

Who Runs Pacifica?

Many Pacificans are unaware of how big an impact the out of town real estate industry has had on our democratic process. It greatly outspends everyone else in our elections. It also lobbies City Council, runs ads in the local media, and mobilizes its members to act locally on its behalf. In the past, the out of town real estate industry has successfully focused its efforts against community work to protect renters and plan for climate change.

In Pacifica, two major forces impact local politics: the power of engaged citizens and the power of the out of town real estate industry. In Pacifica we have many great realtors who work hard to improve our community. But the out of town real estate industry has not had a positive impact. It is represented by three major organizations, the San Mateo County Association of Realtors (SAMCAR), the National Association of Realtors, and the California Apartment Association.

In a typical City Council race, a candidate will spend about \$15,000. In the 2016 Council race, the out of town real estate industry spent \$87,931 to influence the election. In almost every election in Pacifica, there is at least one candidate being groomed and financed by the out of town real estate industry.

In that same 2016 election, Paul Heule, the out of town owner of the quarry put \$786,308 into a political action committee he created called "Pacifica Residents, Taxpayers, and Small Business Owners," which financed his initiative to allow massive development in the quarry. Fortunately, money doesn't always win. But it does provide an unfair advantage.

In 2012, City staff proposed extra project review for buildings in the Coastal Zone to incorporate sea level rise planning. SAMCAR took out large ads in the *Pacifica Tribune*, distributed leaflets and successfully lobbied the City to delete this proposal. This planning is crucial, as the U.S. Geological Survey just released a study finding the stretch of coastline from Ocean Beach to Pacifica is the fastest eroding coastline in the state.

All around the U.S, the real estate industry is working to suppress sea level rise planning while encouraging new building in unsafe coastal areas, thus passing on huge future costs to taxpayers.

In 2014, a city appointed Climate Action Plan Task Force drafted a Climate Action Plan which included two energy efficiency goals. They proposed that when homes and commercial buildings are sold, minor energy upgrades would be required, with a provision included to ensure that the upgrades would be capped at ½-1% of the sale price of the house. Due to successful lobbying from SAMCAR, the Council rejected these energy upgrade goals.

In the Fall 2015, the owner of Pacific Skies Estates mobile home park decided to evict every tenant, claiming there was a plan to do upgrades. Many residents had lived there for decades; many were low-income people, including veterans, elderly and disabled people, with few affordable options for other rentals.

At the Council meeting to consider a short term moratorium on the evictions, Pacific Skies Estates residents told heartbreaking stories of the devastation the evictions would cause them. At that same meeting, the out of town real estate industry turned out in force and the Council majority refused to help. As a result, 77 households were evicted just before Christmas.

After those devastating evictions, Fair Rents for Pacifica worked with experts, and developed a moderate proposal for rent stabilization. They brought that proposal to the City Council to discuss. Again, lobbying by the out of town real estate industry was overwhelming. The Council majority voted against even considering a rent stabilization ordinance.

In the Fall 2016 election SAMCAR and the California Apartment Association collectively spent more than \$1 million opposing two rent control ballot measures in Burlingame and the City of San Mateo. As a result, both measures lost and renters were left unprotected.

Efforts to pass a rent stabilization ordinance are currently underway in Pacifica and our community will have to fight the big money that SAMCAR, the National Association of Realtors, and the California Apartment Owners Association will throw at efforts to protect our town's most vulnerable residents. Efforts are also ongoing both on a City and County level to plan for sea level rise. We expect the out of town real estate industry will lobby against, and try to weaken any long-term, comprehensive planning efforts that take into account our City's unique geography and limited resources.

The problem we face is not our neighbors who are local realtors: it is the power of the money of the out of town real estate industry. Let's stay vigilant when anyone tries to buy our political process. The answer to the question of who runs Pacifica needs to always be: the people of Pacifica.

Cynthia Kaufman is on the Steering Committee of the Pacifica Progressive Alliance and has lived in Vallemar for many years.