

Chapter 21

INSIDE PORTA BELLA

The Porta Bella project represents not only a great challenge, but also a unique possibility for solving some of the long-term problems of Santa Clarita. The property was about one and one-half square miles of what was then our roughly forty square miles of territory, but in many respects it was the core of our city. It was land that was hardly developed and was scarred badly. We knew it was dirty, covered with all sorts of chemicals resulting from its use for the production of munitions since World War I and continuing into the 1980s.

On our general plan it looked like a black hole, to be developed as a specific plan. I was eager to see movement, because several roads we needed badly were obviously going to pass through Porta Bella. Development would mean that the owners of the land would pay for a significant part of our infrastructure deficit. The city staff, planning commission and the council had worked with a group called Northholme Partners through fifteen public hearings and more than a year of deliberations. If they had developed the land according to county standards they could have built 5,000 residential units. We felt it was our job to cut that density, working through a superior plan.

Sam Veltri was their project manager. When he started working with us he was a young man. The last time I saw him, which was some time before I left the council in 1998, he had aged considerably, and had a bunch of gray hair.

We approved a plan allowing 1,678 single-family homes and 1,560 apartments to be built to accommodate 9,200 people. That was about 6,000 people per square mile, less than ten people per acre. The roads would complete the Magic Mountain-Via Princessa route, and the Wiley Canyon route to Via Princessa, as well as some north-south connectors. If city hall were to be built on an adjoining 237-acre parcel next to the planned commercial area of Porta Bella, we would have a downtown area of some renown, with a library and performing arts facility as well as a new Sheriff's station.

It was the Environmental Impact Report that really stirred up the public. When the council met on November 8, 1994, we had a file of 101 pages of letters in response to the EIR, and twenty people in the audience protesting.

One of the problems attracting attention from *The Signal* was that the council had received letters from Carl Newton, the city attorney, about the project. We wanted to discuss the letters, but attorney-client privilege, being a basic legal principal, was not something to be dismissed lightly. Karl Kanowsky, an attorney who knew that better than we did, said, "I can't imagine what's in there they want to keep from the public." He was grandstanding. He knew very well that our refusal to release the letters until we had talked to our attorney was normal practice.¹

Carole Brooks did a story on attorney-client privilege explaining that the privilege to release the letters was held by the council, that only the attorney was

forbidden to release them without his client's permission. I wondered how long clients would keep their attorneys if the clients did whatever they wanted. It seemed that everything we did required legal advice. I missed the community college board, where we seldom had an attorney present and were blissfully unaware of any need for one. Carole missed the point that Tom Newton, the attorney for the California Newspaper Publishers Association, whom she asked for information for her story, was Carl Newton's son.

Of course few people cared what the community college board did. The only people who attended were the administrators, a faculty representative and a student or two. Certainly the general public did not attend, nor did prospective board members. Most of the challengers at election time had no clue what was going on. However, at the city council a developer might profit to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars from a land use decision.

With Carl Newton's approval, we finally released the three letters that we had kept confidential. One dealt with the city's liability for potential toxins under the site of Porta Bella, and another dealt with our right to determine whether Northholme Partners was strong enough financially to develop the site. The third concerned what infrastructure we could ask from the developer. It was nice that Carl did not wave his finger at us, and ask why we did not know about the nuances of the law. That would have been another twenty column inches on a slow news day, of which there were plenty in Santa Clarita.

We were glad to release the letters. It was good for the public to know about the limits of liability, and whether or not the city might be liable for a toxins problem in the future. It was better that they could stop criticizing the city for listening to Sam Veltri, the representative of Northholme Partners. The point was made that a land use decision had to be independent of the financial resources of the owner of the land, or a developer. The letter about exacting roads and other infrastructure would at least let the public know we were trying to find a way to build the roads for which they did not want to pay.²

In March 1995 *The Signal* editorialized about Porta Bella, indicating some pleasure with Sam Veltri's attempts to please the critics of bridge access from Magic Mountain Parkway. It was a pretty hot topic, and I was asked to write a guest commentary. They made the mistake of not specifying the topic, and I wrote about the experiences Chris and I had had with Healing the Children and how people could help foster kids needing medical treatment.³

