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“The Giddy Rise of the Environmentalists”: Corporate Real Estate Development and Environmental Politics in San Diego, California, 1968–73

Abstract

Changes in US real estate development during the 1960s and early 1970s were a catalyst for popular environmentalism. New flows of capital between builders and investors, including direct investment by Fortune 500 companies and the growth of the first nationwide home-building firms, produced a historic peak in US construction between 1969 and 1973. A case study of San Diego, California, indicates that these changes played a key role in the era’s burst of environmental reform. It also reveals an entangled history of environmental and taxpayer politics rooted in the spatial and financial changes of accelerated real estate development. In San

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Diego, the corporate real estate boom brought together environmental concerns with taxpayer anxieties to produce a right-leaning environmental backlash that would have long influence in the city.

“With record sums of cash in their coffers, even the staidest corporations are discovering the attractions of real estate development.”

—*Time* magazine, 1965¹

“To me personally, our top priority local ‘environment’ issue is the galloping urban sprawl . . . so boldly going on every day.”

—John Rose, conservationist, San Diego, California, 1970²

INTRODUCTION

On June 2, 1971, two dozen environmental activists clad in button-down shirts and sun hats hiked onto the giant Peñasquitos Ranch in San Diego, California, to protest the construction of a trunk sewer line. Carrying signs reading, “Save the Trees,” and other slogans, the protestors briefly blocked excavators before being herded away by police. According to organizer Helen Scantlin, the group hoped to “express our deep concern at the point of action.” The Peñasquitos Canyon, she said, “is like a humpty dumpty egg—once it’s broken, it can’t be put back together again.”³

For environmentalists like Scantlin, the fate of the rare riparian woodland in Peñasquitos Canyon was the immediate focus, but the construction of the sewer and the development of surrounding lands exposed larger issues that were at the heart of environmental politics in San Diego and many fast-growing US cities in the early 1970s. The canyon’s owner, the main proponent of the sewer, was the city’s largest real estate developer. His firm was backed by a nationwide investment fund. Neighboring owners included huge corporate-owned homebuilders who were poised to transform thousands of acres of sagebrush into stucco suburbia. “The key” that would “unlock” this development was the sewer, and, from the perspective of many residents, city taxpayers were about to foot the bill.⁴ In the midst of the greatest real estate boom in the city’s history to date, concerns such as these over the environmental and fiscal threats of large-scale development galvanized a tax-sensitive, pro-environmental majority that would alter the relationship between the city and its environment for years to come.

The protest on the Peñasquitos Ranch was not an isolated incident. In conservative San Diego, better known for its navy crew cuts and fluoride-free water, grassroots environmentalism flourished in the early 1970s. As elsewhere, the new environmental mood combined

concerns over pollution, habitat destruction, recreation, and natural beauty.⁵ But in San Diego, a city without smokestack industry or offshore oil platforms, it was large-scale development that provided a focus. At the same time, growth brought together environmental anxieties with more prosaic concerns over taxes and quality of life that were widespread locally. The result was an environmental backlash rooted in the particular threats of corporate-backed sprawl as well as in the city's right-leaning political culture.

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Connections between real estate development and environmental activism are well recognized. As Adam Rome argues in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, post-World War II housing development provided an experiential basis for popular environmentalism. Suburbanites experienced problems of pollution, energy consumption, and open space destruction firsthand, bringing environmental issues home, literally, to millions of Americans.

One root of these trends was a change in US home building. In the 1940s and 1950s, a new class of "merchant builders" applied mass production techniques to housing. Federal housing programs expanded the supply of capital available to homebuyers, assuring a ready market for builders. New technology, especially giant earth-moving machines, facilitated construction in environmentally sensitive places that had been previously uneconomical to develop. The accumulation of these trends, Rome concludes, laid the foundation for an environmental backlash in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶

Evidence from San Diego supports this view, but it also suggests a more immediate link between changes in real estate and environmental politics. While suburbia had proliferated after World War II, the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an arresting surge in the scale of development, driven by the merger of home building and high finance and by the rise of huge corporate real estate firms. In a Sun Belt city like San Diego, these changes were not just a context but were a trigger for environmental reaction. And in the local political culture, they catalyzed reform of a particular shape and kind.

Attention to changes in real estate finance and development provides a critical perspective on the burst of environmental reform in the early 1970s. Indeed, the high-water mark for modern environmentalism coincided with the all-time peak in US housing construction. During the three years from 1971 to 1973, builders produced 6.4 million homes, the greatest number for any such period. The annual record of 2.36 million home starts, set in 1972, still stood in 2013 despite US population growth of 100 million.⁷ In California, where environmental

restrictions enacted after 1970 blocked many large projects, the 1969–73 housing boom ranked second to date, but by the late 1960s trends in investment, land acquisition, and planning—the precursors to construction—had reached a wholly new scale, arousing citizenry up and down the state.⁸ In California, wrote economist Robert Sigafos, the new “pressure for control of the environment” erupted “almost simultaneously with what might be called the high-water mark of corporate land development. Developers, with heavy financial backing, had underway or were planning some of the largest real estate projects in California history.”⁹ When environmentalists such as Ralph Nader lashed out in the early 1970s against the “frantic cycle of devastation” produced by the “unprecedented development boom,” they were responding not merely to the accumulation of postwar trends but to threats that were quantitatively and qualitatively new.¹⁰

San Diego, California’s most southwestern city, provides an ideal window through which to examine the impact of the corporate real estate boom on environmental politics. San Diego was one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, and it was the focus of investment by some of the nation’s biggest real estate firms. At the same moment, the famously conservative city became a leader in efforts to control development and protect the environment. In 1971, San Diego was among the first large US cities to elect a mayor on a controlled growth platform and to enact long-term planning to manage development.¹¹ San Diego’s Sierra Club chapter, with its 2,700 members in 1970, was among the country’s largest, and the city boasted numerous local environmental groups including an influential citywide organization, Citizens Coordinate for Century 3.¹² San Diego was also home to thousands of beach-goers, surfers, hikers, and other active users of the outdoors who added their voices to campaigns against pollution, open space destruction, and unchecked growth.¹³ Lastly, the city was home to thousands of ordinary taxpayers who cherished not only the city’s natural attributes but their own pocketbooks. Sensitive to the fiscal as well as the environmental costs of runaway growth, these citizens made a political majority that would mark a turning point in the city’s history.

