

# Activists, Santa Ana Officials Reconcile on Strategic Plan

By ADAM ELMAHREK | Posted: Monday, March 17, 2014 6:48 am

After weeks of tension, Santa Ana officials and activists have come to an accord over the city's strategic plan, a framework to guide the City Council's policy making over the next five years.

The plan, which will go before the City Council on Tuesday, is mandated by the city's 2012 "sunshine" ordinance and represents a significant victory for activists and others who have been fighting for more transparency and influence in a City Hall that was for years dominated by Mayor Miguel Pulido and a small cabal of officials.

But the road has been bumpy, with members of Santa Ana Collaborative for Responsible Development or SACReD, the group that successfully lobbied for the sunshine law, complaining publicly in recent weeks that city officials were ignoring their wishes regarding elements in the plan.

Specifically, they and other activists wanted it to address restorative justice, emphasize equity among neighborhoods, provide internships for youth and call for the end of the city contract with U.S. Immigration Customs Enforcement or ICE to house immigration detainees.

Yet despite support for these issues from many residents, businesses, the labor community and other groups, they were left out of earlier drafts of the plan.

“We were just surprised and kind of dismayed that the draft provisions didn't include our priorities, other than a token mention of restorative justice,” said Clara Turner, policy analyst with Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development.

Things began to change after the activists made a public show of frustration at the March 4 council meeting and reporters started calling city officials.

Initially, council members Vincent Sarmiento, Sal Tinajero and Michele Martinez reacted defensively, with two saying SACReD leaders had not appreciated their efforts and another accusing the group of acting in bad faith.

Councilman Sal Tinajero, who has been SACReD's strongest council supporter, said it wasn't fair for activists to say council members weren't listening. City leaders had halted impounding of undocumented immigrants' vehicles, had passed the sunshine ordinance and had taken other actions that benefited working-class Latinos, he said.

“Then we are told we are not listening to our community. That is like a dagger in the heart,” Tinajero

said. “I’m just saying, I think there’s a time when you need some tender love and care. And you need to give credit where credit is due.”

Sarmiento went even further and alleged SACReD didn’t support an effort to have private companies help in groundwater cleanup because the activists received funding from The Irvine Co.

“Sometimes you sit up here and you wonder, watch out for your enemies, but sometimes you gotta watch out for your friends,” Sarmiento said. “Unfortunately, you can’t just do enough sometimes.”

When asked to by a Voice of OC reporter, Sarmiento didn’t provide evidence to support his claim that SACReD’s positions were compromised by Irvine Co. funding. But he said that SACReD was circulating a letter of support and that they had reconciled.

Then the afternoon of March 13, City Manager David Cavazos took the unusual step of arranging for SACReD leaders to accompany him to an interview with a Voice of OC reporter without giving the reporter prior knowledge of the arrangement.

During the interview, Cavazos unveiled a new draft of the plan showing that the city had acquiesced to most of what the activists wanted, with the notable exception of language addressing the ICE contract.

“This plan is a Santa Ana plan. We’ve taken ownership of this with the community,” Cavazos said, calling the plan “progress, not perfect.”

With Cavazos and other city officials looking on, activists Apolonio Cortes, Andrew Hauserman and Daisy Gonzalez reacted positively.

“Not exactly as we wanted it, but it’s there,” Cortes said in Spanish. “We’re really happy for the community. ... It’s not a perfect plan, but we see the desire and the goodwill. ... It’s really important that we be part of this history and be part of making this happen.”

There is, however, still the sticking point of the ICE contract.

Activists’ most recent offer to the city was to include in the plan a promise to end the ICE contract as soon as “economically feasible.” They say that this contract is “morally incongruous” for a city with a large population of undocumented immigrants.

Taking federal inmates in exchange for payments helps the city offset the costs of operating the jail, which was built in the early 1990s during a violent crime wave that had reached epidemic proportions. City leaders then decided to construct the jail because the county jail was so busy that it stopped taking misdemeanor offenders.

But crime has dropped significantly in the ensuing decades, and today the jail houses only ICE and U.S.

Marshals Service detainees while running a multimillion-dollar budget deficit.

Cavazos said that ending the ICE contract isn't yet financially possible. With construction bond payments not be paid off until fiscal year 2023-24 and with personnel and other operational costs, the jail isn't yet at a point where the contract can be terminated, Cavazos said

But he said city officials are studying ways to pare down the cost of the jail. He speculated that refinancing the bonds, having part-time employees do the work and negotiating cheaper prices on other operations contracts could be as means to reduce costs.

Cavazos said that the immediate goal is cost recovery and that he hopes this can be achieved in six to 12 months.

“I believe we'll have more options available in the future once we have cost recovery,” Cavazos said. “I don't think we're going to hear the end of this.”

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