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S.F. Sierra Club leaders resist newcomers' takeover attempt

By **Emily Green** Updated 3:44 pm, Monday, December 21, 2015

The old guard of San Francisco's **Sierra Club** chapter has defeated an effort by a slate of newcomers to take over its executive committee.

The newcomers sought to change the San Francisco chapter's opposition to high-rise development projects and make the group more racially diverse. Longtime members argued that the challengers were a front group for real estate interests because they were backed by the the San Francisco Bay Area Renters' Federation, a pro-development group founded early last year.

In the months leading up to the election, the new group took to Reddit to encourage people to join the environmental organization so they could vote for its slate.

The challenge transformed what is usually a sleepy affair into a fractious election, one that underscored the degree to which land-use issues dominate city politics, and also the influence of Sierra Club endorsements on ballot measures and political races.

Winning the election for the five open seats on the nine-person executive committee were longtime Sierra Club members **Arthur Feinstein**, **Sue Vaughan**, **John Rizzo**, **Barry Hermanson** and **Howard Strassner**. Strassner was also backed by the pro-development group because he is more supportive of development projects, although he said he neither sought nor wanted its endorsement.

"Because of your votes, the **SF Group** thwarted a takeover attempt by a slate of candidates endorsed by a development-

at-all-costs group, SF BARF,” Vaughan wrote in an e-mail after the election results were announced. The Sierra Club has not released the finale tally.

Developers’ backing

Challengers [Donald Dewsnup](#), [Leah Pimentel](#), Jacquelyn Omotalade and [Rebecca Lee](#) lost in the voting.

Among them, Dewsnup drew the most scorn from longtime Sierra Club members because he is a real estate agent with little environmental background. The women, who are racial minorities, have worked in the environmental field, but the fact that the pro-development group supported them raised suspicions. The women also ran under the slate “Green SF with color.”

Lee said she will continue to work on environmental issues despite the loss.

“I have always been active in the environmental field, both as a profession as well as an activist on issue-based campaigns; this outcome does not change that,” Lee said in an e-mail. “I hope the winners of this election use their upcoming term to recruit diverse environmentalists and engage our local communities.”

‘Exit over voice’

[Jon Golinger](#), a longtime Sierra Club member who campaigned against the pro-development slate, praised the results. “This is a huge victory and a clear mandate for the SF Sierra Club to remain a strong environmental voice and continue to fight vigorously to protect our waterfront and environment in the many battles ahead in 2016 and beyond,” he said.

Sonja Trauss, the founder of the pro-development group, said the election may be just the start. There are four seats

on the executive committee up for election in 2016.

“If the executive committee continues to oppose height limit increases and smart infill, we’ll probably try again next year,” Trauss wrote in an e-mail. “It’s a hard election to win because most Sierra Club members who agree that opposing infill development promotes sprawl and is therefore antienvironmental, have already quit the Sierra club. They choose exit over voice.”

She added, “Maybe after we run a few times, the incumbents will eventually have to defend their opposition to infill development.”

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