

The Loudest Voices in the Room

The real losers behind Alhambra's reactionary dispute

by Eric Sunada

There has been a marked increase in contention from single-family home neighborhoods regarding Alhambra's land development. Voices are loud and many enough to be heard by local government commissions and elected officials. This has [outraged real estate investors and speculators](#) who claim that their development rights, which in the past went largely uncontested, are [now being denied](#).

But the approvals leading to those rights matter. When obtained unethically and without good-faith public participation, there is a palpable sense of collusion between developer and officialdom given their common, short-term goal of increased revenue. And when such rights are cited as a shield against detractors, it only adds to neighborhood indignation as many residents see local government existing primarily for their own protection.

Take for example the *Villages at the Alhambra*, by far the largest residential development planned for the city in recent times with about 1,100 new dwelling units on the [northeast corner of Fremont Avenue and Mission Road](#). The developers behind this project received a tremendous boost in their property value when the city approved a zoning change that lifted the restriction of professional office buildings only and allowed high density residential at three times that of the standard multi-family unit. The zoning change, although general in the sense that it applies to any such parcel greater than 30 acres, was clearly targeted to this specific developer since it is the only site that qualifies in the city.

The city council voted on this change under the premise of a much smaller development with no discussion on the wider implications for the rights being granted ([ref. 1a](#), [ref. 1b](#)). It allows them to build 100% market-rate with no affordable units, would be located in the most congested area of the city, is not located near any transit-oriented districts, and sits atop the most contaminated area of our Superfund site. The granting of these rights occurred under a mayor who

concurrently worked as a real estate broker in Alhambra. After leaving office, he would be [invited to participate in the interview process for the city's Development Services Director](#) and today consults for this developer on the very project he helped approve. His inside access includes [ghost writing a signed letter from the mayor in support of the developer](#) and [choreographing public hearings](#). Given the amount of government-market collusion, the developer "rights" have understandably lost legitimacy in the eyes of many.

These include residents who have been incensed by the increased density, traffic, tall buildings, and consumption of space associated with recent and planned developments. The protectionist rallying call is commonly focused on maintaining a nostalgic aesthetic and a familiar quality of life.

The marginalized majority

But denying legitimate development for the common good is no less harmful. There is a critical need for supportive and affordable housing. No other factor has as far and detrimental a reach into household stability as the high cost of housing. Nearly half of our households struggle with affordability and over 60% are renters. As measured by the federal McKinney-Vento Act standard, we have hundreds of homeless children in our school district.

It's this vital segment of our population that are caught in the middle. Facing them on one side is the long-time residential home owner, who is often motivated to do so by a desire to maximize their home value and will fight anything that might be perceived to bring it down. On the other is the market-driven city that will not build meaningful amounts of affordable housing. Just the opposite, the hyper-commodification of housing that defines our times ensures only that there is never a shortage of unaffordable units. Just ask our school district that continues to see a

decline in enrollment while the number of dwelling units in the city increases.

Our vulnerable population is put in that position by what amounts to structural violence at the hands of those wielding a disproportionate share of power or wealth. We are failing our households who have been unable to jump on the Ponzi scheme of homeownership and whose income cannot compete with higher bidders. That is, most of our households. And it's our younger generation who are asked to pay for the regressive tax structure and high housing costs that help boost the wealth of the property owner.

The city's future hinges on one question

One of the most common questions from those opposed to development are "why can't the city put a park there instead?" That's easy—because the market, who we've been relying on, will not build it. Just like they won't build affordable housing unless subsidized to profitability. But think of this. What if I said you could have a park and open space interspersed with supportive multi-family housing in place of our burnt-out buildings and speculator-held vacant lots. Such development would bring in families to further enrich our schools and support our local small businesses. And what if I further said that the city would not be saddled with debt to do it. **Would you say yes?** It's not farfetched, given the availability of state and county money and other resources that are being poured in to help alleviate the housing crisis.

The answer to this question depends on whether you put your trust in people who, given a home to thrive, can help build a sustainable city for the future. Or do you double-down on the current status quo. Oscar Wilde once wrote "Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, it is asking others to live as one wishes [them] to live." Whether it's the real estate lobby or market-driven property owner, their agenda of self-enrichment through housing commodification requires people to live without. I don't believe that's sustainable unless the goal is a transactional city. No, I'm betting on a city built for the people, and I hope you will too. Live and let live.