

# **A Short History of Community Activism in Chula Vista**

**1970's to present**

**Prepared by:**

**Crossroads II**

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"A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."  
Margaret Mead

## Foreword

This year of Chula Vista's Centennial Anniversary, as we honor our past 100 years, may be good time to remember that Chula Vista's proud history includes a strong tradition and pattern of community activism. This activist history has shaped the city in significant ways. Some examples are summarized below. *Crossroads II* welcomes corrections and additions to this brief history.

## Widening North Second Avenue – NOT!

In 1971, if you were driving south on Second Avenue from 30<sup>th</sup> Street in National City, as soon as you crossed the Sweetwater River, you would have had to drive up a crooked road to get to the level part of Chula Vista (about C Street). There were many accidents on that section of the road, particularly from people not making one of the curves.

Two families who lived on Second Avenue both found out by accident that at the next Council meeting the City Manager was going to recommend not only straightening out that crooked section of the road, but also to **widen Second Avenue to four lanes all the way from the National City border to H Street!** One of those families was Susan & Peter Watry; the other was the Tabers. Susan and Peter printed some flyers, made up a petition, and went door-to-door on Second Avenue from C Street to H Street collecting signatures and pleading with people to come to the Council hearing that Tuesday night.

At the Council meeting, as people filed in, Susan and Mrs. Taber asked people if they were there about Second Avenue. If so, they were given an inch-wide green ribbon about 6 inches long to pin on their lapel. The Council Chambers was packed to overflowing. The Council wisely decided on a 5-0 vote NOT to widen Second Avenue. Forty years later, although north Second Avenue carries a lot of traffic, it is still a pleasant 2-lane residential street.

Also, at that time, CalTrans had a 4-lane bridge crossing the Sweetwater River planned for Second Ave. After the action by the Council described above, the activists present asked the Council to follow up by requesting that CalTrans change its plan from a 4-lane bridge to a 2-lane bridge. The Council did, and CalTrans did. Today there is a 2-lane bridge over Sweetwater River connecting 30th Street in National City to Second Ave. in Chula Vista.

## Public Ownership of Water

From 1888 until 1977, local water supplies, including the Sweetwater Dam, were owned by a succession of private companies. In 1977 the private owner was the California-American Water Company (Cal-Am). But privately-owned

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water companies could not buy water from the Colorado or California aqueducts, so the South Bay Irrigation District (SBID) was formed as a public agency that could purchase aqueduct water and distribute it through Cal-Am's pipe network.

In the 1970s, the Directors of the South Bay Irrigation District (SBID) decided they should buy the private company, Cal-Am. After some court battles, SBID had to have an election to approve the bond issue necessary to do so.

SBID asked local activist Susan Watry to be their campaign manager. Although outspent by Cal-Am by at least 10:1, Susan and SBID won the election because (1) with little money available, a lot of citizens volunteered their time to walk precincts, especially the local chapter of the League of Women Voters under the leadership of Reva Lynch; and (2) Susan "knew the territory;" she knew from experience which precincts would most likely vote heavily in a special election like this, and which would not. Those few precincts were walked several times over, and no time was spent walking the precincts unlikely to vote very heavily. Cal-Am wasted their money by sending literature to every house in the district, whether they were likely to vote or not.

Thus the Sweetwater Authority, a public agency, came into being to control the water supply for National City, Bonita, and the western part of Chula Vista.

### The Rancho del Rey Battles

Chula Vista's Rancho del Rey neighborhood has been the subject of some of the most intense battles in Chula Vista's history of community activism. In the early 1970's, a San Diego developer/dentist named Dr. Leonard Bloom owned a fledgling American Basketball Association team called the Conquistadors. Dr. Bloom decided that the current location of the Terra Nova neighborhood shopping center at East H St. and I-805 would be a great location to build a 20,000 seat sports arena surrounded by retail development. Dr. Bloom had an option to purchase generally all the land surrounded by I-805, East H St., Otay Lakes Rd., and Telegraph Canyon Rd. **Dr. Bloom's plan included mass grading this entire area and filling all the natural canyons, including beautiful Rice Canyon.** The City Council, under the leadership of Mayor Tom Hamilton, voted to approve Dr. Bloom's proposal.

