

Westchester Features

Westchester/Playa del Rey: First Neighborhood Council election draws over 1,200; some protest busing in of Playa Vista 'stakeholders'

BY HELGA CARR

Some 1,500 "stakeholders" turned out to cast their votes in the first-ever elections for board members of the Neighborhood Council of Westchester/Playa del Rey on Tuesday, November 12th.

Seventy-one candidates vied for 15 residential seats, five at-large seats, and 11 director seats, for a total of 31 seats.

Candidates could run for more than one seat, making the voting —and vote-counting — particularly confusing for volunteers, candidates and voters.

The volunteers counting the votes were apparently overwhelmed by the large number of voters — including more than 600 who registered as stakeholders the night of the election.

The large turnout — and questions about the status of some voters, as well as what were termed as "other improprieties" — resulted in a decision to conduct a recount of the tally.

Julie Rajan, executive director of the League of Women Voters — which is contracted by the City of Los Angeles to run the Neighborhood Council elections — called for the recount.

On Monday, November 18th, the recount was in full swing in Westchester at an undisclosed location.

"We're recounting like mad," said Rajan on Monday. "We hope to have election results on Tuesday, November 19th."

(For final results, see page 9.)

The election was also clouded by allegations of

electioneering at the voting site by some candidates.

Some candidates were also accused of obtaining "pirated" lists of stakeholder names, and sending out "slate" endorsements to the list.

PLAYA VISTA VOTERS —Some candidates are now asking the Los Angeles City Attorney for clarification of the Administrative Code because some 40 to 50 Playa Vista employees were bused in to vote.

Several community members present at the election alleged that at least three buses arrived between 4:30 p.m. and 5 p.m., dropping off workers in hard hats and work clothes, some with the logos of the companies they worked for on their shirts.

One of the candidates alleged that these individuals all registered to vote on site, marked their ballots, and then left by the buses they arrived on.

Another candidate also alleged that of the more than 1,400 stakeholder registrations that were held by members of the coordinating committee, 700 were e-mail addresses.

The e-mail addresses were allegedly put into a private e-mail group that no one else could access, he said.

"There's going to be a lot of this [accusations of wrongdoing] and I'd like to focus on the great showing made by community members to come and vote," said Mike Arias, a Westchester/Playa del Rey neighborhood council member and candidate for Youth Organizations Director.

Playa Vista defended the busing-in of its employees to cast votes in the election.

"It was democracy at its best," said Steve Sugerman, Playa Vista spokesman, who acknowledged that employees of the development were given rides to the voting location.

"The workers are entitled to vote in the election, since they work in the community," said Sugerman.

VOTING DAY — Beginning at 5 p.m. candidates for the 31 board seats were sequestered in an area outside the auditorium, available to discuss issues with the voters.

But voters had to wait until 7 p.m. to hear the candidates speak.

Candidates were told they could not come into the auditorium to campaign.

Many voters, both young families bringing their children and senior citizens, voted early, between 5 and 6:30 p.m.

Every few minutes an announcement was made by a volunteer that if the voters wanted to cast their votes, they should mark their ballots and deposit them into one of two boxes, and then leave the room through the back door.

That door was monitored to keep people from entering.

By the time candidates' speeches began, large crowds had arrived, and Rajan, as the emcee, had to continually remind the group that it was too noisy and the group needed to quiet down and give the speakers their attention.

At the rear of the room, volunteers were set up at tables, each table marked with a section of the alphabet to allow registered voters to go to their table and pick up a ballot.

There was also a table for Spanish-speaking voters, with an interpreter available.

New registrants signed up at a table, giving their name, address, and whether they lived, worked or owned property in West-chester/Playa del Rey.

Each person was required to show a photo identification.

Rajan opened the meeting by saying that, according to the rules, she would accept nominations from the floor if someone wanted to run for a seat and had their candidate declaration statements.

Five candidates nominated themselves.

Rajan asked each candidate running for more than one seat to speak once, because of the time factor.

At 7 p.m. the candidates came into the auditorium, and under the guidance of Rajan, each candidate was allowed one minute, timed by a member of the Neighborhood Council, to state their vision of Westchester/Playa del Rey and why they were running for a particular seat.

The basic theme of each candidate, many of them long-time residents, was to keep the "small-town" atmosphere of Westchester, and to stop the traffic congestion from LAX expansion and widening of Sepulveda and Lincoln Boulevards, and to restore the Ballona Wetlands.

Patricia and Jay Edie, who said they try to volunteer in the community when needed, monitored the two ballot boxes.

As the 9 p.m. voting deadline approached, voters were urged to complete their ballots and get them in the box.

Precisely at 9 p.m., Rajan walked to the back of the room and had two volunteers carry the boxes up to the podium, so that counting could begin.