POSTWAR REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT: A CLOSER LOOK

Urban historians have done a good job situating postwar real estate development in the main narratives of twentieth-century US history. Following Kenneth Jackson, they have illustrated how federal housing programs revolutionized consumer real estate finance and home ownership. They have shown how merchant builders, such as New York’s Levitt and Sons, transformed housing into a mass production business,

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Figure 1: Dr. Seuss, "Leave Something Green," for the cover of *San Diego Magazine*, December 1972. At the peak of the corporate boom, San Diego resident Theodore Geisel captured many San Diegans' concern about real estate development as an all-encompassing environmental threat. Credit: Dr. Seuss Collection, 1919–2003, MS 230, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California, San Diego. Reprinted with the permission of Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P.

and they have rendered that firm's East Coast "Levittowns" (along with a few other extra-large developments) as exemplars of postwar society.¹⁴ Even so, it is important to read this history with care.

What most postwar histories fail to note is that only a handful of firms operated at the scale of the Levitts, who produced two thousand homes a year by the mid-1950s. Communities on the order of the 5,000-acre

Levittowns were rare in the 1940s and 1950s. As late as the mid-1960s, the average “large homebuilder” in the United States built between two and three hundred homes annually on an average of 70 to 100 acres. Land purchases of a thousand acres or more were perceived by experts as “extremely rare.”¹⁵ Regional “community builders,” such as the Levitts and a few other firms, may have captured the historical spotlight, but they were exceptions. Before the 1960s, residential real estate development remained a local business dominated by comparatively modest firms operating in one metropolitan market.¹⁶

During the 1960s and early 1970s, however, changes in real estate finance altered these terms, magnifying the size and scope of development nationwide. Whereas in 1955, the *Los Angeles Times* could describe the \$6 million sale of 875 acres in the San Fernando Valley as “one of the biggest property transactions in California history,” acquisitions on this scale would become routine by the late 1960s.¹⁷ Indeed, the scale of things to come would render projects on this order almost quaint by comparison. In 1965, for example, *Time* magazine reported that just “nine industrial corporations” had plans on the table “embracing” 204,000 acres in southern California alone.¹⁸ From Century City to the San Francisco Bay, and from the high Sierra to the burgeoning rim of suburbia, real estate firms backed by Wall Street or big institutional investors launched ventures on a scale that foretold a vast environmental transformation.

CORPORATE REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT

Underlying the new scale of development were critical changes in real estate investment. While federal support for home mortgages had reshaped the consumer side of finance after World War II, credit for home production remained fragmented through the 1950s.¹⁹ State laws governing banks and savings and loan associations, for example, limited out-of-state lending, meaning that fast-growing regions such as California often faced a shortage of funds.²⁰ Through the mid-1960s, even large developers often relied on joint ventures with wealthy individuals, reinforcing a comparatively small scale of development. Recurring bouts of “tight money,” that is, high interest rates and terms, squeezed builders throughout the decade.²¹

Developers’ search for capital led to innovations that linked real estate more closely to national financial markets and encouraged expansion fitting the appetites of institutional investors. During the early 1960s, for example, real estate investment trusts (REITs) and private pension funds broke into the market for real estate. Within a decade, the trusts were supplying up to 10 percent of US construction and development loans while pension funds loaned similar sums. Added to these changes, many states rewrote laws to allow banks and thrifts to lend out of state, and private mortgage banks expanded to facilitate the

flow of capital between big institutions, such as insurance companies and commercial banks, and real estate developers nationwide.²²

Two other changes proved especially consequential. First, a number of large builders issued public stock. Seeking direct access to capital markets, they formed what one analyst described as “a parade of real estate development companies, homebuilding companies, land development companies, and many others” that marched “over the bridge to the world of Wall Street” in the 1960s.²³ Second, between 1960 and the early 1970s, more than three hundred “major corporations” made direct equity investments in US real estate.²⁴ U.S. Steel, Alcoa, RCA, Chevron, Chrysler, John Hancock, and Phillip Morris were a few of the corporate giants that plunged into real estate during these years. Motives varied by firm, but underlying everything was the potential for profit.²⁵ With experts predicting that the United States would need 2.6 million new homes per year during the 1970s (about twice the postwar average), “investment in land” looked, according to *Time* magazine, to be “the nearest to a sure a thing.”²⁶ Backed by a “Who’s Who of the American corporate hierarchy,” developers expanded the scope of land conversion in markets nationwide.²⁷ The result, as one California developer put it, was “a housing boom the likes of which we have never seen.”²⁸

SAN DIEGO: “A CITY IN MOTION”

With its ocean vistas and consistent sunshine, Nixon-era San Diego was an ideal location for corporate real estate development as well as grass-roots environmentalism. San Diego County is one of the most environmentally diverse places in North America, hosting almost five hundred bird species and fifteen hundred native plants—more than many states.²⁹ The western and urbanized portions encompass a coastal plain of sandstone mesas and shaded canyons, while the eastern half rises to 6,000 feet before plummeting to the floor of the Anza Borrego desert. In the 1960s, San Diego was also one of the fastest growing US cities, and it attracted investment by many of the country’s biggest real estate firms.