A group of activist citizens formed *Citizens Concerned for Chula Vista (CCCV)* and collected enough signatures for a ballot initiative to put Dr. Bloom's proposal to a public vote. The referendum passed; meaning the Council's vote in favor of Dr. Bloom's proposal was null and void.

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Dr. Bloom came back with a revised plan that eliminated the 20,000 seat sports arena, but still included excessive amounts of development. The revised plan was approved by the Council again. CCCV started another petition drive, collected enough signatures to put the issue on the ballot again, and won again.

After the second referendum passed, Mayor Hamilton formed a committee called the Advisory Committee on Rice Canyon Development, nicknamed ACCORD. This committee composed of 50% developers/real estate interests and 50% concerned residents, co-chaired by realtor Ken Kolk and community activist Peter Watry, worked together with city planners to come up with an acceptable a plan for the area. The result of that effort was the plan for the now-existing Rancho del Rey neighborhood of our city and the preservation of the wonderful open space canyons that Rancho del Rey residents enjoy today.

Then around 1990, city planners decided it would be good if Chula Vista had an auto park like the National City Mile of Cars to get the hefty sales taxes car dealerships generate. They decided that the area along East H St. where the Costco and Home Depot are now would be a great location for auto dealerships. Then-Rancho del Rey resident Patricia Aguilar joined with other Terra Nova and Rancho del Rey residents in opposing the concept of having auto dealerships in this area, which is completely surrounded by quiet residential neighborhoods. Calling themselves *No Auto Dealers Allowed (NADA)*, this group worked with Mayor Gayle McCandliss and other members of the city council on an alternate solution. The result of those discussions was city hall's decision to put the auto dealerships on Main St. Subsequently, the "power retail center" that includes Costco, K-Mart and other "big box" stores was built along East H St.

### Growth Management

As the negotiated plan for Rancho del Rey was just beginning construction, a developer came to town with a plan for a new development called *Eastlake*, and wanted to begin construction immediately. Because Rancho del Rey was just beginning construction, this plan meant there would be a lot of empty land between Rancho del Rey and Eastlake. This is known as *leapfrog development*. The city's planning director at the time, Jim Peterson, opposed the Eastlake development for this reason, and was fired as a result.<sup>1</sup>

While Mayor Will Hyde was the only member of the City Council at that time who voted against the Eastlake development plan, the problem of "leapfrogging" was discussed and recognized by everyone on the Council. So even though four Council members voted for the plan, they added the stipulation that by the time a certain number of units were built, East H

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Peterson still lives in Chula Vista and is an active member of the *Crossroads II* Board of Directors.

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Street had to be widened. When Eastlake reached that maximum number of units, East H St. had not been widened. So all five Council members voted to put a development moratorium in place until the widening occurred. (This was the first and only time the Chula Vista city council has ever declared a moratorium on development.) The moratorium lasted until Eastlake agreed to pay to widen both East H Street and Telegraph Canyon Road from 2 lanes to 6 lanes between I-805 and Eastlake. (As Rancho del Rey continued to fill in between 805 and Eastlake, those developers had to reimburse Eastlake for their fair share of the street widening costs.)

Meanwhile, the Council seemed to become more and more pro-development, approving any and all development projects that came along. In response, in 1986 former Mayor Will Hyde and City Councilman Frank Scott, working with other activist citizens, formed *Crossroads*.

In the 1960s the city of San Diego had approved the development plan for Mira Mesa. The developer put in streets, sewers, electrical services, built houses, and sold them. But when people moved in, they found that there were no schools in the area, no parks, no libraries, no police substations – none of the services the city is responsible for providing. The result was a very unbalanced community.

The citizens who had formed *Crossroads* took a look at this and declared this should not happen in Chula Vista. From an idea suggested by Bill Robens, they proposed a series of “thresholds” that had to be met as development occurred. *Crossroads* proposed this to the developers, and they agreed that such thresholds seemed reasonable and desirable. Throughout the summer of 1987 meetings were held by *Crossroads* and developers with city staff members present, and together a series of eleven thresholds were hammered out. The thresholds were designed to ensure that private development and public development would proceed together. At that time Chula Vista was lucky to have developers who, because they were in it for the long-run, recognized the value of the thresholds. Some of these developers included Bob Santos for EastLake, Kim Kilkenney for Otay Ranch, and Ken Baumgartner for McMillan Companies.

