

MEDIA ADVISORY

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New Research Documents Influence of Special Interests in Local Planning Decisions

ORANGE COUNTY, CA – Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development (OCCORD) today released a new report—*The Rubber Stamp Process: Broken Governance in Planning and Development and How Communities Can Regain a Voice*—which details structural flaws in the local planning processes in Anaheim and Santa Ana that favor special interests over local residents.

“Now more than ever, we need economic development in Orange County, but people won’t support it if they lose confidence in the political process,” said Robert Nothoff, OCCORD Policy Analyst and *Rubber Stamp Process* co-author. “The planning process is broken: Communities don’t have an equal voice to counter special interests, and elected leaders are between a rock and a hard place as they look for ways to balance the budget.”

Findings of *The Rubber Stamp Process* include:

- Outside interests have disproportionate sway over local politics, as 70% of all individual and corporate political contributions in Anaheim and Santa Ana came from outside city boundaries.
- The top five Economic Sectors (NAICS) accounted for 63% of overall contributions to successful Mayoral and City Council races, including several development-related sub-industries.
- Local planning commissions do not represent every neighborhood or the general public as a whole. In Anaheim and Santa Ana, over half of all planning commissioners between 2000 – 2010 came from relatively affluent neighborhoods that represent less than 20% of the total population.
- Development projects move forward even when the public strongly disagrees with them. In Anaheim and Santa Ana, 87 new development projects were presented between 2005 and 2010. 21 were met with overwhelming community opposition, yet 20 of the 21 were approved.
- Other significant barriers to public participation exist: Inadequate notification, ineffective public hearings (public input sought at end vs. beginning of process), and constraints on city planners.

To produce *The Rubber Stamp Process*, OCCORD collected and tracked all 5,600 donations made to successful Mayoral and City Council candidates in Anaheim and Santa Ana between 2004 and 2010; reviewed occupational backgrounds and geographic locations of all planning commissioners in the two cities between 2000 and 2010; and based on 3,898 pages of City Council minutes, analyzed the City Council approval rate for all new development projects in those cities between 2005 and 2010. A copy of *The Rubber Stamp Process* is available on OCCORD’s website at www.occord.org/rubberstamp.

The report offers four broad policy principles to remedy the current structural bias: (1) Encourage public participation early in the development process by raising public awareness and increasing outreach to neighborhoods before important decisions are made; (2) level the playing field by ensuring that all costs and benefits for a project are taken into account and increasing transparency in the decision-making process; (3) empower every neighborhood to have a voice in development decisions that affect its quality of life; and (4) make elected and appointed officials more accountable to the communities they represent.

“The bias we observed goes beyond the actions of any single city, elected leader, or political party. It’s about who decides what happens to our communities: Out-of-town developers or the people who live and work there,” said Nothoff. “The solution is to give communities a real voice in the planning process.”

Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development (OCCORD) is a nonprofit organization committed to economic development that benefits everyone who lives and works in Orange County’s diverse communities.