

by Guillaume Doane

## NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISTS SCORE HUGE VICTORY OVER STATE-REQUIRED GROWTH

Responding to state mandates for 62 county-wide acres of high-density housing, the County Planning Commission last week voted unanimously, 5-0, to place new homes in five areas of North County. Despite last minute attempts by First District Commissioner **Michael Cooney** to include consideration of one Goleta Valley parcel, Montecito and the rest of the South Coast were left unscathed.

County planning staff will immediately begin environmental studies of the total 96 acres of considered area – in Isla Vista, the Santa Ynez Valley, Los Alamos, Orcutt and Vandenberg Village. Potential rezoning of those sites to obey state standards could occur as soon as this summer, according to County planners.

Affordable housing proponents deplored the decision, arguing the South Coast needs more growth and more so-called “affordable housing” for “low income” workforce members such as firefighters, nurses and County employees.

For preservation-minded residents, the commission’s May 24 decision was a crucial victory against a state housing approach they consider inflexible and draconian.

“The more you show your position and have a good and concise message, eventually you will be heard,” said **Gary Earle**, president of Coalition for Sensible Planning. “You have to fight this stuff.”

The commission’s vote represents a silver lining for affordable mandated housing opponents who just a week prior had been dealt a significant defeat when the County Board of Supervisors approved the state-required housing element. **Judy Ishkanian**, president of the Montecito-born Homeowners Defense Fund, which promotes local control here and at the state level, said increasing face time with decision makers is paying off.

Ishkanian said she believes County Supervisors have voted through state housing requirements partly to placate Sacramento politicians. “I think they know that some of the decisions they made were downright illegal,” Ishkanian said. “We’re disappointed about it, but there’s a visceral fear of having the state come in to control this whole thing. I can sympathize with the position the County’s been put in.”

Indeed, First District Supervisor **Salud Carbajal** said he was torn about approving the newest housing element, describing his position as a difficult “balancing act.” He said he and the County’s lobbyist would spend more time in Sacramento urging politicians to respect local sovereignty and recognize community plans.



As neighborhood protection advocates such as Judy Ishkanian and Gary Earle become allies, they’re gaining more momentum in fighting state growth requirements

“I agree that we need to be aggressive in trying to impact legislation,” Carbajal said. “There are many pieces of legislation that have come through that assault local control and that violate CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act). We do not tolerate this type of legislation.”

At the same time, Carbajal said government leaders have a “moral obligation” to secure housing for “low income” residents. Affordable housing is “still a major perceived and real need throughout the first district and the county as a whole,” he said.

In recent history, Montecito neighborhood groups’ approach to housing mandates has been more diplomatic than combative. Former Montecito Association President **J’Amy Brown**, who heads the Association’s housing committee, said intensive negotiation with County leaders has produced desirable results. When Association members became aware of the new housing component in 2001, Brown said they immediately referred to the Montecito Community Plan to design a housing goal. They worked with County housing staff to find “affordable” units in non-resident areas, such as Westmont College, without disrupting neighborhood equilibrium.

In all, 27 sites in Montecito have been identified. During its renovation proceedings in spring 2004, the Music Academy of the West agreed to set up two employee apartments. As part of its enhancement last year, the Valley Club set aside one employee residence as a term in its conditional use permit. Hotelier **Ty Warner** has also participated, allowing workforce housing at the Four Seasons Biltmore Hotel.

“We’re being practical and getting to choose properties that are beneficial to the community,” Brown said. “That’s smart planning.”

While she’s in favor of the neighborhood protection cause, Brown said activists should know when to draw their swords and when to yield. “Fighting the state is an excellent and



Montecito Planning Commissioners (from left) Bob Bierig, Claire Gottsdanker, chair Bob Meghreblian and Richard Thielscher (Michael Phillips not pictured) say the time devoted to Westmont College’s development application has been adequate due to the size of the project

## WESTMONT PROJECT’S SIZE DESERVES INTENSIVE REVIEW, SAY OFFICIALS

After six hearings and about 50 hours of public discourse, the update and expansion of Westmont College heads for a seventh Montecito Planning Commission meeting on June 2. But while some participants in this case have criticized the process as lethargic and circuitous, officials from every involved party say the time devoted so far has been appropriate and beneficial.

“I think the headline here is that this is an enormous project,” said Commissioner **Michael Phillips**. “It seems to me that the time the community has spent has not been undue.”

Indeed, Westmont’s request to add approximately 375,000 square feet of buildings to its 111-acre campus is the largest development proposal in the history of Montecito, and is expected to cost the Christian liberal arts college hundreds of millions of dollars. To that end, a project that would be about seven times the size of the Four Seasons Biltmore Hotel warrants all the scrutiny it has received, say County planners.