So, with one or two exceptions, as development projects have been completed east of I-805 over the past couple of decades and people started moving in, the schools were there, the parks were there, fire stations were there, etc. One high school was late, for a variety of reasons, and the city has "borrowed" money from the library fund for other uses. As of this writing the library threshold has not been met, and Chula Vista residents who live between I-805 and the SR-125 toll road still have no community library.

The thresholds and the Growth Management program included a Growth Management Oversight Committee (GMOC) to annually look at the data to make sure that the thresholds were met, and if not, why not. The thresholds and the GMOC

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were the greatest contribution of *Crossroads*. Amazingly, the original thresholds that were developed that summer in 1987 have stood the test of time and are still being used as of 2011. The GMOC is now doing a "top to bottom" review of the growth management program, so we shall see if it can be done even better.

*Crossroads* disbanded in 1993, once the planning for Otay Ranch had been completed.

### The Cummings Initiative

Joe Cummings was a retired naval officer with a Ph.D. in psychology. He served many terms as an elected Board member of the Chula Vista Elementary School District. He was also a member of *Crossroads*.

During the late 1980's a sitting Chula Vista city councilman was brokering real estate deals by getting investors to buy single-family development, getting it re-zoned to multi-family, reselling it at much higher prices, then paying off the investors. The councilman's investors included local politically well-connected individuals. Joe Cummings got so upset over this practice that virtually alone he set out to gather enough signatures to put an initiative on the ballot.

When almost ready to turn his signatures in, a fire in Joe's garage destroyed most of the petitions. Undeterred, Joe simply went out and collected the signatures again. He finally had enough, he turned them in, the initiative was put on the ballot, and it passed. This 1988 initiative, since referred to as the "Cummings Initiative," is still in effect today. It requires that a property can only be up-zoned one step at a time, and cannot be up-zoned again until a 2 year waiting period passes.

### No! to Annexation of Bonita-Sunnyside

The late 1980's was a busy period for community activists. The Bonita-Sunnyside Fire Protection District is an unincorporated area of the county of about 7 square miles northeast of the City of Chula Vista. It is occupied by about 12,000 residents and 4,000 homes. During the late 1980's, three people from Bonita requested that the city annex the area. The primary reason given for this request was that the "community" was much closer to the City of Chula Vista than to County government, and the annexation would mean better government for Bonita-Sunnyside residents.

But other Bonita residents viewed the annexation as a loss of local control of their community. After all, Bonita already had an established Planning Board and a Fire Department Board whose seats were filled with elected local residents, and an active Civic Association that looked after many other concerns of the local community. Chula Vista offered none of

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these neighborhood institutions, and still does not to this day. But perhaps the most important local concern was potential loss in property values, because City zoning code does not allow for farm animals, like horses.

Under California law, all annexation requests must be reviewed by a state agency called the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). LAFCO agreed to study the proposed annexation, and appointed San Diego County as the "Conducting Authority" for the annexation process and public hearings. During this process, several local residents started a petition drive to terminate the annexation study, because they believed a majority of residents (50% plus 1 of the voters or landholders) did not want to be a part of the City of Chula Vista. In late 1988, a signed petition was submitted to the *Conducting Authority* to end the study, because 65% of the registered voters had signed the petition declining to be annexed to the City of Chula Vista. LAFCO ended the annexation study, and that was the end of that.

### Saving Friendship Park

About the year 2000, the city decided it needed a new police station to keep up with the fast pace of growth happening on the east side of the city at that time. Rather than build a second station in east Chula Vista, they decided to build one big centralized police station near the civic center that would serve the entire city through the final build-out of Chula Vista. (Ironically, the Chula Vista Police Dept. recently opened a "storefront" operation in the Otay Ranch shopping center.)

In 2002, after considering several sites, the staff scheduled a special City Council meeting on a Saturday morning for a decision. The staff recommended that Friendship Park (behind the Civic Center Library) become the site for the police station – or rather, to replace Friendship Park with a police station. On this Saturday morning no members of the public were present, but one Union-Tribune reporter was there, and she wrote an article about the City Council's action.

When that article appeared in the newspaper in subsequent days, all hell broke loose. Citizens quickly organized a petition drive against the action, and within a few weeks some 4,000 people had signed the petitions. The leaders in this effort were Susan and Peter Watry, Frank and Joan Roseman, former Mayor Will Hyde, Gerry and Carlene Scott, and Sharon Floyd. Most of the signatures were gathered at tables set up in front of the Civic Center Library. Library employees were not allowed to sign the petitions, but they were generous in their whispered words of gratitude and encouragement.