San Diego’s twentieth-century history repeats a familiar California story. The city boomed with World War II, growing from 200,000 people in 1940 to nearly 600,000 by 1960. Defense industries boomed through the Eisenhower era, and government primed the pump for development. In 1959, California adopted massive highway, water, and university plans, and at the local level, officials approved millions for water and sewers.³⁰ Equally important, the city annexed 140 square miles of undeveloped land between 1958 and 1962.³¹ In the view of local planners, this territory represented “a major reserve of attractive and productive open space.”³² From the perspective of real estate investors, it presented an inviting “wasteland” awaiting entrepreneurial

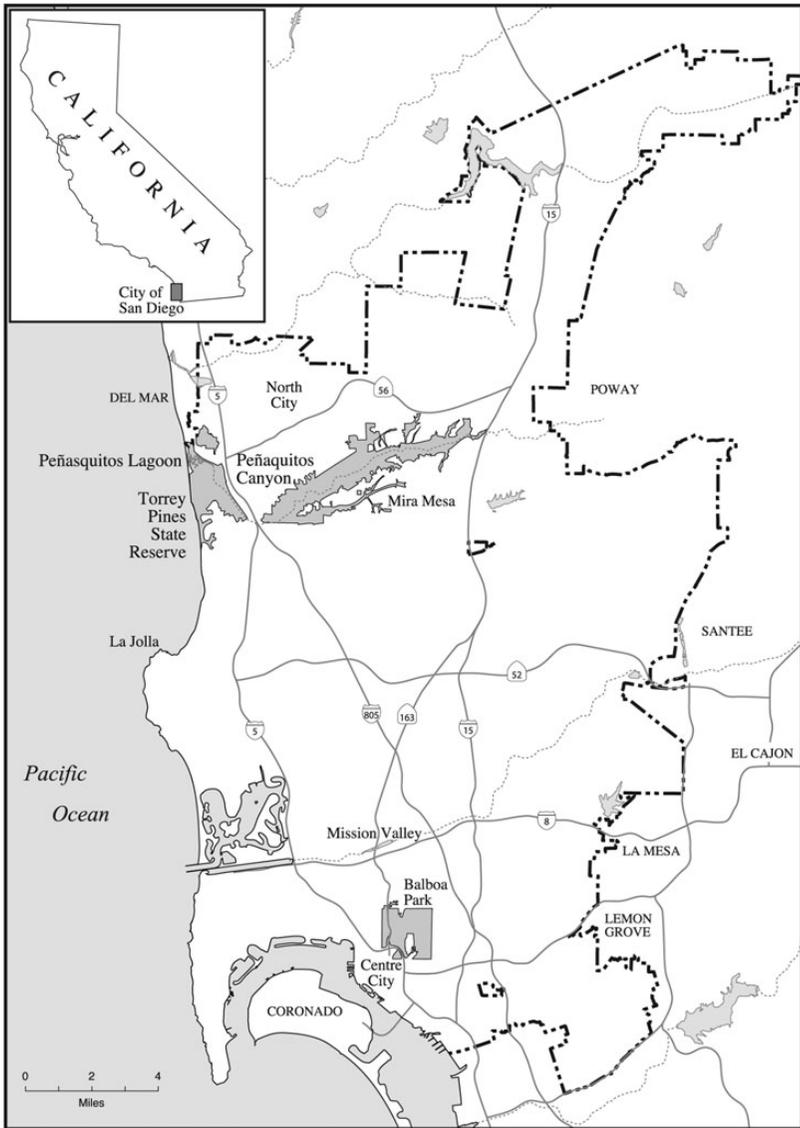


Figure 2: Map of San Diego, California, 2013. Credit: Map courtesy of Harry D. Johnson.

vision and the infusion of capital to transform it into subdivisions and profit.³³

While civic leaders prepared for growth, San Diego's economy stumbled in the early 1960s, hit by cutbacks in the local defense industry. When it regained steam in the late 1960s, conditions were on for a boom. Beginning in 1968, builders in San Diego produced five straight

record years in construction. By 1971, construction value in the county reached nearly a billion dollars, and contractors started a record 36,691 new homes, a rate of 144 housing starts per working day. Remarkably, developers followed this “year of the biggest build!” with even greater tallies in 1972, initiating more than 38,000 new homes.³⁴ Scale was not the only novelty, however.

As *San Diego Union* real estate editor Clyde Smith noted in mid-1970, “Major corporations, backed by ample resources, have acquired subsidiary home building and development companies and are coming into the San Diego market in a strong way.”³⁵ In contrast to the collection of smaller, local firms that had driven San Diego’s postwar growth, the city attracted a new class of institutional investors, including nationally known firms such as Weyerhaeuser, Boise-Cascade, Gulf Oil, Kaiser/Aetna, Smith-Barney, and the Penn-Central Railroad.³⁶ In addition, large out-of-state mortgage bankers and insurance companies, big REITs, and pension funds backed local development on a wholly new scale.³⁷

Two planning studies released in 1971 illustrate the impact of the corporate boom. In 1970 and 1971 alone, the studies found, officials approved or were reviewing proposals for just twenty-eight developments that encompassed over 56,000 acres and homes for 600,000 residents, equal to the city’s 1960 population. In addition, firms backed by corporate-scale investors were responsible for two-thirds of the proposals, while other large newcomers, mainly firms based in Los Angeles, accounted for another 10 percent.³⁸ On the table were proposals to drain the region’s major estuaries, subdivide its coastal canyons, and bulldoze miles of chaparral. Adding to potential effects, most of the projects under review violated current planning or engineering standards, proposing construction on unstable soils or steep slopes or in floodplains that would require enormous redesign to make them safe. The ecological havoc they would wreak would be out of scale even for projects of their size. By 1971, the *San Diego Evening Tribune* concluded, “unchecked urban sprawl” was “rampant” across the metropolitan area.³⁹ Corporate-scale developers were responsible for most of it, and for the first time, large numbers of city voters would mobilize politically to stop it.

“ECOLOGISTS AND NATURE LOVERS”⁴⁰

As in other parts of California, the corporate real estate boom ran headlong into emerging environmental concerns. By the mid-1960s, local groups such as the Sierra Club, the League of Women Voters, and the Audubon Society had voiced fears of declining environmental quality in the region.⁴¹ Other San Diegans were spurred to action by aesthetic worries. Spearheaded by a group known as Citizens Coordinate for a Handsome Community, they battled billboards, coastal high-rises,

and freeways during the 1960s. The group also played a key role in the city's 1967 General Plan, intended as a guide for future development.⁴² Joining these voices were residents who sought to stop development in the iconic canyons and estuaries that adjoined their neighborhoods.⁴³ As elsewhere in California, local environmentalists grew in numbers and influence in 1969, the year of the Santa Barbara oil spill, but in San Diego it was uncontrolled growth that became the catalyst and focal point for popular environmental action during the early 1970s.

