



THE BANANA REPUBLIC OF DEL MAR MESA

A cancelled election, a stealth candidate, the elimination of an elected office without warning—sounds more like Panama circa 1968 than San Diego in 2003.

Tiny Del Mar Mesa, nestled between Carmel Valley and Los Penasquitos Canyon, is an unlikely setting for a coup d'état.

With its Tuscan-styled mansionettes, rustic ranchettes and chic golf course greens carefully arrayed around miles of olive chaparral covered wildlife preserves, only a few exotic backyards would bring to mind a banana republic.

But last week, in a surprise conspiratorial overthrow, highly regarded and long-time Del Mar Mesa Community Planning Board Chair Jan Hudson was replaced by a developer member during a vote laced with violations of city council policy and its own bylaws.

The move shocked planners, land use consultants and city staffers who have done business with this planning board admired as much for its planning skill, fortitude and fairness as for its familial style. It was a model board under Hudson's stewardship.

Until now, the Del Mar Mesa Planning Board, made up of developers, land owners and residents, squabbled a lot, but always came together to help each other create a unique rural styled community in the midst of the most environmentally important public lands in the city.

An investigation is underway by the Planning Department after complaints were lodged about election procedure violations, including the seating of three board members without a ballot cast and the installation of a new member a month early allowing him to vote for officers.

Particularly disturbing was a vote to eliminate a board seat and with it arguably the most dedicated and astute environmental community planner in town, Anne Harvey, without public notice just before the vote. Other complaints include failure to inform members who were viewed as Hudson supporters that the chairmanship was going to be contested.

The regime change has put a fox in charge of the chicken coop: a developer who does not live in the area but has major projects in front of this board now Chairs a city advisory body charged with making sure new projects conform to the community plan.

At least three other planning boards in the city are embroiled in election controversy over alleged irregularities, including improper noticing, ballot box stuffing, questionable nomination procedures and in some cases, failure to even hold elections as required by law.

All of the cases involve accusations ranging from barefaced city policy violations to bumbling bylaw breaches by planning board members fighting to control advisory boards that have no real land use decision making power but are viewed by City Council Members and the press as neighborhood voices.

In University City, the ballot box was sequestered after evidence surfaced that votes were possibly cast by people living and working outside the area, and the La Jolla Planning Group postponed their election after nomination procedures were challenged.

Less shadowy, but just as undemocratic, several boards including Carmel Valley's failed to hold an election at all because the incumbents ran unchallenged and an election was deemed unnecessary.

Power struggles between developers and residents around election time are not new to Planning Boards. Several years ago, Torrey Hills residents discovered that developer written bylaws allowed employees of large companies in the area to vote whether they lived in the area or not. They flooded early elections there until the bylaws were changed.

The amplified intensity of the dark doings this year is an indication that these advisory groups are exerting increasing influence on San Diego's landscape.

But the iconoclastic Del Mar Mesa Planning Group has operated worlds away from the 42 other volunteer urban boards, a diverse group of neighbors and developers overseeing the development of their community with a common vision to maintain a rural equestrian atmosphere and protect the city's most important habitat preserve system.

The sudden upheaval is hard to figure, but with Del Mar Mesa half built, it is widely read as a change in direction for the board.

The new chair has made it clear that he favors small enclaves of walled gated communities over the open connected rural-like neighborhood envisioned by Hudson and the community plan. Many are worried that the change heralds the suburbanization and Balkanizing of this one-of-a-kind area.

It also remains to be seen how a developer chair with projects in front of the board can set agendas, name committee chairs and represent the board at Planning Commission and City Council hearings without conflict of interest problems.

While the undeserved public humiliation of two distinguished women by some members of the Del Mar Mesa Planning Board displayed a gross lapse of manners, the manipulation of the process was shameful. Norriega would have been proud.