After several weeks the City Council wisely directed city staff to find another site for the new police station. They eventually chose a site directly on F Street, directly across from the Library. And that's where the police station is today. Later, the Council changed the zoning of Friendship Park to "Park."

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In early 2003, in conjunction with construction of the new police station, a complementary project was to line Fourth Avenue in the area of City Hall with palm trees. The problem was that the palm trees to be planted on the east curb of Fourth Avenue meant that some of the wonderful mature eucalyptus and other trees in Friendship Park would have to be cut down. The usual suspects (Sharon Floyd, former Mayor Will Hyde, Susan and Peter Watry) took exception to this insult to their newly-saved Friendship Park, and with friends started a protest movement. Sharon Floyd contacted local television personality Turko, and he came and did a story that aired on KUSI television. One day they spread out along the Fourth Avenue curb with balloons and signs that read, "Honk if You Love Trees" – drivers did. Within a couple of weeks word was sent out that the city had decided not to cut down any of the trees in Friendship Park. Later the activists held a wonderful celebration in beautiful Friendship Park. It was at this celebration that the Watrys met Patricia (Pat) Aguilar.

### Southwestern College's "Corner Lot"

Pat Aguilar, who worked as Director of Planning at UC San Diego, moved to Chula Vista in 1990 when she married Nick Aguilar. (Nick is a long term south bay resident who at the time served on the Sweetwater Union High School District Board of Trustees.) Pat applied for and joined the city's Design Review Board (DRB). At one of the DRB meetings, a developer from Los Angeles presented a plan for development of a strip mall on Southwestern College's vacant "corner lot" at East H St. and Otay Lakes Rd., as well as on some of the beautiful lawn area in front of the college on Otay Lakes Road. As a university campus planner, Pat was appalled that the college would give up this property to a developer to build a strip mall, especially given the future growth planned for Chula Vista and south San Diego County. She began talking to her neighbors about it and solicited the help of Susan and Peter Watry. (Peter Watry, a retired Southwestern College faculty member, could not say no.) Soon, *Citizens Against Retail Expansion (CARE)* was formed under the leadership of Pat Aguilar, Lupita Jimenez, Tom Davis, Sam and Barbara Longanecker and a few other hardy souls. They called themselves *CARE* because they cared about Southwestern College and wanted to see the historic front lawns of the campus preserved, and the corner lot developed, but for college uses, not another strip mall. *CARE*, working behind the scenes with Southwestern College faculty members, filled the room at meetings of the Southwestern College Governing Board for months on end. Eventually the Board decided to end its agreement with the L.A. developer. Today the front lawns are intact and the "corner lot" is planned to be developed for college uses. In early 2003, activists from *CARE* joined with activists who had worked to save Friendship Park and formed *Crossroads II*.

### The General Plan Update, Espanada, and Community Character

An update of the city's 1989 General Plan had begun in 2001. While the earlier 1989 General Plan focused on new subdivisions on the city's growing east side, the General Plan Update focused on redevelopment of the city's older west

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side. *Crossroads II* president Pat Aguilar served on the General Plan Update Steering Committee. The draft of the General Plan Update proposed high-rise buildings in three locations in western Chula Vista called *Transit Focus Areas* - near the E and H St. trolley stations, and along H St. between Third and Fourth Ave. The Fourth and H Transit Focus Area came to be known as a *Transit Fiction Area* - the only transit there was a bus stop, no different than bus stops all over the city. It seemed plain the only reason this location became designated as a Transit Focus Area was to allow a high rise condo project called Espanada to proceed.

In July 2003, realtor/developer Jim Pieri, who built the Gateway office buildings at Third and H Sts., submitted plans to the city for a high-rise condo project called Espanada, proposed to be built just west of the Gateway complex. The proposed project called for two 15-story steel and glass high rise towers with 100 condominiums each. Before submitting the project to the city for approval, and even before he owned all the land needed, Mr. Pieri started advertising the project in local publications and began collecting deposits from potential buyers. In the fall of 2003 the project was rejected by the both the city's Resource Conservation Commission and Design Review Board. Local realtor Earl Jentz, who owned property near the project, formed the *Roosevelt Street Coalition*, which joined with *Crossroads II* to oppose the project. Jentz paid for a series of ads in the local Star News newspaper in opposition to the project. *Crossroads II* collected thousands of signatures on petitions opposing the project. Local contractor/developer Kevin O'Neill, who was developing a piece of property he owned on Roosevelt Street, helped by encouraging customers in his Broadway deli to sign the petition.