One indication of the impact of corporate-scale development on environmental politics in San Diego was the evolution of the aesthetic-minded Citizens Coordinate into a more thoroughgoing environmentalist organization in 1970. Responding to what board member John Rose called, "the growing conflict between commercial 'progress' and environmental destruction," the group adopted a new name and mission.⁴⁴ The revamped Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 (C-3) defined its role as a spearhead for "all the various fragmented, volunteer groups concerned with environmental issues and 'the quality of life' that are springing up in San Diego." However, the group focused on what they perceived as the city's critical problem: "planning and development decisions as they affect our total environment."⁴⁵

C-3's activities reflected this new emphasis. In early 1971, for example, the group outlined a list of active "threats to our environment" including not just long-standing aesthetic issues in the core city, such as "ugly" development in the Mission Valley and pavement in Balboa Park, but a compendium of ills related to sprawl: "subdivisions multiplying and spreading to outlying areas without schools, transportation and *public* parks; public money spent to promote growth and tourism when we have no funds for acquisition of canyons which should remain as open space . . . ; the brown layer of smog which hangs almost perpetually over our city . . . ; our view of and access to the beautiful coastline threatened by development; vanishing wildlife as we lose our lagoons and backcountry."⁴⁶ By the height of the housing boom, this focus became even more consuming. Indeed, the group's docket of activity through 1972 and 1973 focused almost completely on the environmental threats of large-scale development on the city's suburbanizing edge.⁴⁷

C-3's environmental agenda reflected not only the impact of the boom, but the background of activists themselves. Like early environmental groups that Richard Walker describes in the San Francisco area, C-3's membership was composed of a social and professional elite, including members whose family names dotted the landscape, plus scientists, architects, and others with a social base in the city's older (and especially its coastal) neighborhoods.⁴⁸ Unlike the Bay Area, however, where environmentalism evolved as part of a century-long "green" (and left-leaning) political culture, San Diego's environmental movement developed in a conservative political milieu. Traditional

GOP tenets of small government, low taxes, and free enterprise were widespread. Many of the city's leading environmental advocates were Republicans, and the environmental movement that developed there reflected their outlooks.⁴⁹

Among C-3's early activists, board members John Rose and Dorothea Edmiston illustrate the right-leaning politics that shaped the city's environmental movement. A resident of the wealthy seaside neighborhood of La Jolla, Rose was a driving force in the reorganization of Citizens Coordinate as an environmental group. His professional background was in film, and in the mid-1950s he had served as the national director for the corporate-backed anti-litter group Keep America Beautiful.⁵⁰ In 1970, he lived just a few doors from the fashionable La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club, which his family had helped to found. Rose's environmental convictions reflected this milieu. While he disagreed with local conservatives that environmental preservation was "anti-industry, [and] anti profit," he described his own views as those of an "enlightened businessman": fiscally conservative, establishment oriented, and supportive of economic growth.⁵¹ Nonetheless, he approached the corporate building boom from the perspective of a resident. As an organizing force in the La Jolla Shores Association, a neighborhood group that advocated community planning, he supported strict land use regulation in the "unique coastal area of La Jolla". Privately, he decried "ruthless commercial interests" that threatened the natural beauty of his city, and he blasted the idea that taxpayers should subsidize development.⁵² His was an environmental populism with an ocean view, but it reflected a broader vein of opinion in a Sun Belt city beset by headlong growth.

Among Rose's colleagues in Citizens Coordinate was Dorothea Edmiston, a civic dynamo who helped to found the organization in 1961. Edmiston had built a successful business before turning to civics in the 1950s. She was active with the League of Women Voters, the statewide Planning and Conservation League, and the county GOP. Through Citizens Coordinate, she had spearheaded the successful effort to stop the widening of Highway 395 in the city's Balboa Park.⁵³ More than Rose, Edmiston extolled the transcendental values of nature—"men's need for quiet and inspiration"—but she shared his emphasis on civic beauty and citizen planning, and his disdain for unresponsive power.⁵⁴ Her home on the canyon rim above the booming Mission Valley offered a panoramic view of disorderly development, and her campaign to stop the highwaymen had nurtured a fierce opposition to the ethos of growth-at-any-cost. In the context of spiraling growth, eroding natural amenities, and rising taxes to boot, Edmiston felt witness to the good life slipping away.

Rose's and Edmiston's biographies reveal an environmentalism drawn from local experience as well as their party's Progressive tradition. They emphasized beauty, planning, resource conservation, and orderly economic growth, as well as responsible taxation. As Edmiston argued,

development should be “ecologically wise, economically feasible, [and] esthetically pleasing” (a formula she called the “3 ‘E’s”).⁵⁵ As residents who had prospered in postwar San Diego, they did not believe that economy and environment were necessarily at odds. But they opposed the current imbalance, and as taxpayers, they wanted a voice in charting the future. In these views, they found common ground with thousands of San Diegans.

While C-3 attracted a membership of upper-middle-class activists, the corporate boom shaped a wider environmental majority rooted in many of the same concerns. As a political issue, the “juggernaut of rapid growth” had wide appeal. “Careless urban development” threatened not only wildlife but prized recreational space.⁵⁶ As resident Teresa Husbands noted in opposing development of a neighborhood canyon in 1971, “it is small but beautiful and precious to many children in our area. It has given our 3 1/2 year-old son an opportunity to see a rabbit, road-runner, [and other animals] living as God created them. It gives children a chance to be woodsmen or campers.”⁵⁷ Many San Diegans also recognized, as Mayor Pete Wilson pointed out in 1972, that “land use really is the starting point for most of man’s other polluting activities.”⁵⁸ New housing developments poured treated sewage into creeks, estuaries, and the ocean. Far-flung subdivisions contributed to smog by putting more cars on the road and forcing them to drive more miles, and sprawl increased the pressure to bulldoze the city’s undeveloped open space.⁵⁹ Concerns such as these linked San Diegans to the environmental impulses sweeping the country.

