”
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