Pat Aguilar, who served on the city's General Plan Update Steering Committee, argued for an alternative to the "preferred" General Plan called the "Community Character Alternative". The purpose of this alternative was to preserve Chula Vista's small-town feeling by, among other things, restricting development in and around downtown Chula Vista to mid-rise building heights. Aguilar made presentations to both the General Plan Steering Committee and the City Council comparing Oakland to Pasadena, both suburbs of major metropolitan areas, arguing that Pasadena's "harmonizing" approach to redevelopment was a better fit for Chula Vista than Oakland's high rise approach. The General Plan Update Steering Committee adopted Aguilar's point of view.

The matter came to a head in the spring and summer of 2005. At a Council workshop in May of that year, Mayor Steve Padilla upped the ante by suggesting **that high-rises be permitted along the entire length of H St.** between Third Avenue and I-5. This concept was supported by outside special interest groups, but four polls of Chula Vista residents indicated that 70 to 75% of residents opposed high rise development in western Chula Vista. Dave Wood, Aileen Price and residents of a condominium complex called Holiday Gardens located at the west end of H St. also banded together and protested vigorously. The matter finally came to head in the fall of 2005 when Mayor Padilla wrote to Earl Jentz and announced he was withdrawing his earlier proposal for a General Plan alternative that that designated the Transit Focus Area on H St.

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between Third and Fourth Avenues for high-rise development. (It was rumored that that the mayor's change of heart came when he learned that developer Pieri needed a major subsidy from the city to make his Espanada project work financially.) But the mayor also proposed that an "economic development and land use" study of the H St. corridor be done. Mr. Pieri withdrew his application for the Espanada project, and in December 2005 the city's new General Plan was adopted by the City Council with community support. The H St. corridor study was never done, and Mayor Padilla was voted out of office in November 2006.

### The Urban Core Specific Plan and "Entitlements"

A Specific Plan is a zoning document intended to implement a General Plan. Given the focus of the newly adopted General Plan on redeveloping Chula Vista's older west side, city leaders started calling most of northwest Chula Vista "the urban core" and started on path to rezone the "urban core" in the hope of attracting big development projects by "entitling" them through zoning. (Once a piece of property has been rezoned, the property owner has a right - or an entitlement -to develop the property up to the limits the new zoning allows.) This hope was seen in reorganization within City Hall. The wife of a well-connected downtown San Diego developer was hired by the city to head the effort, and under the reformed *Community Development Department*, was given a lot of power and staff to plan for and attract new development to northwest Chula Vista. Nothing wrong with that - many parts of northwest Chula Vista need redevelopment and revitalization. What the zoning document failed to recognize, however, is that there are also many parts of northwest Chula Vista that deserve protecting and cherishing. So the fight over protecting the baby while disposing of the bathwater began.

During the General Plan discussions, *Crossroads II* kept bringing up the Cummings Initiative. (See above.) Under the Cummings Initiative, up zoning a piece of property several levels at once cannot be done - up zonings must be staged over time. *Crossroads II* was told that the *Cummings Initiative* was a zoning issue, not a General Plan issue, so it would dealt with in the context of the Urban Core Specific Plan zoning document. But the organization's request that this issue be paid attention to fell on deaf ears within the city's Community Development Department, who argued against all evidence that the *Cummings Initiative* was not applicable to the Urban Core Plan. In the end the city attorney overruled the Community Development Department and said that all residentially zoned property covered by the Urban Core plan had to be removed from the plan. So this was done, and northwest Chula Vista's charming single family neighborhoods were preserved. Kent Thompson and Jillayne Salmon of the Jefferson Street neighborhood southwest of H St. and Broadway were key to this effort.