For many San Diegans, the corporate boom also challenged environmental values that coalesced around “quality of life.” As Samuel Hays and Adam Rome indicate,⁶⁰ postwar suburbanization enhanced the political importance of this concept, uniting it with a residential vision of homes adjoining nature. By 1970, few cities exemplified this ideal better than San Diego. As columnist Neil Morgan wrote in 1972, San Diego “is not so much a city, somehow, as it is a good place to be . . . [It] is the kind of place that those in other parts of the world are most likely to think of when they picture California: a bucolic setting of sunshine and water, not yet shrouded in smog or grown into anonymous infinity.”⁶¹ Real estate development had reinforced this sensibility by producing a suburban city in which single-family homes clustered on mesas surrounded by natural canyons. By the early 1970s, however, growth threatened this ideal. “What was once one of the most beautiful cities in America,” wrote the organizers of a 1969 rally, “now promises to go the way of the malignant infestation that is Los Angeles. Our way of life is at stake.” By the early 1970s, fears such as these raised widespread sympathy for environmental strategies to “Save San Diego.”⁶²



Figure 3: "County's Builders Hammer Up New High," *San Diego Union*, January 11, 1971, with handwritten notation "Pollution." A Citizens Coordinate staffer filed this real estate news story under the heading "pollution," expressing the view that real estate development is an explicit environmental problem. Credit: Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 Records, 1961–80, MS-0030, San Diego State University Special Collections and University Archives, San Diego, CA.

A TAXPAYER ENVIRONMENTALISM

In addition to stirring environmental concerns, accelerated real estate development provoked fiscal anxieties that struck home in the local political culture. In a city that voted for Nixon, Goldwater, Nixon, and Nixon in successive elections, aversion to taxes was a staple of politics. Postwar development reinforced this proclivity by combining growth with a bucolic environment and low taxes. Indeed, San Diego's local tax rate was the lowest of any big city in the state.⁶³ By the early 1970s, however, the pace and scale of growth jeopardized these expectations. Real estate development required new schools, sewers, highways, police and fire stations, parks, libraries, and other services that added to the cost of government and pushed taxes up. The housing boom also inflated home values, which produced worrisome property tax increases across the city.⁶⁴ Unlike many environmental concerns, then, sprawl not only damaged the environment but it made citizens pay for the injury as taxpayers. As taxes rose with population, many San Diegans questioned the booster logic that growth paid for itself. Instead, by the early 1970s, they drew the opposite conclusion, as John Rose put it, that "urban sprawl creates higher taxes!"⁶⁵

The convergence between environmental and fiscal concerns in San Diego is not as surprising as it might appear. As Robert Self illustrates,

taxpaying emerged as a critical political identity in postwar California. Like the environmental consciousness that Rome traces, it was an identity rooted in the privileges of postwar suburbanization (including suburban cities like San Diego). Taxpaying was a political identity that trended right, but, as Self shows, it could be mobilized to various political ends. Even Oakland's Black Panther Party campaigned on the issue of tax fairness in the early 1970s.⁶⁶ More to the point, leading open space advocates in California challenged urban sprawl as a drain on taxes, a line of reasoning that San Diego environmentalists adapted locally.⁶⁷ As development outran the city's capacity to pay for services, thousands of San Diegans melded fiscal concerns to an environmental agenda that would expand government regulation, restrict private property, and potentially *increase* taxes to preserve open space. This was a very different kind of taxpayer agenda than the anti-statism associated with California's tax rebellion later in the decade, and it was a combination in which environmental concerns took a leading part, at least for a time.

THE NORTH CITY

Ground zero for corporate development and for this merger of environmental and fiscal anxiety was San Diego's North City, 70 square miles of undeveloped chaparral, creek, and canyon that had been annexed to the city in the early 1960s.⁶⁸ By 1970, corporate land developers had assembled large pieces of this territory, and on thousands of acres, real estate editor Clyde Smith noted in 1971, the dirt was already "flying."⁶⁹

Epitomizing the impacts of corporate development on this region of magnificent natural scenery and rare environmental resources was the watershed of Peñasquitos Creek. Spanning the North City from the foothills to a placid tidal lagoon, the area became a critical environmental and fiscal battleground in the 1960s and 1970s. Where the creek meets the sea, towering headlands form the backdrop for a stand of Torrey Pines, an endemic tree that occurs nowhere else on mainland North America. To the east, beyond the lagoon, the creek meanders for 7 miles through Peñasquitos Canyon, then the heart of a 14,000-acre cattle ranch that was slated for large-scale development. On the tablelands south of the canyon, a neighborhood called Mira Mesa, three of the country's biggest homebuilders produced a frenetic development scramble that laid bare the fiscal and social costs of sprawl.⁷⁰

The Peñasquitos watershed had long drawn the attention of local conservationists. As early as the 1920s, the city had joined the philanthropist Ellen Scripps to set aside several hundred acres south of the creek for a city park. In 1959, the state incorporated the area as the core of a new Torrey Pines State Park. By the 1960s, however, imminent development north of the lagoon sparked efforts to save more of this singular landscape. Activists mobilized in the mid-1960s to stop development on 215 acres of eroded headland that included nearly a quarter of the rare

trees. Development firms owned approximately half of the site, and by the late 1960s, these included major corporate-backed builders such as William Lyon and Pardee Construction. Residents Robert and Gloria Bates recalled seeing bulldozers “ripping into” the trees while walking behind their house in 1965. Alerting neighbors, the media, and public officials, they catalyzed an eight-year campaign to protect the remaining trees. In 1967, the state agreed to kick in half of the estimated \$2.5 million price tag for a Torrey Pines Park Extension on the condition that private donors match the sum.⁷¹

The campaign to “Save the Torrey Pines” featured classic elements of environmental preservation in this era, and it served as a training ground for environmental activism in the city. Scientists stressed the site’s ecological value not only as habitat for an endangered tree, but as “a complete native ecological unit.”⁷² Advocates emphasized the educational and recreational value of the site as “an outdoor museum,” and campaign literature appealed to a conservationist sense of stewardship over a “place of beauty that must be kept in trust for the many generations who are to come.” Some proponents, such as Gloria Bates, argued that the pines called for a new environmental ethic: “a place to grow for wild things; a sharing of the land.”⁷³ Engaging schoolchildren, business executives, women’s clubs, and many others, the Torrey Pines campaign drew thousands of San Diegans to an environmental cause for the first time, and it alerted them to the wider threats of real estate development across the city.

