

## Editorial

### Ridgeline developer seeks support with poison pen mailers

The public debate over rezoning the Ridgeline property from open space to single family residence took an ugly turn with a series of spiteful, unfounded mailers that attack the very community the developer seeks to win over.

The printed materials mailed to East Orange residents were an apparent response to two planning commission hearings held last month. Ridgeline Equestrian Estates is seeking a zone change on the 52-acre parcel in the heart of Orange Park Acres to allow 38 estate homes to be built.

The public hearings were attended by some 250 rezoning opponents and about 30 supporters. During the May 3 and May 17 meetings, 40 members of the community spoke against it.

#### Inside out

“Who were those guys?” the mailer from Ridgeline Equestrian Estates asks, referring to the largely local opposition. “We believe they were summoned in by consultants paid to help fill the room.” The text goes on, “many of the opposition attendees were not real OPA residents, they were members of outside groups.”

Most of “those guys” dismissed by the developer were, in fact, long time members of the OPA community. Some of them residents for 25 or more years. Their faces are familiar; they know each other and are well known by people who participate in OPA activities. They were not the outsiders in the room.

A review of the public comments made at both planning commission hearings reveal that of the total 43 rezoning critics, 35 live in OPA, four in the Colony and one in Orange. Those not living in East Orange included two members of the equestrian coalition and a land use consultant. Those speaking in favor of the development included nine Ridgeline neighbors; three non-local representatives from the Building Industries Association and OC Taxpayers Association: two former employees of the developer; and five consultants with addresses ranging from Tustin, Laguna Beach, South County and Placentia. About one-third of the total pro-rezoning constituency (including non speakers) were paid consultants. None of the open-space advocates were.

#### Outside in

Yet the Ridgeline Equestrian Estate mailer ignores its own line up of “outsiders” and labels the opposition attendees “members of outside environmental groups and allied organizations.” It also fails to note that the Ridgeline property owner Klaus Dieckel, a Laguna Beach resident, is himself a member of an “outside group” of investors.

The mailer further notes that those 40 local voices amounted to “mob rule.” Jane Canseco, a 30-year OPA resident, was one of the mob. Her message to the planning commission: “You are not obligated to make a zone change simply because one is sought, because the property owner

stands to make a load of money or because he'll lose money if you don't. You *are* obligated to preserve the quality of life in perpetuity for all of the citizens of Orange."

The first flyer to hit local mailboxes suggested that the anti-zoning campaign was financed by "an outside direct donation." A second flyer, this one bearing a vague reference to taxpayers on Meads but with no return address, provides a name. The "outside interest" controlling and paying for the anti-rezoning campaign is, according to the anonymous author, the Sierra Club.

A slate mailer sent to Republicans in the city of Orange offered a "Taxpayer alert." "Stop Sierra Club operatives from their take and tax property rights violation scheme," it said. ". . . ask planning commission and city council to approve the Ridgeline plan."

### **Ridgeline who?**

A survey of Sierra Club leadership at the Orange County and regional level turned up no one who had heard of the Ridgeline project. "Sierra Club is surprised and dismayed," says Bob Siebert, conservation chair of the Sierra Club's Orange County Group, "that this developer is making false statements about Sierra Club involvement and opposition when the Club has taken no position on this project."

There may be legitimate reasons to support rezoning, but none of these flyers mention them. Instead of offering a fact-based case to rally neighborhood support, the developer throws mud at the people who disagree with him.

The Orange Park Association Board and Real Estate Committee are pilloried for hiring an attorney and a public affairs firm and paying "hefty" retainers, bonuses and expenses. All financed by the "outside direct donation." "Who is actually paying these bills," the mailer asks, "and why are these outsiders so interested in what happens in OPA?"

### **The bills stop here**

Anyone familiar with the OPA Board and its voter-approved mandate to work in the best interests of the community would know that financing comes from association dues and fundraisers. The bills are paid by the Board and not by "the Sierra Club and allied environmental organizations" as the hit piece claims.

The final offense is a cheap shot at the community's intelligence. Everyone who has followed the Ridgeline controversy knows that the city must grant a zone change before houses can be built. Yet the mailer wants people to believe that the desired zoning is already there. "The one-acre estate lots for Ridgeline are in compliance with the OPA Plan and the City of Orange General Plan," it says.

Not so. The Orange General Plan was amended in 1989 and defined the Ridgeline property as recreational open space. If it held any other designation, the developer would not be seeking a zone change; he wouldn't need to.

The zone change (or no zone change) will affect the community and is therefore worthy of healthy public debate. But the debate is pointless if facts are dismissed in favor of slurs, false accusations and complete fabrications.