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By this time a new civic organization, the *Northwest Civic Association*, had formed using *Crossroads II* as its model. Its first president was Pamela Bensoussan, a historic preservation advocate, who was subsequently elected to the Chula Vista City Council. The *Northwest Civic Association* joined with *Crossroads II* in protesting this assault on Chula Vista's historic northwest quadrant. Despite the hard work of civic activists, or perhaps because of it, at the last minute an addition to the proposed zoning plan called "Development Exceptions" was added. This new provision allowed wholesale exemptions to the zoning controls, making the plan itself practically meaningless. In 2007 the City Council approved the Urban Core Specific Plan, but on a 3-1-1 vote. Newly elected Mayor Cheryl Cox joined with Council members Rindone and McCann in supporting the plan. Newly elected Councilman Rudy Ramirez voted no, and Councilman Steve Castaneda was absent. This action was followed by a series of citizen initiatives (propositions) in the style of the *Cummings Initiative* (see above).

#### More Initiatives: C, E and Q

First was Prop C. Taking up the mantle of Joe Cummings (see *Cummings Initiative* above), Chula Vista resident and realtor Earl Jentz, with the help of businesses on Main Street and mobile home park owners, sponsored an initiative to restrict use of *eminent domain* in Chula Vista. *Eminent domain* is the government's right to take private property by declaring that it is needed for a public purpose - like widening a road or building a new park. (If the city does this it is obligated to pay "fair market value" for the property.) However, in 2005, in a 5-4 decision the U.S. Supreme Court validated the government's right to take private property and turn that property over to another **private party** for redevelopment (*Kelo vs. City of New London*). Publicity and controversy over this Supreme Court case followed. Then locally, representatives of the proposed Espanada project used heavy-handed tactics to threaten a property owner on Roosevelt Street with eminent domain. Anger over these events led to a petition drive to place a measure on the ballot prohibiting the City from utilizing eminent domain to take property for private development unless the voters approve. The initiative became known as Prop C, which passed overwhelmingly in the June 2006 primary election with almost 74% of the vote.

Prop E followed closely on the heels of the City Council's 2007 approval of the *Urban Core Specific Plan* (see above). Prop E, which would require a vote of the people to exceed maximum building heights called for in the General Plan, got enough signatures to be placed on the ballot. An ugly community battle ensued, and the city was torn apart. In a heated and expensive election, Prop E lost by a close margin. In the end the sub-prime mortgage crisis intervened, the real estate market collapsed, and the *Urban Core Specific Plan* sits gathering dust.

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As community activists were submitting Public Records Act requests researching various issues connected with Prop C, Prop E, and the Urban Core Specific Plan, it seemed that the City Attorney repeatedly favored and protected the wishes of the mayor and City Council who could, after all, fire the City Attorney at will. This led, in part, to Prop Q, an initiative to make the Chula Vista city attorney an elected instead of the Council-appointed position it had always been. The argument was that an elected city attorney would be more responsive to the concerns of the voters than to the City Council members who appointed him. "Establishment" figures including Mayor Cheryl Cox and Deputy Mayor Jerry Rindone opposed Prop Q. The Yes on Q campaign was supported by Earl Jentz and a collection of community activists, including Norma Cazares, Past President of the South Bay Forum; Retired Naval Officer Gerry Scott; Larry Breitfelder, President of the newly formed Chula Vista Taxpayers Association; Theresa Acerro, President of the Southwest Chula Vista Civic Association; and Delores Dempsey, President of the Chula Vista Mobile Home Park Association. Prop Q passed in the November 2008 election, and in June 2010 Chula Vista elected its first elected city attorney.

### The Rolling Hills Ranch Truck Route

In around 2006, Con-way Freight, in the Eastlake industrial-business district of Chula Vista, became the center of a neighborhood controversy in Rolling Hills Ranch. Rolling Hills Ranch, located in northeast Chula Vista, is one of the new, upscale communities in east Chula Vista. The neighborhood is bisected by Lane Avenue, which runs north-south between Proctor Valley Rd. (East H St.) and Otay Lakes Rd. (Telegraph Canyon Rd.). Con-way, which operates 18-wheeler trucks 24 hours a day, was using the south end of Lane Avenue to reach Otay Lakes Rd./Telegraph Canyon Road to access I-805.

