Walking path of collaboration for new bayfront plan

By Laura Hunter & Marco Gonzalez

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When our organizations joined together in 2000 to form a coalition to oppose a development plan for the Chula Vista Bayfront, it would have been hard to imagine then that we’d be where we are today – poised to support the largest new land-use plan in the California Coastal Zone.

We traveled quite a road to get here, and the lessons learned and the accomplishments achieved provide a framework and important lessons for those who seek to plan communities in a new way.

The path we started down was rocky at first. Our early call to action – "Don’t Pave Paradise!" – opposed the initial proposal of high-density development as unacceptable. The proposal drew major opposition from the community and environmental interests. It proposed to develop land too close to sensitive salt marsh habitat and did not include enough open spaces and parks for the public. We had to find another way.

The most desirable future vision of the bayfront varies, depending on your perspective. For the underserved Westside residents, the land could be used for new public parks and green spaces to relax, recreate, and enjoy. For workers, the bayfront represents an opportunity for employment in a time when jobs are desperately needed. For water and nature lovers, it gives access to South San Diego Bay and provides nesting and overwintering areas for seabirds. For conservationists, it houses two National Wildlife Refuges, filled with rare plants and animals, among the richest eel grass beds, and a significant amount of the remaining less than 10 percent of salt marsh habitat in California.

The bayfront also has considerable barriers to development. Formerly an industrial area, the Harbor District has significant need for cleanup and remediation of contamination requiring multiple jurisdictions and landowners to agree on a plan. For the last 60 years, the South Bay Power Plant loomed over the area with its oppressive, polluting profile. In the shadow of such a monstrosity, who could envision this as a popular park or tourist destination?

To its credit, Pacifica Companies chose a very different path than many coastal developers – to work with the community instead of against us.
Pacifica withdrew its original plan and we entered into a multiyear community planning process. Everyone at the table learned to listen and, most importantly, hear the others’ challenges. The business participants learned about the lack of green space for residents and the needs of endangered species; the community learned to read and evaluate a business plan and understand return-on-investment. We sought to create good jobs to support families and ensure that residents had easy access to open spaces.

We didn’t agree on everything. We still don’t. However, we agreed on enough to forge a consensus to achieve the major goals of contributing to the regional economy, creating good jobs, increasing public access and protecting the environment. That is a victory in itself!

Before getting finalized, the Chula Vista Bayfront Master Plan underwent numerous revisions to accommodate various community, environmental, and economic needs and realities. The two Bayfront Settlement Agreements, negotiated by our members and allies, will ensure that we can enforce the actions promised – protections of wildlife and public access; creation of funding for community benefits; prioritizing good jobs; establishing high levels of energy efficiency; and, inclusion of the public participation in future planning and management. Most importantly, it will provide more than 150 publicly accessible acres of public parks, promenades and open space throughout the Bayfront. More local residents will have easier access to quality park experiences – especially those in low-income areas. Although the process took more than a decade, we have arrived at a master plan that has a significant consensus of support on the local, regional and state levels.

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Selena Garcia · Top Commenter
The people aren't in support of the plan. It has been shoved down our throats by a political machine that has ignored the public will.

You're selling snake oil. The 'signature park' is shoehorned into the north end, the coastline will be blocked by structures hundreds of feet tall (almost completely eliminating the bay view for residents), and the promised economic impact is purely speculative (and extremely optimistic) at this point.

Put the UC school on the bayfront. It creates jobs, it enriches the culture, it attracts new businesses, it creates HIGH-PAYING jobs (not just minimum wage hotel armies), allows the public access to the grounds and resources like libraries, and you can still keep a ton of space for parks as it would be beneficial for the residents and act as a study/hangout space for the students. The school might even be able to have a biological/living environment type program that would actively make use of our sensitive lands, which could be a mutual benefit for both the school and the health of the land itself.

How come no one ever talks about that? Even if the construction bonds aren't available yet, they will be... and if Chula Vista residents have gotten good at anything, it's being patient.

Don't rush into a decision of this magnitude. The people aren't behind it... no matter how much articles like this (and the one written by Cox & Moore) try to dress it up... The people are NOT behind it.