After a final public hearing on April 25, 1995, the council voted unanimously to certify the Environmental Impact Report, and adopt a statement of overriding considerations. We made it clear this was not final approval. Relatively minor decisions had to be made whether Wiley Canyon should be four or six lanes, and how the Springbrook Avenue bridge would be positioned. The general agreement among the council members that the entire site must be clean before any development could begin was more important. As Sam Veltri put it, about 20% of the approval process had been completed. I was particularly concerned at a suggestion from the public that a school site that was to be made available on 150

feet of fill would be very dangerous in an earthquake. Those homes on Via Onda, destroyed fifteen months earlier by the earthquake, had been built half on fill and half on solid ground. What would be the impact of fill 150 feet deep?

Some people were concerned about the additional population. However, Porta Bella was a twenty-year project, so the addition of 500 people a year would be manageable. Jan Heidt was pleased with the reduction of 5,000 people we had negotiated with Veltri.⁴

In August the project was dragging behind schedule again, but Clyde Smyth reflected the attitude of the council, "I for one would rather have a good decision than a fast one."

In the ten years that Louis Brathwaite was my appointee to the Planning Commission I only spoke to him once about a project under consideration. I do not remember whether it was Porta Bella or Santa Catarina, but I am sure it was one of those two. I said, "Don't worry about the political fallout. Do what you think has to be done at the Planning Commission level, and I'll deal with whatever comes to the council." Louis was at times downright antagonistic to developers, but I had appointed him to be his own man.⁵

The public was generally pretty cool about Porta Bella, even though the concern about toxics had it nicknamed "Porta Potty," a moniker stuck on it by Dan Hon. Nonetheless, in "Tell It to the Signal," one member of the public said, "Porta Bella pollutes. I'd like to comment on Porta Bella probably being approved (Jan. 23). The city gets the gold mine, and the residents of the Santa Clarita Valley get the shaft. The city is going to gain about \$10 million, and we're going to be polluted out of our minds. We're going to have traffic like we've never had before, and it will become unbearable. One more time, I will say, some people will end up *dying* because of the probably 6,000 more vehicles in our valley. In the name of money, hooray for the City Council and the city of Santa Clarita! God bless the poor people who live in this valley and have to put up with this, because all they can see is dollar signs. They don't give a darn about those of us who live here in this valley, about what we breathe, or the possibility of people being injured or killed with all of these additional cars, etc., in the area. Great work, City Council."

I read the letters and the "Tell Its" carefully, and responded to many of the letters with phone calls or letters, if I could tell who wrote them. I did not recognize many of the names and could not find many in the phone book. This was a shame, because many of the letters to the editor should have been written to the Mayor. Seldom were they really specific, and so we knew there was a problem, but could not find where it was. A letter to the Mayor, with return address and phone number, always got action. If the author wanted to copy it to the press, that was his right. The "Tell Its" were anonymous, so we never knew from where they came, but this general complaint deserved a quick response, which I called in.

"Porta Bella points. In response to the caller who complained about the approval of Porta Bella because of the additional traffic and pollution the traffic

would bring (Jan. 26), I would like to make three points: 1. The owners of Porta Bella inherited from the County of Los Angeles the right to build about 5,000 homes, which would have created still more traffic. 2. The city worked hard to foster a plan which would bring mixed uses to the center of our city, so that many could work within walking distance of home. 3. It is the people of the city who will gain \$10 million worth of extra roads and facilities. The city is merely a public corporation created to benefit the people.”⁶

So many of the “Tell Its” were factually incorrect, and deserved a response from the editors of the paper. One such entry was, “Snooping cameras. I have a small complaint about the cameras placed at Bouquet Canyon, Sierra Highway and Whites Canyon Road, for north-, south-, east- and westbound traffic, that take pictures as (drivers) go through the light. This is totally unconstitutional. It’s not right. I mean, now nothing in your car is private, with these cameras taking pictures. I don’t believe it’s legal, and I don’t believe it’s right.”⁷

I wanted to respond to so many of the “Tell Its,” but I did not have the time, and did not want to work as a volunteer editor for nothing. I had appreciated Ruth Newhall’s efforts in earlier days to check the facts, and respond with editorial notes. She printed what the public wanted to communicate, but when a correction, or more often simply an explanation, was needed, she provided it.

