

Rancho Palos Verdes cedes victory to YIMBYs

City Council abandons last-ditch effort to block housing development on ocean bluff overlooking Catalina Island

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Rancho Palos Verdes has waved the white flag in its standoff with YIMBY reforms.

The Rancho Palos Verdes City Council voted Tuesday to keep the zoning changes it adopted in its housing element last April [rather than wade into uncharted legal territory](#) to block a 16-unit development maligned by neighbors on a picturesque ocean bluff overlooking Catalina Island.

The decision puts the city back on track to certify its state-mandated housing plan, which took years to complete and was near the finish line last year when it was suddenly derailed.

City planners were not prepared for the backlash after they received an application from Ali Vahdani, the seismic engineer-turned-housing developer at the center of the drama.

Vahdani bought the 1.6-acre lot known as “Clipper Site #16,” for \$2.2 million in 2022 and unwittingly stepped into a rancorous battle with neighbors.

The site has remained vacant since its previous owners, Thomas and Shannon Hartman, gave up on a plan to add an eight-car parking garage near their home and instead sold it to Vahdani.

Since learning of Vahdani’s proposal last fall, many in the affluent neighborhood hoped to preserve their [“little piece of paradise”](#) in the seaside community south of Los Angeles, and tried numerous tactics to do

so. Some residents proposed [novel legal theories](#) to block the development, while others submitted complaints to the Fair Political Practices Commission, the state's corruption watchdog.

But Vahdani has continued to assert his vested right to develop the site according to the zoning the city had adopted at the time he submitted his preliminary application. State lawmakers enshrined that right into law in 2019 with SB-330, also known as the Housing Crisis Act.

That fact, along with the risk of subjecting the city to builder's remedy — which allows housing developers to get around local zoning in cities that fail to certify their state-mandated housing plans, provided their projects include 20 percent affordable housing — was enough to persuade the council to lay the matter to rest.

In a public hearing before the vote Tuesday night, one resident — Sharon Yarber — summed up the situation:

“I think it's a crying shame that this property was ever included in the housing element inventory,” Yarber said. “However, I think there is a possibility [of] putting us in jeopardy for builder's remedy. That, to me, is a hill I would die on.”

“I do not want there to be a scintilla of risk of reopening the door,” Yarber added.

The vote will also spare the city from the very likely possibility of a lawsuit from pro-housing nonprofit YIMBY Law had council members persevered in their previous plan to draft a new housing element reverting several lots, including Clipper Site #16, to their previous single-family zoning designation.

YIMBY Law's Rafa Sonnenfeld, who has been watching events unfold in Rancho Palos Verdes, said he was bracing for Tuesday's vote to go the other way.

“A lot of cities in California want to push the boundaries of what they have to do under state law and push back against mandates,” Sonnenfeld told *The Real Deal*. “It was good to see the city council recognize that they are between a rock and a hard place. Frankly that's a little unusual.”

First-time developer Vahdani, for his part, has been meeting with neighbors to talk about how he can adjust his development plans to address some of their concerns about its height and size, according to his lawyer, Rand Paster & Nelson's Dave Rand.

Rand told *TRD* he was prepared for the legal fight to escalate Tuesday night.

“I have to admit, I was a little bit surprised,” Rand said. “I've gotten used to these things going badly, but they turned this one around. I give credit to the city council for actually reading the legal objections and taking them seriously and making a prudent decision, even if their constituents weren't wildly happy.”