



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

www.lisaross.com

A SUNDAY CHEVRON ROAST

Whenever more than a dozen reputedly asocial suburban Southern California neighbors get together, it is considered an event.

Last Sunday, over four hundred residents of Carmel Valley's new southern neighbor, Sorrento Hills, threw an afternoon picnic party in a neighborhood park and three television news cameras showed up.

It was not the hot dogs or the sunny day that pulled such a large crowd and news media attention, but the theme of the event—an opportunity to talk about the consequences to their community of decisions made by city planners and regional policy makers long before they bought their homes. And talk they did.

From the latest outcroppings of Rancho Penasquitos to Sorrento Hills, new neighbors are banding together to fight the grotesque side effects of San Diego's "smart growth" planning strategy that plunks down some of the ugliest, and sometimes unhealthiest, types of commercial enterprise into their back yards and threatens to add more density than their community plans contemplated without requiring additional public facilities.

In Rancho Penasquitos, it is the specter of a big box strip shopping center and high density apartments sandwiched between quiet neighborhoods of single family homes and SR56; in Sorrento Hills, a Chevron gas station mini mart complex that will glare into the windows of several hundred homes and add pollutants to the air.

And in Carmel Valley, pressure from city planners may force a developer to turn his townhouse project, once considered high density, into a much more intense project of four story stacked units.

As one resident of Sorrento Hills said at the Sunday afternoon event, nothing brings people together more than a threat to home and hearth. But, because San Diego's recently revised zoning codes are designed to encourage commercial, retail and residential uses

within easy reach of each other, the battle to preserve neighborhood character is like rowing against a tidal wave.

A recent Planning Commission hearing on the Sorrento Hills Chevron station reveals a great deal about what is in store for neighborhoods all over San Diego.

Hundreds of residents and the Sorrento Hills Planning Board found themselves up against eight power house Chevron guns who resisted any and every change to their project suggested to them by the Planning Commission, from eliminating a noisy car wash and limiting hours of operation to changing striping and landscaping, because they simply did not have to make those changes.

In the end, the largely sympathetic Planning Commissioners sat with their hands tied by zoning codes that allow a range of uses within the zoning designation "Neighborhood Commercial," a term that could mean a quiet neighborhood coffee house or as big and ugly a gas station as could possibly squeeze into the Sorrento Hills property. And, the commissioners were out of their area of interest, expertise and jurisdiction in regards to the health and air quality issues raised by a nuclear medicine expert.

But, it is just this health argument that has begun to capture the attention of news media as communities from Waimea to Orange County have successfully beaten back efforts to build gas stations in their residential neighborhoods based on concerns about carcinogens as well as bad land use planning.

The proposed Sorrento Hills Chevron is sure to rise to the center of the controversy because of the site's proximity to power lines that recent research indicates could exacerbate the health effects of gas station emissions.

With the health effects Pandora leaping out of her box, Chevron has a festering public relations mess on their hands in Sorrento Hills.

And, their unwillingness to scale back the sprawling project to fit this residential area or to find an alternative site throws one more spear at attempts by city planners to win the hearts and minds of San Diegans for their nascent "smart growth" strategy.