

## Annenberg Project What Happened and Why

From: tomlong@palosverdes.com  
Sent: Saturday, November 20, 2010 12:12 PM  
Subject: Annenberg Project What Happened and Why?

Message:

Dear RPV Residents,

The way in which the city has likely lost the proposed Annenberg Project bears some additional discussion because of the consequences it may bring. I have had additional time to garner some facts about what happened and they present a picture that should be made public. The decision was singularly the worst I have seen in my seven years on council because of the substance but even more importantly the process behind the decision. The city's decision was the product of a 3-2 vote on November 16th that can be reconsidered if one of those in the majority (Wolowicz, Missetich, or Campbell) chooses to support reconsideration. I urge you to write to the council at cc@rpv.com asking them to do so and to do it at our next meeting on November 30th.

In 2008 the city council voted 4-1 (Clark, Gardiner, Long and Stern in favor and Wolowicz dissenting) to proceed with the planning application for the Annenberg Project. At the time the council determined that the project would not require a general plan amendment. The project continued to move forward to the point that a Draft EIR was prepared and an initial hearing was held before the planning commission a few months ago.

Residents within the community opposed to the project, most notably Eva Ciccoria, contacted David Siegenthaler of the National Park Service (NPS) to lobby against the project. Ms. Ciccoria, the wife of Palos Verdes Land Conservancy (PVPLC) President Ken Swenson, is also actively lobbying the State of California to block grant applications for other park improvements in the city. Siegenthaler was told that the Annenberg Project was a "dog pound" and relayed that misrepresentation of the project to his superiors in Washington D.C. Without contacting either the Annenberg Foundation or other supporters of the project or any elected officials, Siegenthaler attended planning commission meetings where he spoke mostly to opponents of the project and some, but not all, members of the planning commission. He wrote letters suggesting that the project violated deed and program of utilization (POU) restrictions but also admitting that he really did not have complete information about the project. His letters also failed to explain the process for getting an official determination from the NPS or for seeking amendments to restrictions if needed. Siegenthaler's letters were a premature judgment on the project based on misrepresentations. Siegenthaler now essentially admits this.

I made a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the NPS to obtain Siegenthaler's files to try to learn more. Interestingly Ms. Ciccoria learned of my FOIA request before I got a letter from the NPS acknowledging receipt of the request. Ciccoria contacted me to complain about the request and to demand that I withdraw it. She cannot articulate any good reason, however, for her desire to conceal the NPS files from the public. I have received only a limited

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partial response to my request. If and when I get a complete response I will post the results on my webpage.

In the meantime, the Annenberg Foundation continued to work to bring its proposed project through the planning process. Over the two years since the council's 2008 vote to permit the application to proceed, the project was further modified to address concerns. Over the course of the past few months Annenberg's representatives met with each councilmember and was assured of support by each. Most significantly Mayor Wolowicz assured the foundation that he was "100% in support" of allowing the application to proceed.

In advance of planning commission and council hearings, project opponents continued to misrepresent the project describing it as a "huge development," a "dog pound" and an "animal hospital." The former commercial farm and untended fields where the project would be located were falsely described by opponents as "pristine open space." The proposed building footprint on 3% of the land was described as "dense development" and all of the non-building features of the project and many of its other aspects were simply ignored. Opponents of the project mischaracterized Mr. Siegenthaler's letters as well as the deed restrictions and the POU. The deed was misrepresented as requiring "open space passive recreation" when it does not even contain the phrase "open space" or the word "passive" anywhere.

The planning commission hearing on the project was disrupted by Mr. Siegenthaler's letters. Understandably the planning commission felt that it needed guidance from the city council as to how to proceed in light of the letters. At the council hearing on November 16th Ciccoria and others falsely characterized the letters as a final decision of the NPS that demonstrated that the actions of the council allowing the project to proceed were "illegal." Ciccoria was again resorting to misrepresentation. Mr. Siegenthaler explained that his letters were preliminary and did not represent a final NPS decision. He clearly indicated that such decisions cannot be made until the city applies for a determination. Siegenthaler also indicated his preference to have the determination based on a project that had gone through the entire planning process. The process also includes the ability to seek amendments to the restrictions if necessary.

Given our knowledge of many of the facts above on November 16th, it should have been easy for the council to send the project back to the planning commission with instructions to continue the process. Siegenthaler had clearly indicated that NPS was willing to work with Annenberg and with the staff. Nothing about the project had changed to justify reconsidering the council's 2008 determination that the project was worth considering in the planning process. And no council member identified any new information that justified reversing his earlier declaration of support of the project.

Amazingly, and with almost no explanation, three councilmembers voted to abort the planning process. One of the three, Councilman Campbell, continued to say he supported the project. Councilman Misetich and Mayor Wolowicz left their votes largely unexplained. After 4 years of work and after clear earlier indications that it felt the project should get a full hearing in the planning process, the council abruptly ended the process without a coherent explanation. In light of this, a number of people understandably have expressed the view to me that the trustworthiness of RPV's council is questionable.

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Regardless of what one thinks of the merits of the Annenberg Project, all of the residents of RPV should be appalled by the process used to kill the project. Much of the process was hidden from public view and left totally unexplained. Much of it was based on misinformation that the Annenberg Foundation was not given an opportunity to fully answer through public exposure of that misinformation and through the public hearings of the planning process.

We should understand that the way the Annenberg project was handled, even more than just the rejection of the project, will have serious ramifications for RPV. Major private donors were in the audience on November 16th watching how our city council handles donors. One was heard to remark “I don’t need to go through something like this.” Another donor has withdrawn some funds that were on deposit with the city for possible civic center improvements—interestingly redirecting them to PVPLC. Of course PVPLC has taken no official position on the Annenberg Project or any other land use matter in RPV. But its President previously joined his wife Ms. Ciccoria in personally lobbying against the city’s application for a grant to provide park improvements at Abalone Cove. That lobbying too was characterized by misrepresentations.

Now that 1400 acres (15% of the city’s land area) is in the city’s Palos Verdes Nature Preserve, eliminating sources of funding for improvements on public park land may be seen by some as a way to further expand “open space preservation.” Of course what the city really needs is help protecting and maintaining the open space it has, not converting its parks into yet more open space. RPV has had to turn to others, notably the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, to provide a park ranger program, because of the inability of the PVPLC to provide RPV with all of the help the city needs. Hopefully the energies of those now attacking the city’s parks can be redirected to constructively helping PVPLC fulfill its original mission. PVPLC clearly needs that help.

Whatever hopes we had for public private partnerships between RPV and charitable foundations and other agencies, those hopes are now likely dashed for decades to come. While open space preservation has been successful and likely will be for some time to come, efforts to improve the city’s parks, educational opportunities and its civic life in general are sure to suffer.

Tom Long  
Mayor Pro Tem, Rancho Palos Verdes