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Land Use Planning in a 'Post-Fact' World? Looking Back on Measures B and C in Our Recent Election

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One of the disturbing trends in this turbulent season of national electoral politics was the explosion of uncertainty about information and truth in reporting. The talking points and tweets often wandered so far from actual facts, they left behind an exhausted citizenry. We are still recovering.

This "post-fact" world has brought the nation to an odd juncture. Fake news stories, Internet hacking, and websites that pump out false information remain a point of contention.

Has this "post-fact" epidemic trickled down to our local elections?

Two local ballot initiatives—Measure B (Adoption of the Lilac Hills Specific Plan) and Measure C (Downtown Stadium Initiative)—were beset with enough zigzagging around facts to give one pause. Both measures were flawed in the most fundamental way—development projects completely out of sync with their locations. But both campaigns did their best to use catchy slogans and misleading talking points to keep voters from seeing the truth.

The good news is that voters weren't fooled; they rejected both of these measures. But, the bad news is that the "yes" campaigns spent $5 million (Measure B) and $7 million (Measure C) respectively. That kind of financing can allow folks to spin some rather tall tales. These kinds of "post-fact" campaigns are not going to disappear anytime soon.

So, it may be worth taking a brief look back.

Measure B: Lilac Hills attempts an 'End Around' the County General Plan

Lilac Hills' …[location is] a 608 acre site, located in an isolated, rural area zoned [to] allow up to 110 homes on the site. But the Lilac Hills project proposed to build a whopping 1,746 homes … and 90,000 feet of commercial space.

Measure B asked San Diego County voters to approve the Lilac Hills Specific Plan, which would have amended the San Diego County General Plan, and its Zoning Ordinance. This measure was put on the ballot by Accretive Investments, the developer of Lilac Hills, a master planned community proposed for a rural area 10 miles north of Valley Center, and just east of the I-15. The land parcels were purchased by Randy Goodson, CEO of Accretive Investments, beginning in 2005.
Lilac Hills' essential problem was, as mentioned, its location—a 608 acre site, located in an isolated, rural area zoned for "limited agriculture," a designation that would allow up to 110 homes on the site. But the Lilac Hills project proposed to build a whopping 1,746 homes (of which over 1,000 are single family suburban-style homes), and 90,000 feet of commercial space.

This was a stunning violation of the County of San Diego's updated General Plan, which expressly was written to direct future growth toward existing town centers, while zoning to prevent "leapfrog development" in rural farmland away from those centers. Lilac Hills was classic 'leapfrog development," and, as such, should have never gone beyond its initial outright rejection by County planners.

The larger context for this is quite clear. Since the beginning of the new millennium, metropolitan areas across the United States finally began to face up to the fact that they had allowed far too much "sprawl." Slavish dependence on automobiles is no longer sustainable in an era of climate change, pollution and oil shortages. The "smart growth" movement was born out of this reality. Nearly every major urban area is reigning in urban sprawl, whether through "urban growth boundaries, " zoning restrictions, or climate action plans.

The Lilac Hills Ranch project was, to be blunt, urban sprawl on steroids. As such, it represented a critical test case of whether the San Diego region was going to continue to allow more car-oriented, energy-sapping sprawl, or begin a desperately needed new direction toward smarter, more compact growth, pitched around existing urban centers, especially in the far flung rural portions of the county.

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itself as “smart growth”, even though it lacked the most critical element a “smart growth” community requires—alternative transit.

According to studies, Lilac Hills would generate some 19,000 daily auto trips, in an area that currently has approximately 1,300 car trips/day. This pencils out to around 7 million more automobile trips per year.

Goodson and Accretive knew they were asking for permission to build an auto-centric, mostly single-family housing development in the wrong place. There are no employment centers nearby, no mass transit connections, and few roads. Urban development would be permissible down in Valley Center, ten miles away, but not here.

End of story, right?

Not in our post-fact world, apparently. Accretive Investments tried at least two different tactics to cover over the fatal flaw of the project’s unsustainable location. First, they dressed it up with energy-saving materials for the buildings, trails, open space, and water recycling. This allowed the project to advertise itself as “smart growth”, even though it lacked the most critical element a “smart growth” community requires—alternative transit. Not a single alternative transit option would be available (no trolley lines, rail, or bus rapid transit) at the Lilac Hills location.

Second, out of the more than 1700 homes, they agreed to build a very small percentage at higher densities that would cost less, so they could then advertise the entire project as “affordable housing.” Opponents pointed out that if most of the homes would sell in the neighborhood of $500,000 or more, that did not really add up to using the “affordable housing” label.

Welcome to the new fact-free millennium.

Measure C: Foisting a football stadium on the East Village

And then there was Measure C, the downtown football stadium/convadium initiative sponsored by the San Diego Chargers and their owners, the Spanos family.
Like Measure B, the essential problem of Measure C was its location—East Village.