In this case the cameras were not “taking pictures.” They were very low-resolution television cameras useful only for letting monitors know whether or not traffic was moving properly. They could not detect faces, license plate numbers or anything of the sort. Only an expert could have used the pictures to tell the make of the cars on the roads. The very reason the council had approved the low-resolution cameras was a concern for the rights of privacy. Not until 2004 did the city have high resolution cameras installed at some traffic lights, and that move had popular support.

As Porta Bella came to the council for “final approval,” five leaders of the Chamber of Commerce, led by vice president Connie Worden-Roberts, wrote a letter to the council. They wanted final conditions concerning transit to be written into the project to protect the city. They made an excellent point about the requirement that roads be completed before certain numbers of houses in a neighborhood are occupied, raising the issue of whether Northholme Partners might move from one neighborhood to another before the critical number was reached. That was an old developer trick.

At the council meeting on February 27 there was a lot of discussion, particularly about the Metrolink station. Jill Dolan of *The Signal* called it wrangling. We talked about putting off the decision for two weeks, but in the end the vote was unanimous. Sam Veltri said, “I’m stunned, pleasantly stunned. I thought we were going down in flames.”

During the meeting, George Pederson and Clyde Smyth suggested that the three-year lease on the Metrolink station be extended to six years. The rest of us shot that down. We would have loved a six-year lease, but opening up the lease terms would reopen all the negotiations, which had taken many hours of our staff

time, at great expense. Sam Veltri argued that the site would be clean by 1998. The California Environmental Protection Agency said cleanup would take until 2001. Neither were right within years.

I said we had negotiated enough, and the city's credibility was at stake if we backed out. We had extracted enough out of Veltri. "Now we're asking if we can have what's left of his gray hair. I think a deal is a deal. We have answered all the questions."

Ken Pulskamp chimed in that this was the sweetest deal any city in Southern California had negotiated, all because Northholme wanted a twenty-year buildout. The developers, whether they were Northholme Partners, Whittaker or some successor corporation, had the right to pursue construction documents and financing, but could not build anything until CalEPA had removed their concerns about developing the property. At the time there were seventy-seven locations on the 996 acres that had been identified as needing cleanup.⁸

Subsequently more toxins have been found, and some wells of the public water supply have been closed. Northholme Partners and Sam Veltri have left the scene, and an Arizona corporation apparently lost millions trying to step in to clean up the mess.

There is an effort to get approvals to build on pieces of the property, to provide funds to clean up the rest. The public has expressed concern that the profits of such projects might be sidetracked, and some of the property left dirty. One question has not been asked. Why has not the federal government, as the prime customer of the munitions operations on the site, taken some of the responsibility?

Obviously, this chapter is incomplete, and may not be completed for years. One of the consequences of failing to develop Porta Bella in a timely fashion is the loss of infrastructure. In addition, there will be pressure, because of population projections, on the Board of Supervisors to grant more building rights in the unincorporated area, thus causing more sprawl. There may be lack of access to more than 230 acres of city land, on which we might have developed a real center. However, if that land is never developed, it will be worth, as open space, the \$7 million it cost.

¹*Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 10, 1994, and *The Signal*, Nov. 11, 1994.

²*The Signal*, Nov. 22 and 24, 1994.

³*The Signal*, March 26 and April 6, 1995.

⁴*The Signal*, April 27, 1995.

⁵*The Signal*, Aug. 23, 1995.

⁶*The Signal*, Jan. 26 and Feb. 1, 1996.

⁷*The Signal*, Feb. 6, 1996.

⁸*The Signal*, Feb. 27-28, 1996, and *Daily News*, Feb. 29, 1996.