

South Bay's Developments – Degrees of Change

At this year's second Breakfast Dialogue run by Citizens Coordinate for Century 3, a five-person panel described in detail the newest and upcoming developments in an oft-ignored part of San Diego County – South Bay. On February 25th, C3 invited representatives from the cities of Chula Vista, National City, Imperial Beach, and San Diego to answer the question, “What does South Bay know that the rest of us don't?” After over an hour of presentations, it was clear that many projects are underway in the region, from the construction of office spaces to the redesigning of street corners. South Bay leaders seem to know how to plan developments that benefit their residents and improve the neighborhoods they govern, even when they do not change them fundamentally.

Gary Halpert, City Manager of Chula Vista, introduced the morning's speakers with references to the land use “dramas” currently making headlines in the county. He highlighted what is perhaps the most unique characteristic of South Bay cities, their proximity to the busiest international border crossing in the world, especially in the case of Imperial Beach, the first topic of the day.

The City Manager of the southernmost beach town in California, Andy Hall began with a friendly admonishment to those seated at the gathering, asking whether they had ever even been to Imperial Beach. For a town marketed as “Classic Southern California,” with fifty percent natural spaces and a view of the Pacific Ocean, Imperial Beach receives little attention from the average San Diego resident. According to Andy, the city battles with a lack of funds, its location that is far from people's commutes, and its county-wide reputation for being dirty and unsafe. Ignored by outsiders, however, Imperial Beach has begun to invest in its own improvements. First, Pacifica Companies – the private developers who also own thirty-five undeveloped acres of the Chula Vista waterfront – built Marriott's beachfront Pier South Resort and restaurant. This served as a catalyst for other developments in the community, like the revamping of Seacoast Drive. Bikeway Village uses repurposed industrial buildings to house a hostel, bike shops, and restaurants and to serve as the anchor for Bayshore Bikeway, which connects Imperial Beach to downtown. The improvements in Imperial Beach have involved residents, who, according to Andy, simultaneously “want new stuff and everything to stay the same.” His office has held open-air budget workshops and ad hoc committees to review zoning concerns in the effort to “make progress without change” that is approved by local residents.

The following speaker echoed the importance of public input in development plans. For Brad Raulston, Executive Director of Planning and Development in National City, the challenge is “convincing locals that change can be good.” The plans underway in his city include a Paradise Creek development that includes National City's first new park in forty years as well as 201 affordable housing units. According to Brad, National City leaders must work with the city's “old bones,” its industrial history and the resulting infrastructure, and a federally protected marsh. This community “in the center of everything” is also effectively roped off from the rest of San Diego by freeways. Brad Raulston's department is seeking to use as many city and state funds for projects that include rebuilding the storm drain system, establishing an aquatic center in an old boathouse, and improving Kimball Park. The city is investing especially in redesigning streets and intersections, making them pedestrian- and bike-friendly and facilitating the flow of traffic. Once again, it would seem that the developments in National City are geared towards locals, a welcome change from the nonstop onslaught of gentrification across the country.

Chula Vista was the center of attention for the next speaker, Erick Crockett, the city's Economic Development Director. Describing Chula Vista's “major developments,” he cited the campus-style office spaces in the Millenia project that are now for rent as well as the long-term plans for Chula Vista

University. The latter is proposed to occupy 375 acres of land in the eastern suburbs of the city, creating a binational center for research and academia. Chula Vista leaders are also interested in improvements to their neighborhoods that include fiber optics, traffic data boxes, and infrastructure for electric and eventually autonomous vehicles. Erick mentioned the Chula Vista Bayfront development, which represents some of the last untouched land along the entire West Coast, for its successful cooperation with the environmental community, but gave little detail. Of the South Bay cities, Chula Vista has the most possibilities of developing on new land, as opposed to being restricted to redevelopments.

The last speaker, Nancy Bragado, addressed the gathering as the Deputy Director of Planning for the City of San Diego. Seeking to fill the gaps in the discussion about South Bay, she briefly described the San Ysidro community plan which is in the process of adoption and the Otay Mesa community plan which was adopted in 2014. Improvements in the region focus on transport centers and roads and seek to deal with the congestion caused by the nearby border crossing.

The members of the Dialogue had little time to ask questions, but the importance of nearby Mexico was highlighted as an inspiration for Latino urbanism and an important trade and tourism partner for South Bay neighborhoods. The ubiquitous problem with traffic was brought up, to which Gary Halbert responded that Chula Vista's quality of life was nonetheless high.

The planning projects in South Bay undoubtedly continue to favor the suburban, southern California model. Density, citizen initiatives, public transportation: these words were absent in the presentations prepared for C3's gathering on Thursday. South Bay planners and government leaders continue to design their neighborhoods around the use of cars and the business of real estate developers, all while C3 members discuss how to build a 21st century model of San Diego. This Breakfast Dialogue was an important reminder of the need to be aware of development patterns all around San Diego county if this goal is to be achieved within our lifetimes.