Measure C asked voters to allow the Chargers to build a stadium there. But, truth be told, the Chargers arrived in East Village in the proverbial eleventh hour. After a stadium deal in L.A. failed to materialize, and with the clock ticking, they needed to convince San Diegans they had wanted to build in downtown all along. And then they needed to convince San Diegans that a football stadium belonged in East Village.

It did not.

Charger consultant Fred Maas … attacked the validity of the cultural model for redevelopment [saying] "…the possibility of bringing some artistic, airy fairy, consultant-based, planner-based plan to those blocks is impossible."

The "Convadium" was an attempt to dress up a project (football stadium with a rather odd, attached convention center annex) that was never going to fit on the East Village site. As a rule, football stadiums are almost never built in the heart of downtowns. The footprints are too large, too disruptive and out of sync with the tightly packed streets and pedestrian buzz of an urban downtown.

So, in Measure C, the Chargers were relying on the smokescreen of fan loyalty toward the team, combined with the now discredited trope about stadiums bringing economic development to downtown. The stadiums = downtown redevelopment myth has now been dismissed by a majority of economists, public policy and urban planning experts around the country.

Indeed, it's almost amusing that while the Chargers were pushing a stadium-centric economic model for East Village, it had already moved on to something bigger and better, to the cutting edge style of downtown redevelopment that is already happening in places like Seattle, Portland and San Francisco. East Village and center city's economic growth are being driven by clusters of high tech and "creative economy" jobs, as well as the "cultural industries," like arts, theater, music, furniture design, architecture, and education. These activities draw millennial and other innovation workers and investors to the excitement of street-friendly, pedestrian scale downtowns where they can live and work. A football stadium is completely out of sync in such a place.

Here are the facts, though. Nationally, … the "creative economy" … employs about 27 million people and contributes some four trillion dollars per year to our nation's GNP, or 18% of the U.S. economy.

But, when presented with these facts, Charger officials and surrogates were willing to say or do anything to retreat back into their post-fact bubble. Charger consultant Fred Maas, for example, during a breakfast forum on East Village last April, attacked the validity of the cultural model for redevelopment. In his words, "…the possibility of bringing some artistic, airy fairy, consultant-based, planner-based plan to those blocks is impossible."

Based on what evidence, Fred? He never mentioned any.

Here are the facts, though. Nationally, according to a U.S. Department of Commerce (Bureau of Economic Analysis) report, the "creative economy" (Maas' "airy-fairy" activities) in U.S. cities (artists, film, culture, music, radio, TV, and its linked industries) employs about 27 million people and contributes some four trillion dollars per year to our nation's GNP, or 18% of the U.S. economy.

Downtown and the East Village are the next frontiers for the "knowledge economy" in San Diego. The Quartyard, an eco-friendly park and community space, is an example of the kind of grass-roots, neighborhood-oriented innovation that can occur here. This "pop-up" space was created on a 25,000 square foot vacant space by former architecture students at the nearby New School of Architecture and Design. That kind of energy is already spilling into surrounding pedestrian-scale neighborhoods like Barrio Logan and Sherman Heights.

Still, in the final weeks of the election campaign, the Chargers were not about to let facts and information about the actual East Village get in their way. In an October 13 Voice of San Diego (*VOSD)* editorial titled, "Don't let the small town undertakers send the Chargers packing, " spokesman Fred Maas once again came out swinging. His target was celebrated San Diego architect Rob Quigley, who, in an earlier *VOSD* piece, extolled the virtues of the recently drafted East Village South Focus Plan for the neighborhood. That plan is built around a mixed-use, residential/office/commercial development plan that would contribute over 5,000 jobs, up to $450 million dollars a year in spending, and as much as $265 million in property tax over thirty years.

Kudos to San Diego voters for getting it right on both of these ill-advised measures.

Maas claimed that Quigley's approach made him a "small town undertaker," because he dared to exclude football from his downtown vision. Oddly, one wonders, who is more "small town" here, someone (Maas) trying to imitate the sports/entertainment district downtown model from places like Indianapolis, a mid-west city surrounded by corn fields, or someone (Quigley) looking to support an urban neighborhood built around the knowledge economy of the future, in one of the sunbelt and west coast's largest and booming cities, with all the advantages of climate, topography, Pacific Ocean, aesthetic beauty, waterfront, quality of life, proximity to Mexico, high technology clusters, and major universities? Why would San Diego need to copy Indianapolis?

Voters understood this. Measure C was rejected by a margin of 57% against to only 43% in favor. Those are huge numbers when you factor in the seven million dollars spent by the Chargers to promote the measure.

Kudos to San Diego voters for getting it right on both of these ill-advised measures. Yet, well-funded development interests in town aren't going away. The "post-fact" syndrome is probably not going away either. We voters need to stay tuned.

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