



Who Killed the Skid Row Neighborhood Council?

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L.A.'s Skid Row

[Andrew Kudrin/Flickr](#)

At a narrow storefront near Skid Row, a performance troupe and a visual artist have built a new mini-golf course. It's not like the outsized affairs you'd see at Golf N' Stuff with lighthouses and waterfalls and kids scoring holes-in-one. This project is meant to illuminate – and satirize – the class divide in downtown L.A.

It's called [The Back 9](#), a colloquial expression, organizers say, for a private place where deals get done, and each hole seems to be making a joke at the expense of classist assumptions that underlie city zoning.

It's miniature golf even Marx would appreciate.

The mini-golf course was designed by artist Rosten Woo and the [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#), an arts organization that has been engaging the Skid Row Community for decades. Its founder, John Malpede, says that the irreverent take on city zoning speaks to serious issues of homelessness and low-income housing.

"The purpose of the installation is to show they're rewriting the zoning code of the city and writing new community plans," Malpede says, "and the first one is going to be written for downtown, with deleterious consequences to the Skid Row neighborhood including the potential displacement of people."

Malpede is not the only one trying to give a voice to Skid Row residents. Over the years there has been a concerted effort to treat the area like any other neighborhood in L.A. And earlier this year there was a push to form a new neighborhood council covering Skid Row.

That proposal got killed.

On Jan. 11, the city of Los Angeles approved a petition to form a new neighborhood council and set the date for an election that would determine if residents of Skid Row would be able to secede from two larger neighborhood councils in downtown Los Angeles. The vote was open to property owners, employers, workers, residents and community volunteers in a vast area of downtown and Northeast L.A. – all to determine who would represent the 10,000 residents living in the 50 blocks at the core of Skid Row bounded by Main, Alameda, Third and Seventh streets.



A man plays mini-golf at a course created by L.A. Poverty Department and artist Rosten Woo.

Monica Nouwens

Neighborhood councils advise city government on issues relating to land use in their district. Though they have no formal authority, a well-organized council can create headaches for a developer when the majority does not approve of the development.

Downtown L.A. is undergoing the largest construction boom in its history, at a time when the latest figures show the homeless population has skyrocketed 20 percent in a year. Real estate news source The Real Deal reported last year that nine major developments were under construction within five blocks of Skid Row, with a combined 1.5 million square feet of space soon to be for rent.

Community advocates on Skid Row say the influx of new residents and the rise in land values make it inevitable that massive development is coming to the neighborhood that has long been ground zero for homelessness in Los Angeles.

“Look at all the cranes downtown, it’s the only place left, and they’re coming for it,” says Pete White, executive director of the L.A. Community Action Network, one of the groups driving the effort for a new neighborhood council.

Proponents of the Skid Row Neighborhood Council, in their statements and in their

petition to the city, made it clear that part of their motivation was to reduce the influence of “downtown business interests” at a crucial time in Skid Row’s history. In November, voters approved Measure HHH, authorizing a \$1.2 billion bond issuance that is supposed to pay for the construction of 10,000 units of housing for homeless.

Charles Porter, the coordinator of a drug prevention program on Skid Row and a proponent of HHH, says the effort to secede from the larger councils was a blessing: “It was an opportunity for us to finally say that [the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council] was dysfunctional and they never represented Skid Row. So now hopefully we could have the opportunity to redefine our own neighborhood.”



Ted Soqui

While the proponents of the Skid Row Neighborhood Council have made the reasons for their support clear, the actions of its opponents are murkier.

Emails to and from the Business Improvement Districts of the Historic Core and Fashion District that were recently obtained via the California Public Records Act and published at the blog MichaelKohlHass.org (the blog shares the name of a 19th-century German novella about a fanatical quest for justice) provide insight into the opposition campaign that led to the narrow defeat of the Skid Row Neighborhood Council.

One opponent of the Skid Row proposal, according to the emails, was Capital Foresight Ltd., perhaps the largest loft owner on Skid Row, which owns a handful of refurbished welfare hotels and lofts inside the boundary of the proposed Skid Row council.

In an email to a manager from the Palo Alto-based property trust that owns PE Lofts at Sixth and Main, Scott Gray, director of operations at Capital Foresight, warned that the formation of a Skid Row Neighborhood Council could depress property values in and around the affected area. “The implications may not sound politically correct; however, the economic realities are obvious,” Gray wrote.

He added, “It would be helpful if you would share this with property owners and property managers that you may personally know. We have to inform everyone we can that they must actually VOTE or they will actually have no say. 20,000+ homeless people live downtown and they will be carted up to vote!”

Gray told the *L.A. Weekly*, “I have no comment on the subject.”

The email was forwarded to the directors of the Fashion District and Historic Core Business Improvement Districts, which made it subject to the California Public Records Act. The Business Improvement Districts organized a letter-writing campaign to pressure City Councilman José Huizar to allow online voting for the Skid Row election, according to the email correspondence.

Former L.A. City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo, now a lobbyist with the firm Liner LLC, appeared at city meetings representing a group called United Downtown L.A., which opposed the effort to form a breakaway council.

“I think a lot of folks underestimated our opposition,” Porter says. “We didn’t understand at the time that there had already been movement to influence [Huizar] to allow the online voting.”

On March 22, at a special hearing just 15 days before polling was to begin, Huizar moved that the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment enable online voting for only the Skid Row election. The City Council approved the motion two days later. The decision meant that more than 1,000 eligible downtown voters who registered for the city’s online voting pilot program last year would be automatically pre-registered and ready to vote.

The temporary ban on online voting remains in place for neighborhood elections across the city.

Proponents for the Skid Row Neighborhood Council countered that enabling online voting less than two weeks before the election put Skid Row's core constituents at an unfair disadvantage.

"Many of our neediest residents do not have ready access to online voting," argued Skid Row activist Kevin Michael Key, a member of the Los Angeles Poverty Department.

The proposal for a Skid Row Neighborhood Council was defeated by a vote of 826-766, and 807 of the no votes (and 581 of the yes ones) were submitted online.

Rick Coca, spokesman for Huizar, says the decision to allow online voting was in keeping with a City Council motion passed in December that states online voting may be resumed pending a report and recommendation from the city – which is what occurred at the March 22 hearing.

"It looked like we were doing this 14 days before the election when in reality we had done it six months before that," Coca says.

Coca says the decision to allow online voting and to set up a series of "pop-up polls" downtown to extend voting beyond the one physical polling location on Skid Row increased voter turnout on both sides.

A city panel later reviewed the election and recommended the city either reverse the outcome or hold a new balloting within 90 days, this time without online voting.

The Department of Neighborhood Empowerment declined to accept the panel's recommendations and certified the election results on May 19. Proponents of the Skid Row Neighborhood Council can apply again in October 2018.

Leaders of the defeated proposal say they're now mulling their legal options.

General Jeff Page, the lead organizer of the measure, says the need for community control on Skid Row is clearer now than ever. Like Malpede and the L.A. Poverty Department, Page is a colorful figure. He's a hip-hop pioneer who performed with Compton rappers like Rodney-O & Joe Cooley and DJ Quik, but around Skid Row he's called [the Mayor](#). The Skid Row Neighborhood Council was his baby. Without representation, he says, Skid Row and the people who live there could vanish as easily as that ephemeral mini-golf course; here one day, gone the next.

"I hear a lot about progress, but the progress has not been made on Skid Row, only

around Skid Row," Page says. "And that's exactly why Skid Row wants to have the chance to represent itself."

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