



What Happens When Foes of the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative Panic?

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With the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative hurtling toward its deadline to turn in more than 62,000 signatures for its March 2017 ballot measure, the forces arrayed against the measure, which curtails developer influence over the L.A. City Council and protects neighborhoods from wildly inappropriate mega-projects, are panicking.

A Los Angeles Times op ed last week badly fibbed about the citizen initiative — which is strongly backed by a richly diverse quilt of L.A. residents from every corner of the city — as a measure pushed by “wealthy homeowners” who would somehow “severely restrict building altogether.”

Those and other ignorant comments were sounded in the paper by a density developer who believes in slashing parking to force Angelenos onto the bus, and an academic who argues L.A. should be like Chicago — but who built himself a hilltop L.A. aerie protected by leafy, dense trees.

Such ignorant comments negate the tens of thousands of L.A. residents who back the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative and its embrace of the kind of growth that preserves neighborhood character and our unmet needs for affordable housing, parks and open space — but does not overwhelm our streets, sewers and water supplies.

We are a movement of working-class Latinos fighting displacement by luxury housing developers, and South L.A. residents trying to stop profit-driven gentrification from overrunning their historic neighborhoods, and residents from the Valley to the Westside to the Wilshire District fighting towering glass projects that destroy neighborhood character and create surface street gridlock.

Absentee investors and greedy developers are pouring money into the safe harbor of L.A. luxury development. They are urged on by their many apologists. The Coalition to Preserve LA, sponsor of the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative, has come to expect a drumbeat of inaccurate slams from the op ed pages of the Los Angeles Times.

In fact, the paper's op ed page has repeatedly refused to publish a single essay from the Coalition to Preserve LA, instead demanding a series of rewrites, then further rewrites, that water down our message. Meanwhile, those pages have rolled out a months-long series of attacks on our citizen initiative, penned by ill-informed essayists and, worse, people with a vested interest in paving over communities.

Since we cannot get our own views published in those lofty op ed pages, here is the reality:

- While opponents of the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative have raised money solely from a very few rich developers, our broad-based citizen initiative has inspired more than 225 donations averaging about \$25 from across the city and across every economic strata.

Jill Stewart, campaign director of the Coalition to Preserve LA, noted that, “To our knowledge, in the past 20 years, no citizen ballot initiative to reform Los Angeles City Hall has ever attracted hundreds of small donors. In a normal world, that would be considered news.”

- Los Angeles now has a luxury housing glut, with the city's housing department admitting that all housing built in the past ten years has a whopping 12% vacancy rate. After correcting for the affordable housing that was built (and quickly rented), the luxury housing glut has a 15% to 20% vacancy rate — endless, gleaming, unwanted,

ghost condos and penthouses in a city where even fully employed residents cannot find an apartment or afford a home.

Zillow's chief economist has dismissed City Hall's "trickle down" theory that piling on more luxury units helps the middle class and poor. Dr. Svenja Gudell warned that low-end rental prices in L.A. are skyrocketing amidst luxury overbuilding, saying, "Very high demand at the low end of the market is being met with more supply at the high end, an imbalance that will only contribute to growing affordability concerns for all renters." She urged construction of affordable, not luxury, housing.

- The Neighborhood Integrity Initiative ends the political favors granted to luxury developers, favoring legal development that doesn't tower over its neighbors and is allowed by existing zoning.

Former Mayor Richard Riordan says, "More than 95% of development built in L.A. follows the zoning rules, and will thrive under the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative. And that's what we need, instead of these \$3,000-a-month apartments City Hall is pushing. It's ridiculous." Developers' apologists have no choice but to reach for absurd whoppers, claiming that our citizen measure will "severely restrict building altogether."

- The Neighborhood Integrity Initiative forces the City Council to do its job: Update the badly aged L.A. General Plan and 35 Community Plans, a public process that will give communities who are now awash in mansionization, small lot subdivisions and overdevelopment a strong say in shaping their futures.

Hated by City Hall, this core reform requires the City Planning Commission to schedule all of its community "update" hearings in the neighborhoods themselves, at night and on weekends only. Not during the day and not downtown — where packs of developers and lobbyists dominate the room.

- The Neighborhood Integrity Initiative forces the City Council to follow the rules: It ends the rigged system in which the City Council approves "spot zoning" — back room deals in which an individual council member acts as a development czar, tossing out the existing protective zoning to encourage mega-projects and luxury overdevelopment.

No wonder lobbyists for developers raised \$124,046 in the first quarter of 2016 on behalf of seven Los Angeles City Council members, to grease the way for these back-room "spot zoning" deals. Where is the series of newspaper op eds on that?

- Luxury overdevelopment, from Westlake to Highland Park to Van Nuys to Venice, is worsening the homelessness crisis and displacing thousands of people. According to City Hall's data, city practices have allowed the demolition, or conversion to condos, of 22,000 affordable apartments since 2000.

What is the result of this travesty of demolishing, instead of repairing and saving, older affordable housing? According to The Real Deal real estate news site, this year, L.A. rents in the bottom third of the housing market skyrocketed 27.5 percent.

The Neighborhood Integrity Initiative returns us to rational planning, fair land-use, and healthy and empowered community engagement, forcing City Hall to end its Wild West approach to how L.A. grows and what it becomes. No thanks, Chicago.

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