With no notice to the neighborhood, the city Engineering Department suddenly installed truck route signs on the north end Lane Avenue, which bisects the Rolling Hills Ranch neighborhood. Once the signs were in place, large 18-wheeler trucks began using the northern half of Lane Avenue to reach I-805 via Proctor Valley Road/East H St. 24 hours around the clock, creating serious noise and safety problems for neighborhood residents. A local resident, Dr. Sue Hauwiller, organized other residents, including Angela Brill. Through the Rolling Hills Ranch Ad Hoc Committee established by Brenda Norton, residents protested at Council meetings and complained to any official they could get their hands on. The controversy dragged on for months until Con-way Freight representatives and officials from the City of Chula Vista finally held a raucous public meeting. Following this meeting, the city removed the truck route signs from the north end of Lane Ave. Con-way agreed to restrict their truck traffic to the south end of Lane Avenue, which, while not as convenient for them, does not bisect residential areas. Today Rolling Hills Ranch residents are once again enjoying the tranquility of their own piece of heaven.

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In Progress: The Chula Vista Bayfront Plan

Chula Vista's frontage on San Diego Bay is marked on both the north and south ends by two recently established National Wildlife Refuges. (The National Wildlife Refuge System is a system of public lands and waters set aside to conserve America's fish, wildlife and plants.) The Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) sits on the north end of Chula Vista's bayfront. Established in 1988, the 316-acre Sweetwater Marsh NWR extends from just north of the flood control channel separating National City from Chula Vista, to about G St. in Chula Vista. The Chula Vista Nature Center sits in the Sweetwater Marsh NWR.

The 3,940 acre South Bay NWR, dedicated in 1999, encompasses most of the south end of San Diego Bay. The South Bay NWR was established to rescue and restore what little of San Diego Bay's historic coastal habitat is left. Although spared the impact of extensive dredging and filling that has destroyed 90 to 100% of natural habitat in the north and central parts of San Diego Bay, the south end of the Bay has also experienced significant habitat loss. The salt marsh and mudflats that had historically occupied this area were eliminated beginning in the 1870's by evaporation ponds used to produce salt. Nevertheless, the South San Diego Bay Unit of the San Diego Bay NWR is the largest contiguous mud-flat in southern California. Part of the South Bay NWR sits west of Chula Vista between Palomar Street and Main Street.

Chula Vista is blessed by the presence of these Refuges, and no one disagrees that they must be cherished and even enhanced if possible. But, as noted earlier, the fact that Chula Vista's Bay frontage sits between these two Refuges has severely restricted land uses in the proposed *Chula Vista Bayfront Master Plan*.

In 2002 the San Diego Unified Port District began preparing a plan for the development of properties in Chula Vista under the management of the Port District. The first issue the Port District had to deal with was the fact that there were two parallel planning efforts going on at the same time: one for Port lands, and the other for the *mid-bayfront*, which developer Pacifica Companies had an option to purchase at the time. Eventually it was agreed that the 500-acre Chula Vista bayfront between the Sweetwater Marsh NWR on the north and the South Bay NWR on the south, including the mid-bayfront, should be planned together. This decision was a major accomplishment.

Next came the process issue. A large committee called the Chula Vista Bayfront Citizens Advisory Committee (the CAC, for short) was formed with every interested interest group participating, including labor unions, environmental organizations, developers, representatives of government agencies, and a few local organizations. The Port hired the renowned waterfront planning firm of Cooper, Robertson & Partners of New York to work with the CAC to produce a plan. They produced a fine plan for the Chula Vista bayfront that featured a grand 32-acre waterfront park as its

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centerpiece. This central park, right on the water, was the most important piece of the plan for community activists. It was to be Chula Vista's landmark park....what Balboa Park is to San Diego.

It was to be an oval-shaped park that could hold an amphitheatre for outdoor concerts on the Bay, and be ringed by civic and cultural buildings. It was to be Chula Vista's crown jewel, designed to bring east side residents west, serve as a gathering place for city-wide special events of all kinds, and to attract people from all over the county to enjoy the amenities of Chula Vista. Known as Option C, this grand plan was approved by the CAC and approved at a joint meeting of the Chula Vista city Council/Redevelopment Agency and the San Diego Port District Board of Port Commissioners in May, 2004. Everyone seemed happy. The developers had land to build on, Goodrich Corporation (one of Chula Vista's oldest and largest employers) felt protected, Pacifica Companies was content, the environmental groups were happy because the Refuges were protected, and the local activists got their landmark park and civic cultural space; consensus had been reached.