As the real estate boom accelerated in the late 1960s, however, tensions over the site escalated. Fund-raisers struggled to meet their goal. Meanwhile, land prices rose, and developers recalculated. In 1969, William Lyon, a subsidiary of plumbing maker American Standard Corporation and the nation’s fourth largest homebuilder, broke ground on 20 acres of ocean-view hillside. Baldwin Homes, a developer based in Orange County, submitted plans for an adjacent parcel that proponents had envisioned as a public gateway to the tract, and nearby, the earthmovers of Pardee Construction, a subsidiary of forest conglomerate Weyerhaeuser, graded hillsides adjacent to the extension. Finally, in late 1969, the owners of the largest parcel threatened to sell their land to a development group backed by the New York investment bank Smith-Barney.⁷⁴ Preservationists pushed on, staving off the Smith-Barney sale and finally achieving their fund goal in mid-1970, but they witnessed their park erode as the boom pushed land prices out of reach. By 1973, the state had purchased just 149 of the original 215 acres. Meanwhile, developers gouged the cliffs and trees on every side.⁷⁵ Sierra Club national president Philip Berry expressed the frustration of many local activists while visiting San Diego in late 1970. Holding a news conference on what the *San Diego Union* described as the “denuded and terraced” Lyon development, Berry pointed to the site as a “raped piece of landscape,” a clear illustration of the need for

coastal development controls across California.⁷⁶ Looking back on the campaign that had begun so hopefully in the mid-1960s, a writer for one local environmental group lamented in 1972 that “the sad saga of . . . thousands of citizens and young people, raising funds in innumerable fund drives to help save the last area of Torrey Pines” leaves citizens with “deep questions in their hearts over ‘how the system works.’”⁷⁷

If the struggle for this small tract of rare trees raised citizen concerns over real estate “speculation [and] destruction,” controversy over the huge expanse of creek and canyon that lay upstream became the focus for a sharpened critique of corporate-scale sprawl.⁷⁸ The campaign to save Peñasquitos Canyon mixed concerns over natural open space with discontent over the fiscal costs of development. At the core of debate were plans to develop the historic Peñasquitos Ranch into a planned community for 100,000 people.⁷⁹

As in other parts of California, the catalyst for controversy was the infusion of institutional capital. In 1968, the ranch’s owner, the developer Irvin J. Kahn, secured an eye-popping \$35 million line of credit from the Chicago-based pension fund of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.⁸⁰ Immediately, Kahn opened negotiations for infrastructure, and by mid-1968, the city of San Diego had begun plans for a \$15 million trunk sewer running the length of Peñasquitos Canyon. Kahn made a second gambit for public funds in 1969, this time offering to donate 3,400 acres of canyon land to San Diego County for a regional park in exchange for \$18 million in public amenities including roads, golf courses, swimming pools, botanical garden, museum, and, according to one critic, “thousands of asphalt parking spaces.”⁸¹ Within the space of little more than a year, the “vast acreage” of the inland North City, most of which appeared on the city’s two-year-old General Plan as open space through the mid-1980s, had been placed on the fast track for what the *San Diego Union* called “large-scale development.”⁸²

Objections to the Peñasquitos project raised themes that would reverberate across San Diego throughout the 1970s. From the start, civic groups charged that the sewer represented a green light for the “pre-mature urbanization of the undeveloped North City area.”⁸³ “Putting in sewers was the same as inviting people there,” claimed Comprehensive Planning Organization member Dick Parker in 1970.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, groups such as the League of Women Voters, Sierra Club, and C-3 objected to the fiscal and environmental implications of development. Speaking for the League of Women Voters, C-3 member Lucia Smalheer urged city council members to reject the sewer project as a “tax burden.” The city, she said, should consider the “long term costs to the citizens of San Diego that development of this area will bring.”⁸⁵ C-3’s John Rose fumed privately over the same theme, describing Kahn as a “villain” whose “outrageous manipulations . . . mean money out of every citizen’s pocketbook.”⁸⁶ Other activists cited the project as an example of “our disappearing open spaces,” and they urged the city to

set aside Peñasquitos Canyon as a natural park. These concerns notwithstanding, the city council approved the sewer in October 1970 by a vote of 8–0.⁸⁷

Approval of the sewer and the total failure of civic groups to influence the process provoked expanded environmental opposition. The Sierra Club and C-3 sponsored tours to introduce members to the canyon. Scientists catalogued species, and San Diego's alternative press featured articles critical of development. As in the case of the Torrey Pines, environmentalists argued that the area was a valuable natural space: "nature's gem," in the words of C-3's Helen Scantlin.⁸⁸ According to Robert Banks of the Sierra Club, the canyon represented the "last remaining example of a coastal riparian biological community within the city of San Diego."⁸⁹ In a region with few year-round streams, the canyon's watery depths sustained wildlife that faced eradication in the urbanizing portions of the county including mule deer, badger, bobcat, and golden eagle.⁹⁰ Stalled in their efforts to reroute the trunk line from the sensitive canyon woodlands, a coalition of local groups threatened legal action in April 1971 under the new California Environmental Quality Act. In response, the city accelerated construction, ensuring that the sewer would be finished before any legal roadblocks could be erected.⁹¹

