



SMOKESTACKS INTO FUME HOODS

Biotechnology is any municipality's dream come true. A clean trade that provides high wage jobs and highly valued products, the biotech industry deservedly has maintained an impeccable public relations track record in San Diego.

And so it is puzzling why this crucially important industry, represented by its trade group Biocom, decided to flex some new-born political muscle on behalf of a commercial developer who wants to build two buildings bigger in what is shaping up to be a gun fight against the neighbors in Torrey Hills, many of whom are members of the tech tribe.

But, there they were at a recent community forum hosted by Councilman Scott Peters, sincere bio nerds complete with power-point presentations, haplessly trying to convince nerve-frayed residents that the biotechnology facilities contemplated for their newish neighborhood are so positively and absolutely safe that they can be built across the street from the recently finished Del Mar district elementary school.

Judging from the body language of the biotech gladiators thrown, along with a fire marshal and two county regulators, to the irritated community lions by the PR geniuses who cooked up this grizzly event, they were ill-prepared for the level of audience distress—and educational level.

After an excruciating half-hour of a blatantly one-sided presentation designed for Sesame Street droolers, the meeting collapsed after a pleasant presenter began an in-depth dissertation on what is a pipette, a laboratory item known to most junior high school students.

That is when tempers flared from an audience possessing more advanced degrees than exist in the state of Arkansas even absent the many biotech professional homeowners opposed to the project who stayed away for fear of losing their jobs or businesses.

But, it was the cynical attempt to cast residents who are in violent disagreement over changing an employment center into a mini-biotechnology park as fringy hysterical opponents of the entire biotechnology industry that galled most in attendance, a characterization made possible only by the dynamics of a meeting where rational opposition, which exists, was nowhere to be found on the stage.

The political muscle present at a community meeting called only five days previously, including high level staffers to state, county and city public officials, as well as representatives from the Economic Development Corporation and Biocom, suggests that this ruckus represents more than a melee over two buildings in li'l ol' Torrey Hills.

With its promised availability of employment center space near homes and schools, the rapidly developing SR56 corridor is the wet dream of smart growth advocates imagining happy workers bike peddling and walking to and fro. But, it is also a potential nuclear battle zone if the city does not take a look at its research and development zoning policies, soon.

And so, it is not hard to imagine how the biotechnology folks were talked into coming as dinner to the Torrey Hills community on behalf of two buildings if they are convinced that the brush fire in Torrey Hills could create a catastrophic blaze of protest against any building containing hazardous materials in employment centers near residential areas.

The culprit in this sorry mess is not the developer who wants to believe that all biotechnology labs are benign so he can maximize his profits, or the biotechnology industry that feels compelled to defend itself against real and imagined foes, but the City of San Diego, which has relied on research and development zoning laws written in the mid-1970's when such research was largely mechanical.

Current law, which is as antiquated as the balance-beam scale, does not define differences between various uses within the general R&D designation, nor take into account changes in the industry since these laws were written.

Biocom would better serve its membership and the larger San Diego community by joining with community planners instead of engaging in self-defeating and humiliating skirmishes against them and work to reform the city's zoning laws so that communities feel safer in their presence.

Such a process was undertaken by the city and county with the nationally recognized and successful Multiple Species Habitat Plan—environmental, planning, business and builder interests hammered out a policy that defined clearly on the basis of science wildlife corridors that should be preserved and land that can safely be built on.

Long overdue is a city science and technology advisory panel to help formulate level headed policy and design ordinances that clearly define what are acceptable uses near homes, parks and schools so that commercial builders know what and where to build and home buyers know where and what to buy.

But, the MSCP took a lot of leadership to bring the right people to the table and keep them there. So far, that kind of leadership is in short supply among public officials who seem satisfied with simply replacing smokestacks with laboratory fume hoods.