“This process is a model for all planning agencies, and I’ve been doing this for thirty-one years at six different agencies,” said **Steve Chase**, County deputy director. “This is a community that’s alive; this is exactly why you get in the planning profession.”

Chase said the commission could begin final deliberations at its regularly scheduled monthly hearing on June 21.

**Tony Spann**, chair of the Montecito Board of Architectural Review, which has participated in the hearing process, said given the size and scope of the project and the community-wide interest in the outcome, it’s unsurprising talks would take longer than usual.

“Should the process be done differently? Probably. Should we go back and start over? No,” Spann said. “Probably, when it’s all said and done, when the public looks back on this, we’ll all say it’s been done correctly.”

Spann did cite clear frustrations about the process, one being that Westmont has changed its application multiple times. “Good God, it’s a moving target,” he said.

Eventually, Spann said, decision makers will be forced to “roll up our sleeves” and make determinations. “This idea of walking on egg shells is not going to work,” he said. “Ultimately, somebody is not going to be happy.”

In recent hearings, Westmont officials have urged the commission to make more concrete findings. Still, they said they are pleased with the progress. “We are frustrated by the confusion and delay in the Montecito Planning Commission process caused by opponents who have continually misstated the facts and the law,” said Westmont College President **Stan Gaede** in a written statement. “At the same time, we appreciate the helpful feedback we have received from the Montecito Board of Architectural Review and are working to address their comments.”

In all, Westmont has made noticeable concessions. County Planners point to the traffic cap the school plans to implement on neighboring streets. College officials have also agreed to relocate proposed buildings to the middle of the campus to ease noise and visual burdens on neighbors. The school even proposed a five-year development moratorium after the first construction phase, an initial 60,000 square feet of development.

Project opponents said Westmont’s concessions have been helpful, but hinted that more needed to be given up before a full compromise could result. “I think it has some holes in it; we’re ironing out some details, but the cap concept is good,” said **Laura Collector**, a leading member of the Citizens Concerned Over Westmont Expansion. “Ideally, Westmont will see that their dreamy and pure wish list won’t be seen as acceptable.”

## FIRE BOARD UPHOLDS CHIEF'S DENIAL

Days before he decided on, and ultimately denied, a Ty Warner Hotels & Resorts application to install a traffic median on Channel Drive, Montecito Fire Chief **Ron McClain** promised the proposal's opponents that his Board of Directors would uphold any decision he makes. He was right.

By a vote of 3-0, the Montecito Fire Board on May 15 turned down the six-foot wide planted median citing fears that it would slow down response times on Channel Drive, a major emergency route for fire personnel and paramedics. The board vote did uphold approvals made by McClain for five-foot traffic bulb-outs placed strategically on Channel Drive.

Ty Warner officials saw the traffic median as a safety instrument to slow down motorists on Channel Drive. Disappointed executives said they were unsure whether they would pursue legal avenues, such as filing a lawsuit.

"We have spent a lot of time, energy and money to address neighbor concerns; so obviously to have such an important, yet simple project rejected without consideration of the facts or the majority of the citizens' concerns is disheartening," said **Greg Rice**, executive vice-president of development. "It will leave our members, hotel guests and neighbors exposed to an unnecessary risk, which I'm hoping we will not all later regret."

The Channel Drive traffic implementations were part of a two-pronged attack meant to aesthetically augment the street and make it safer for pedestrians. New brick sidewalks and the planted median were seen as ways to spruce up the entrance and viewing

corridor leading into the Coral Casino and Four Seasons Biltmore Hotel, both owned by Warner. The median, which would include a crosswalk, was designed as an alternative to other types of traffic-calming devices, such as speed bumps.

Warner officials have reported spikes in excessive speeding on the road and residents of the area have long complained about traffic dangers in their neighborhood.

The disagreement over the median was founded on two touchstone issues: safety and aesthetic appeal. The chief critic of the traffic structure was the Montecito Association, whose members feared the median could cost emergency crews precious seconds of response time. Also in opposition were residents of the area, such as **Dick Shaikewitz**, a Montecito Association director, and **Eileen** and **George Anton**, Bonnymede residents.

"Channel Drive is a public roadway, heavily used by beachgoers and tourists during the greatest part of the year," George Anton wrote in a May 1 letter to Chief McClain. "Nothing should be done which would increase or discourage use by tourists who come to look at the ocean or those who come with family and friends to enjoy Butterfly Beach."