By the summer of 1971, the battle for Peñasquitos Canyon collided with formal politics as the city prepared for fall elections. In August, developer Irvin Kahn unexpectedly offered 1,400 acres of the canyon to the city for a park. In the midst of a contentious campaign, Mayor Frank Curran announced the "gift" at a "special news conference" one month before the primary. Curran assured voters that the offer came with "no conditions of any sort," but as the details emerged, the mayor's opponents pounced.⁹² Plans showed that Kahn envisioned (and needed city approval for) a community of 37,000 people on land adjoining the park. In the gift parcel itself, plans called for a six-lane road and a flood control channel the width of a football field in place of the riparian habitat that environmentalists prized.⁹³ Candidate Virginia Taylor, a Republican who campaigned on an environmental platform, charged that the offer was "a 'good example' of what happens when special interests gain control in the city." Kahn "got the Peñasquitos sewer approved for installation through the last natural coastal canyon in San Diego. Now he wants the taxpayer to pick up a large portion of the costs."⁹⁴ Front-runner Pete Wilson expressed a similar mix of fiscal and environmental concerns. He argued memorably that the park offer "has more strings attached to it than Charlie Brown's kite-eating tree." "Before any city action occurs which would . . . commit the people of San Diego to the tax consequences and environmental impact of the Kahn proposal," Wilson intoned, "the city must look this gift horse in the mouth."⁹⁵ Good to his word, Wilson's election that fall spelled the end of Kahn's gift and the turning point in efforts to develop Peñasquitos Canyon.⁹⁶

Want to help plan San Diego's future? Get yourself a bulldozer.



Some far-reaching decisions are being made about the quality of San Diego's environment. Take Penasquitos Canyon, for example. A developer has bulldozed a mile-long ditch through this wooded wildlife area to lay sewer pipe for future North City housing. Pleas to consider other, less damaging routes were ignored—despite the inevitable loss of millions of gallons of water and the destruction of irreplaceable vegetation and wildlife.

In the South Bay area, the same "developer" is preparing to shove around 16 million cubic yards of earth to make way for his housing tracts. *Sixteen million cubic yards!* Can you imagine the consequences of moving that much earth without proper planning? Is there a need to move it at all?

It may be too late

We don't know whether anything can be done to reverse or alter the decisions on these projects. Possibly the ecological damage can be limited. If so, it will be due, in large part, to the efforts of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3. This volunteer group began doing something to help preserve the physical quality of San Diego long before ecology became fashionable.

Now in its eleventh year, C-3 continues to serve as a catalyst for citizens who want to take an active part in conserving San Diego's attributes.

Win some, lose some

We've had some notable successes during our first decade of operation. We're proud of being instrumental in seeing that trees were planted in the parking areas at San Diego International Airport. We contributed a great deal to improving the once unsightly entrance to Presidio Park. Additionally, C-3 was responsible for establishing the first billboard controls in San Diego. And we were the successful advocates of the 50-foot building height limit in La Jolla.

But sometimes we lose. For example, C-3 was totally unsuccessful in convincing the city that the stadium parking lot needed trees as much as the

airport. And we're still fighting to save the trees that make Cabrillo Freeway a pleasant place to drive.

Where do we go from here?

We think maintaining the quality of San Diego's environment is worth the fight. And to continue our work, we need two things: money and people. It takes money to operate any organization. It takes people to help give our citizens and public officials a better picture of the environmental, social and economic consequences of any major change. If you can't give time, at least give money. If you can spare some of both, all the better.

Get out your scissors

The important thing is to act now. Just cut out the coupon and mail it to us with your remittance. If you choose to take an active part in C-3, we'll send you a list of committees that need help. If not, we'll just send you our thanks.

But hurry. Because if you listen carefully, you can hear the steady clanking and rumbling in the distance. More decisions are being made.


 Mail with Remittance to
CITIZENS COORDINATE FOR CENTURY THREE
 Post Office Box 16217, San Diego, Calif. 92116
 (or write/phone for additional information) 232-7196

Annual Membership	Please Check	
Patron	\$100 _____	This is my <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal
Sustaining	50 _____	
Contributing	25 _____	
Organization	25 _____	Please make checks payable to:
Family (2 votes)	15 _____	Citizens Coordinate
Regular	10 _____	for Century Three
Special Category*	5 _____	

*Students, those on fixed incomes, members no longer living in the San Diego Region.)

Name _____

Address _____

Date _____ Phone _____

Please indicate present organization affiliations, if any: _____

C-3 is incorporated as a nonprofit, nonpartisan, tax-exempt educational association.

Figure 4: Citizens Coordinate for Century 3, "Want to Plan San Diego's Future? Get Yourself a Bulldozer," October 1971. The activities of corporate-scale developers such as Irvin J. Kahn formed the backdrop for San Diego's 1971 elections. In this political advertisement, C-3 singles out Kahn as the face of environmental destruction and uncontrolled growth, literally, the man on the bulldozer. Credit: Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 Records, 1961–80, MS-0030, San Diego State University Special Collections and University Archives, San Diego, CA.

"INDISCRIMINATE DEVELOPMENT"

If the battle over Peñasquitos Canyon illustrated the merger of environmental and fiscal concerns raised by large-scale development, events in

the adjacent neighborhood of Mira Mesa became a special flashpoint for taxpayer anxiety in the corporate development era. By 1970, three of the nation's largest builders controlled much of the area. The largest by acreage was Pardee Construction, the Weyerhaeuser subsidiary whose bulldozing of Torrey Pines was already drawing public ire. Pardee planned a square mile of budget homes in Mira Mesa. Nearby, two even larger firms—Larwin Homes, the recent subject of a \$100 million corporate acquisition, and Kaufman and Broad, a publicly owned builder ranked second largest in the United States—owned competitive tracts. Between 1969 and 1971, the city approved nearly fifty subdivisions in the area, and these firms rushed houses onto the market with as few amenities as possible.⁹⁷

By late 1971, Mira Mesa had three thousand homes but scarcely a store, park, or public facility. Miles from the nearest development, ten thousand residents occupied a mishmash of dense subdivisions surrounded by bulldozed chaparral and the uproar of construction. Elementary school children attended class in model homes because the city schools could not afford buildings.⁹⁸ Older students commuted without bus service 12 miles to the nearest classrooms. Meanwhile, traffic on two-lane Mira Mesa Boulevard, the only way in or out, was a daily snarl. Bert Brown of the Mira Mesa Homeowners Association lamented in September 1971, "We have nothing but homes and dirt and 12,000 people."⁹⁹ By that time, Mira Mesa had become a poster child for uncontrolled development.¹⁰⁰

