

Westchester-Playa del Rey: Playa Vista again busses in workers to cast ballots in Neighborhood Council election

BY ROB WASSERMAN, The Argonaut

Hundreds of Playa Vista employees were observed by several candidates and voters, unloading large tour buses and standing in line to cast their vote at the Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey election Thursday, February 12th.

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"I saw young and middle-aged men standing in line dressed in work uniforms, T-shirts, blue jeans, hard hats and baseball caps," said Neighborhood Council stakeholder Edgar Saenz.

"They were almost entirely men who appeared dressed as trades, construction, and security workers."

"There were the equivalent of 18 to 24 chartered buses because there were 18 to 24 arrivals per hour," said Saenz.

Saenz said approximately 700 residents and workers were bussed over from Playa Vista to cast a vote, but said that number could have been as high as 1,000.

Several other stakeholders and candidates said the number of Playa Vista workers and residents bussed to the Neighborhood Council's voting site was about 700.

"The busses would drop off a load and then go back to Playa Vista to pick up more and then return," said Saenz.

One Neighborhood Council board member alleged that the Playa Vista workers were being compensated for their vote with food and drinks across the street at the Furama Hotel.

However, a Playa Vista spokeswoman denied such activity.

"The workers were given a boxed lunch because most of them had been up since 5:30 in the morning and were very hungry," she said.

According to Neighborhood Council board member and Elections Committee member Sybil Buchanan, several hundred Playa Vista employees had been

certified as stakeholders by Buchanan — a Playa Vista employee herself — in the week before the election.

Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey treasurer Denny Schneider suggested stakeholders go home and influence their neighbors to vote at the election.

"I've been telling people, if you don't like it, go home and get your neighbors out here to vote, there's more of them than Playa Vista people," said Schneider.

Westchester stakeholder and Neighborhood Council voter Raedean Kiesz said she spoke to a Playa Vista worker in the election line.

"I asked him who he was voting for and he pulled out a flyer with the names (candidates) of Playa Vista supporters," said Kiesz. "I asked him if he knew there were other people on the ballot and he said 'no'."

Kiesz alleges that the Playa Vista worker told her, "They told us that if we wanted to keep our jobs, to come and vote."

Playa Vista spokesman Steve Sugerman affirmed that Playa Vista workers and residents were transported to the election site, but denied that any Playa Vista workers were threatened with losing their jobs if they didn't vote at the election.

When asked if laborers at Playa Vista were permanent employees of Playa Vista, Sugerman responded:

"Playa Vista has been the primary employer of many of the construction workers for the past two and a half years and will continue to be their primary employer."

"Playa Vista employees are stakeholders and they have a right to support Playa Vista," said Sugerman.

Sugerman said he observed people who were not stakeholders of the Neighborhood Council representing Ballona Wetlands Land Trust at the election site, distributing flyers and documents.

The day after the election, a flyer was recovered at a Playa Vista construction site with the word "PARTY!" in large letters at the top of the flyer.

The rest of the flyer reads:

"Election Night Party for Playa Vista Workers at the Furama Hotel Thursday, February 12th, 5-8 p.m. After you vote, Join us for FREE food and beer across the street! Transportation will be provided to and from the worksite and hotel throughout the night. Don't forget your ID!"

Sugerman acknowledged Wednesday, February 18th, that a "party" had been held for Playa Vista employees who participated in the election.

The Argonaut was denied entrance to observe stakeholders casting their vote at the polling location.

CAMPAIGN SPEECHES — All candidates running for election were allotted two minutes to deliver campaign speeches to an audience of stakeholders.

Although all candidates were allowed the opportunity to speak, almost all that did opposed expansion of Los Angeles International Airport and the Playa Vista development.

"It is my firm belief that our quality of life should improve with approved developments in our community," said candidate Curt Curtiss.

"Do you need your sidewalks repaired? We can do something about that. My daughter needs an off-road stroller just to get around the block," candidate Geoff Maleman said.

A man in the audience voiced his disapproval of the Neighborhood Council classification of a stakeholder.

"You gotta change who gets to vote. If you don't live here, it's crooked," yelled a voter.

TURNOUT REACTION — The anti-airport expansion and environmentalist candidates were noticeably dejected after the Playa Vista busses had begun to roll in.

"None of us (anti-airport expansion slate) have a great chance to win," said candidate Doug Ehlers.

"I think it's wrong, the workers should vote where they live," Curtiss said. "I'm not sure we have any shot at all to win.

"It's not fair, but it's legal," said Curtiss.

"I didn't move here because I thought it was going to be one big fat city and I would sit in traffic," said candidate Jina Jani.

"They (Playa Vista) had goals in mind," said stakeholder Frank Velasco.

"The community is upset.

"What we have is polarization. What Playa Vista will get is a backlash, observers will come out with guns firing," said Velasco.

"The Playa Vista community has done a good job organizing for the election," said Playa Vista resident John Lee.

"I voted for growth. We have to move forward. I support Playa Vista. I'm from New York, so I'm for more housing," said voter Rabbi Yossi Greisman.

RESULTS — The Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey Web site has posted that initial election results reflect some very close races and that official results are expected to be released by Saturday, February 21st.

Neighborhood Council officials say that as soon as the results are available, the results will be posted on the Web site.

Information, www.ncwpdr.org