Last February, the Antons, along with fellow Bonnymede resident **Elizabeth Dilworth**, were involved in an appeal of the Biltmore Spa expansion. Requesting placement of a Channel Drive crosswalk, they complained that additions to the spa would heighten traffic activity on a road they claimed was already dangerous for pedestrians.

complimentary approach, but that's a long-term approach," she said. "Right now we're facing state mandates. [In the long run] people have to go to Sacramento to fight mandates, and I'll gladly join them. Still, you have to fight in advance. That's smart politics."

Ishkanian said they were ready to lobby more ferociously at the state level, but indicated it was a matter of time. The movement against subsidized housing is a young one, she said, but its adherents are increasingly becoming more consolidated. For instance, the Homeowners Defense Fund is allied with preservation advocacy groups such as the Preservation of Los Olivos, Coalition for Sensible Planning and Castle Coalition, which fights eminent domain abuse.

Under the umbrella of the Coalition for California Neighborhoods, like-minded organizations are forging partnerships and making connections via Internet. "If you go onto the website of

all these groups you see the same thing – all of these people are yelling at the government about state mandates," said Gary Earle, a board member of the Homeowners Defense Fund and president of the Coalition for California Neighborhoods.

The coalition recently submitted to several County offices and to its members a 25-page report that takes on current housing policies. The study, conducted by law firm Burke, Williams and Sorensen, asserts that state growth requirements place dangerous burdens on community infrastructure.

In November, the coalition will try to block the state's \$2.5 billion housing bond, this time with more manpower and resources. It's a sign that a movement once in its infancy stages has quickly grown up. "That's the shock of it," Ishkanian said. "No one ever thought they'd have to be protecting their own neighborhoods or even their own doorsteps. We've come a long way."



During multiple chicken lunch debates, the four County Sheriff candidates – (from left) Jim Anderson, Jim Thomas, Bill Brown and Butch Arnoldi – have stated their case for who most deserves the Big Badge. They are seen here on April 21 at the Montecito Country Club, in a discussion hosted by the Santa Barbara Republican Club.

## MEET THE FOUR CANDIDATES

While this well-chronicled County Sheriff's race has been mostly preoccupied with benchmark issues such as the overcrowding of prisons and the questioned integrity of the County Sheriff's Department, the four candidates, in several debate sessions, have touched on topics that have great implications for Montecito. With the June 6 election looming, henceforth is a laundry list of issues that pertain to the village, with commentary from the candidates.

- One year ago, the Sheriff's Department assigned to Montecito a Community Resource Deputy, a position the first of its kind for Santa Barbara county. The deputy's assignment, currently handled by **Isaiah Tchobanoff**, is to build a stronger relationship with the community he serves and to gain a pulse on the interests and sensitivities of people in Montecito. Tchobanoff is present at a multitude of public meetings, from twice-monthly Montecito Association discussions to Montecito Emergency Response & Recovery Action Group (MERRAG) seminars to even Montecito Water District hearings. He's followed ongoing disputes and conflict resolutions between hikers, equestrians, and bikers on local trails systems, dealt privately with residents, all the while fulfilling his primary calling as a law enforcement officer.

Sheriff **Jim Anderson**, who oversaw creation of the position, applauded the Community Resource Deputy position as a "very successful program" and said he's received "very good feedback" from deputies. "It's important to have those types of programs in place," Anderson said, to assess the needs of a community and "identify specific problems."

Anderson's opponent, former Sheriff **Jim Thomas**, praised the program as a "great one" for Montecito.

"In all my years of law enforcement, I learned one important thing:

you don't ride in a parade for the lights, you ride for the people who are there," said Thomas, who added that it was imperative for law enforcement authorities to learn from the people they serve.

"I think it's a great program," he said.

- For years, residents have lodged complaints about the County Sheriff's station in Carpinteria and its limited hours of operation – Monday through Friday, 9 am to 5 pm. Candidate **Ugo "Butch" Arnoldi** said the headquarters must be open at all times.

"That office has been closed early for the past few years, and that's just wrong," said Arnoldi, who attended Westmont College and graduated from UCSB.

- If elected, Jim Thomas said he would immediately reinstall the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program and return five deputies back to their posts at elementary schools, like Montecito Union and Cold Spring. The drug prevention program, offered to fifth- and sixth-graders, was cut with Anderson in charge. "At a time when drugs are rampant in our schools and our young children need education, Jim Anderson has abandoned [adolescents]," Thomas said.

- Every candidate has recognized the need for a second County rescue helicopter. The demand for a new vessel became readily apparent in April when a mountain biker injured himself in Montecito's Romero Canyon and needed to be airlifted. Because the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's rescue helicopter was "unavailable," the Ventura County Search and Rescue Unit's craft was sent instead. After being stranded for six hours, the mountain biker was airlifted to Cottage Hospital, where he was treated for multiple trauma injuries. He was subsequently released.