As candidates campaigned in 1971, Mira Mesa emerged as the focus for discontent over the fiscal and social costs of growth, but once again, these emerged as part of a wider critique that melded worries over environmental destruction and quality of life with threats to the pocketbook. City council candidate Maureen O'Connor, a twenty-five-year-old teacher with waist-length hair whose campaign literature showed her strolling through the Torrey Pines, argued that the "mushroom" housing tracts of the area represented a case of "indiscriminate development" at public expense.¹⁰¹ Mayoral hopeful Jack Walsh, a Republican from coastal Point Loma who was the leading environmental voice on the county commission, charged that developments such as Mira Mesa represented the "single greatest drain" on city revenues.¹⁰² Candidates such as O'Connor and Walsh frequently drew links between such subdivisions and pollution of the air, water, and land, but in the debate at large, Mira Mesa stood out as an example of the fiscal mismatch between taxes and services under the pressure of corporate development.¹⁰³

CONCLUSION

According to longtime political analyst Harold Keen, San Diego's 1971 elections signaled the "ascendancy of the environment as an issue" in

local politics, but it revealed two other lessons as well.¹⁰⁴ First was the central role of corporate-scale development to this ascension. The election's main "thrust," according to the *San Diego Union*, was "against developers and uncontrolled growth."¹⁰⁵ In September, the top three vote-getters in the mayoral primary were established environmental advocates, and candidates in favor of controlling growth won 87 percent of the votes.¹⁰⁶ The eventual winner, Republican state assemblyman Pete Wilson, was one. Wilson had earned acclaim in 1971 as one of California's "four outstanding environmentalists" for his work in Sacramento on coastal protection, parks, and development control.¹⁰⁷ On the campaign trail, Wilson emphasized that changes in land use underlay the city's major environmental problems.¹⁰⁸ He promoted an economic strategy based on "non-polluting light industry," opposed billboards and coastal high-rises, and he repeatedly asserted the city's "responsibility" to "control our future growth."¹⁰⁹ He also consistently linked the environmental and fiscal costs of sprawl. To prevent "environmental and tax disasters," he argued, "the city rather than developers" must have the final say in planning development.¹¹⁰ In November, voters swept Wilson into office with 62 percent of the vote, and they sent with him a like-minded majority on the city council.¹¹¹

Second, as Wilson's campaign rhetoric reveals, the burst of popular environmentalism in San Diego reflected a multivalent critique of sprawl shaped by both the corporate boom and the city's right-leaning political environment. Corporate development riled citizens from across the political spectrum, but in San Diego's conservative political culture, they brought these anxieties together in a distinctive way, melding concerns with the environment, quality of life, growth, and taxes that would have long influence in the city.

Surveying San Diego politics midway through 1973, Keen concluded that one of the most remarkable trends of recent years was "the giddy rise of the environmentalists" in a city formerly dominated by "the growth syndrome."¹¹² Events support Keen's conclusion. Popular environmentalism reached a peak during Wilson's first term. The mayor and city council substantially revised development regulations, placing a new value on environmental resources that had recently been seen as "barren acreage."¹¹³ Eventually, they wrote regulations that postponed development over a large portion of the North City for a quarter century, and they blocked it permanently on thousands of acres of canyon-side, floodplain, and other sensitive habitat. During Wilson's first term, San Diegans also banned billboards and limited coastal building heights. They lent majority support for the statewide Coastal Initiative and gave the go-ahead to an eventual citywide light rail system. They turned aside efforts to redirect the San Diego and Tijuana Rivers into L.A.-style flood channels, and they blocked development that would have destroyed the county's coastal lagoons. Eventually, the city and county

would preserve these and other critical areas, such as Peñasquitos Canyon, as permanent open space.¹¹⁴ Taken as a whole, these efforts marked a turning point in the city's environmental history.

If the early 1970s represented a high-water mark for environmental reform in San Diego, the outline of future limits was also evident. On the defensive in the early 1970s, corporate developers proved formidable environmental opponents in the years to come. Joined with economic conservatives and construction labor interests, they underwrote an anti-environmental superminority large enough to block public spending for environmental preservation, even before the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978.¹¹⁵ Equally important, many environmentalists' own political proclivities encouraged compromise. Wilson and many supporters sought to *balance* environmental protection and economic growth. Limited in their ability to purchase sensitive lands outright, they put their faith in stronger planning and negotiation with developers that exchanged environmental concessions for wider rights to develop. Seen in this light, Pete Wilson's eventual support for Multiple Species Habitat Planning as governor of California in the 1990s can be seen as a direct descendant of this experience.¹¹⁶

Finally, taxes would prove an unstable issue for environmental advocacy. In San Diego, as elsewhere in California, the politics of taxpaying shifted to the right as the 1970s wore on, culminating in the antistatist fulminations of Proposition 13, which sought limits to public authority of all kinds. Taxpayer concerns also proved easier to satisfy than environmental ones. Among Wilson's imprints as mayor was a policy forcing developers to pay for new infrastructure.¹¹⁷ Builders (and future buyers) would shoulder the fiscal costs of sprawl, at the same time easing the way for the conversion of more land.

Thus the "giddy rise of the environmentalists" in the early 1970s was one of many legacies of the corporate real estate boom, but it represented a critical moment in which environmental concerns gained standing, and it helped to "secure," in Wilson's words, an environmental "legacy of unparalleled value" for the future.¹¹⁸

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Notes

This essay is for Lucas, my partner in San Diego's open spaces. I would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Robert Ray and his staff at the San Diego State University Special Collections Department, and I also extend special thanks to Sarah Elkind, Becky Nicolaides, Kevin Marsh, and two anonymous readers for their review of earlier drafts. A sabbatical from San Diego State University helped to support research for this essay.

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