



CAN THE DEL MAR MESA'S PLANNING BOARD SINKING SHIP BE SAVED?

Captain Paul has decided to go down with his sinking ship. More accurately, the newly elected chair of the Del Mar Mesa Planning Board has decided to sink his ship.

Why this Planning Board has chosen to self-destruct would have intrigued Sigmund Freud. This one is so perplexing the good doctor would have rather shaved his beard than try to find a fix.

Unfortunately for the San Diego's Planning Department, the Del Mar Mesa Planning Board, which is supposed to represent a full 570 households when the area is built out, is the latest in a string of sick boards that the agency has had to cure. University City and La Jolla almost achieved election melt-down last month.

But none of the fall-out from those boards comes close to the cacophony created by a controversial election process and broken bylaws that created a planning board with a supermajority of developers and outside investors, a new chairman with projects in front of his own board, and angry residents calling for dissolution of the board.

The distortions and manipulations of the bylaws that resulted in the elimination of a member who might object to his projects but who has served the board with distinction brought hoots and howls from residents attending last months meeting.

And, by all accounts, the chair's open admission in an earnest speech that his goals were to apply a broader interpretation of the community plan, and to speed his own projects through the city planning process, left most in the audience speechless. He had to be in complete denial.

Freud said that the most destructive defense mechanism available to the ego was denial. That is because the patient has a dim awareness that his behavior is causing great damage to himself and others, but he does it anyway.

Even Freud, who believed all motivation comes from internal forces of self-destruction, understood that bad behavior also requires some external assistance. In this case, the Del Mar Mesa Chair gets plenty of help from people on the board, some who are investors in his projects, and others investors in the tony Meadows golf resort.

But, Planning Groups are advisory bodies to the Planning Commission and City Council only. Their only power in effecting land use policy lies in the credibility of its individual members' ability and integrity, the collective wisdom

guaranteed by a diverse membership, and a fair proportional representation of the entire community.

The Del Mar Mesa Planning Group in one election cycle reduced their status from among the most respected in the city to the most disturbed. This is a body in deep need of an intervention before their supermajority drowns in their own self-congratulatory narcissism.

That insight has to come from the City's Planning Department and the City Council that give direction to planning groups and who rely on their advice as community representatives.

But, Sigmund would warn that the most difficult defense mechanism to tackle is denial. Typically, when confronted the defensive patient becomes hostile, and engages in more self justification. The confronter becomes the enemy rather than a messenger of health.

That is what happened when one Del Mar Mesa developer member who understood the importance of a credible board for good planning and swift project approvals, challenged the wisdom of pursuing the majority's agenda. He was shouted down, and then voted down.

It is now up to the City's Planning Department and the City Council to determine if both the bylaws and recent election missteps have created a board that fails to comply with city policy—planning boards are supposed to be widely representative of their communities.

The city must act quickly and decisively. The Meadows Resort, now owned by hotel developer Doug Manchester, is looking for a squeaky clean and quick approval process for changes to their resort plans at next month's planning board meeting, a prospect more assured than it might have been before the darkness fell.

The Planning Department and City Attorney could decertify the board before that vote, write bylaws that would ensure real residential representation, and hold community wide elections. That is what we call a sunk ship.

The captain of this Titanic could wake up before he hits the iceberg. Supporting an independent commission to write new bylaws for the Del Mar Mesa Planning Board would be a healthy first step.