Then Gaylord Entertainment (a nationwide operator of large resort hotels and convention centers) came to town and announced they wanted the landmark park site. The Chula Vista Bayfront Plan was completely redone to accommodate Gaylord's wishes. The effect of this planning effort was to relocate 2/3rds of the landmark park to the mid-bayfront portion of the planning area. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the environmental organizations demanded a quiet passive park here instead of an active park because this part of the park was now adjacent to the Sweetwater Marsh NWR, and they worried that having an active public park next to the Refuge might disturb the wildlife. But this decimated the original intent and purpose of the park as an active central gathering place. (Some community activists have renamed it Library Annex Park, because there is not much one is allowed to do there but read a book.) This was simply not acceptable to local community activists who believed Chula Vista residents need and deserve the large, active landmark park incorporated into the Bayfront Plan envisioned and endorsed in 2004.

Rubbing salt into the wound, the environmentalists also demanded that the park be separated from San Diego Bay by a 6 ft. tall chain link fence, so park users would see through the fence to the Bay, but have no access to the Bay. But the environmental organizations were acting to protect the resources in the Refuge, which is what they are supposed to do. It's not their fault. The fault for this current controversy lies in the hands of leaders in the city and with the Port District who continue to insist on a plan to accommodate Gaylord in the hope that Gaylord, which has rejected Chula Vista twice now, may eventually want to come back. Since their second flirtation with the city, Gaylord has expressed no interest whatsoever in Chula Vista. Yet leaders at the Port and city, unwilling to let go of this hope, are willing to risk rejection of the Bayfront Plan by the California Coastal Commission because of community opposition, when there is a superior plan (the previously approved Option C) that gained acceptance by **all** interest groups, including the community activists.

*"A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*  
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Rubbing even more salt, this decision to totally alter the originally intended fundamental nature of the park was made behind closed doors out of view of the members of the CAC and the public at large. Instead, the deal to restrict uses on 2/3rds of the former landmark park was made following a series of closed door meetings between a coalition of environmental organizations led by the Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) and the Port District. This led to a "Settlement Agreement" between the environmental organizations, the Port and the city. Under this agreement, the environmentalists got the restrictions of use of the park they wanted, among other things. In return, they agreed not to sue, and to support the revised Bayfront Plan as it made its way through various approval bodies.

**The entire revised plan was approved at one grand meeting of four different advisory and decision-making governmental bodies on a mid-afternoon in May 2010. The Port District got what it wanted – a plan they believe will pay for itself without any investment from the Port, and a guarantee they will not be sued by EHC. EHC and their environmentalist partners got what they wanted – enhanced protections of the Refuges and a funding source to do even further mitigation. But the residents of Chula Vista got cheated in the process.** Naturally, Chula Vista community activists are incensed and have vowed to fight the proposed plan when it goes before the Coastal Commission.

The eventual outcome of this battle remains to be seen, but it is likely to be bitter.

### The Civic Associations

Besides *Crossroads*, *Crossroads II* and the *Northwest Civic Association*, Chula Vista has spawned several other active civic groups. Other than the original *Crossroads*, perhaps the oldest is the *South Bay Forum*. Founded in 1998 by Norma Cazares and other local activists, the South Bay Forum is a non- partisan political action committee (PAC). Beyond its political activities, the South Bay Forum also addresses the educational and social needs of the Chicano/Latino community in the San Diego South Bay area, while building coalitions with other communities.

Besides the *South Bay Forum*, *Crossroads II*, and the *Northwest Civic Association*, Chula Vista is also benefitting from the activism of other self-formed civic associations. These others now include the *Southwest Chula Vista Civic Association* under the leadership of Theresa Acerro, the *Chula Vista Taxpayers Association* under the leadership of Larry Breitfelder, and the *Chula Vista Civic Association* under the leadership of Isabelle Espino. All of these organizations are active today, albeit without support or even recognition from city hall. Together these organizations continue to influence the dialogue and decisions made at city hall, to the benefit of the wonderful town of Chula Vista and its people.

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Afterword

To Chula Vista's community activists, our town's best quality is its friendly, small town, wholesome, residential, family-centered feeling. Cherishing, preserving and protecting those qualities has been the objective of local community activists since the 1970's. That vision will only continue to be realized through tenacious and vigilant activism by Chula Vista's future residents.

*"What thou hast inherited from thy fathers, acquire it to make it thine"*  
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1748 – 1832

*"Eternal vigilance is required."*  
Chula Vista Mayor Will T. Hyde, 1919 - 2004

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