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Council: Developer stole vote

WESTCHESTER: Area residents say Playa Vista rigged the outcome by sending construction workers to cast ballots.

By David Zahniser Copley News Service, Daily Breeze

When Westchester and Playa del Rey's neighborhood council held its latest election, it saw the kind of heavy voter turnout that most sections of Los Angeles would envy.

Instead, neighborhood leaders are fuming over the Feb. 12 vote, after the development company Playa Vista sent busloads of construction workers to cast votes and rewarded them afterward with free beer and chicken wings across the street.

Election challenges have already been filed, with some residents saying Playa Vista crossed a line by sending workers who lack a direct stake in the neighborhood's future.

Playa Vista and its allies are also angry, saying young children were allowed to vote. And both sides expressed dismay over the behavior outside the polling place, where some voters yelled at each other and others were videotaped as they waited for ballots.

"It was very sad. That's the word that I would use," said Westchester-Playa del Rey Neighborhood Council President Gwen Vuchsas. "I'm president of the council, and I was saddened by what I witnessed."

City officials say turnout was relatively high for the arcane and relatively obscure world of neighborhood councils, which are marked by dozens of candidates and few of the rules required in other elections. An estimated 1,650 people turned out to vote for the 11 open seats in Westchester and Playa del Rey, with one contest so close that it remains unresolved.

The battle in Westchester and Playa del Rey has exposed issues that are roiling several of the city's 81 advisory-only councils -- questions over who is allowed to vote, what election rules should apply, and whether a single group should be permitted to dominate a neighborhood council.

The neighborhood council's elections committee will review the controversy at 7 p.m. Monday in the Community Room of the Westchester Municipal Building, 7166 W. Manchester Blvd. Part of the discussion will

likely center on the construction workers, and whether they went willingly or were pressured.

"They were complaining that they were told that if they didn't vote they would lose their jobs," said Raedean Kiesz, a Westchester resident who said she spoke to several workers employed at Playa Vista.

Under the City Charter, a stakeholder in a neighborhood council is defined as anyone who lives, works or owns property within the council's boundaries. That broad definition has led to complaints in Venice that votes have been cast by the homeless of Santa Monica, and that wetlands activists from Ventura County have been voting in Westchester-Playa del Rey.

Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, whose district includes both neighborhoods, said the city needs to address an issue described by some as "drive-by stakeholders" -- those who are in a community on a temporary basis but still qualify as voters even though they're in the community sporadically.

The city's administrative code allows membership on neighborhood councils by individuals who define themselves as stakeholders based on their involvement in a school, community group, religious institution or nonprofit.

One gray area, said Miscikowski, is the status of people from outside the city who oppose Playa Vista in order to preserve the Ballona Wetlands.

"They are not local Westchester people, and yet they believe they have a serious stakeholder interest in preserving this land," she said.

Playa Vista officials estimate that as many as 200 of its construction workers turned out for the vote, which began at 4 p.m. at the Westchester Municipal Building. The Playa Vista party, held across the street at the Furama Hotel, began an hour later.

Half a dozen buses and shuttles delivered the workers to the polls. Some carried fliers saying "After you vote, join us for FREE food and beer across the street!"

Sugerman said the event was no different from any other election night party. Because Playa Vista has developed 3,146 housing units -- and is planning another 2,600 -- those construction workers have to be seen as stakeholders, he added.

The neighborhood council has been closely divided on Playa Vista's latest

proposal, favoring it on a 13-10 vote. Construction workers were worried about certain candidates, Sugerman said.

"There are opponents who are trying to stop Playa Vista," he said. "And if you stop Playa Vista, you take these people's livelihoods away."

Others in Westchester counter that construction work is by its very nature transitional, leaving workers with little interest in any other community issue. Neighborhood council candidate Doug Ehlers said one of the voters he spoke to lives in Moreno Valley, a community in Riverside County.

"He's as divorced from our issues as he can be, and I'm not going to go out and vote in his area," Ehlers said.

Sugerman said the construction workers are no more temporary than an employee behind the counter at a Subway sandwich franchise. And Vuchsas argued that Westchester residents played their own mischievous role in the election, allowing family members as young as 5 to fill out a ballot.

"Some of the children could barely print their name," she said.

For now, the result of the election appears to have resulted in a split between two slates of candidates -- one that opposes development and another that is more accommodating. One race is divided by a single vote, said neighborhood council member Denny Schneider.

Although he is not an opponent of Playa Vista's latest development plans, Schneider warned that the company's election tactics could have a corrosive effect on the neighborhood.

"I'm not opposed to Playa Vista, but I am opposed to the politicking and the way (the election) has gone," he said. "Because the net result can be a neighborhood council that's not representative of this community."

Community leaders across the city have already begun directing their ire at the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, or DONE, the city agency overseeing the formation and operation of the neighborhood councils. In San Pedro, Hollywood and elsewhere, activists have been questioning whether the city makes it too easy for a single entity to control an election.

Greg Nelson, the department's general manager, said that some of Westchester's anti-development activists simply got outmobilized by Playa Vista. Playa Vista sent busloads of voters last year as well, Nelson said, but those who disagreed with the company failed to turn out their own supporters.

"I don't know how many Playa Vista workers there are, but there are plenty more residents in Westchester and Playa del Rey," he said. "Frankly, they should have planned for this, because it happened last time."