



South County redevelopment forum draws large crowd

BY WENDY FRY, REPORTER - SOUTH COUNTY GA/GOVERNMENT
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SOUTH COUNTY — Two South County mayors defended redevelopment agencies and a former San Diego councilman criticized them at a lively debate Thursday at the South County Regional Education Center in National City.

Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to end redevelopment has ignited a month-long battle between local municipalities and state officials about how local tax dollars should be spent. The governor's plan, released late Wednesday, proposes to stop local agencies from incurring new debt and allow the state to reclaim money that is typically collected from property tax increases and diverted from schools.

The funds would help plug the state's \$25 billion budget hole from its \$84.6 billion general fund.

Mayors Ron Morrison and Jim Janney vehemently opposed the proposed legislation, while former San Diego Councilman Fred Schnaubelt, who once served on San Diego's downtown redevelopment agency, spoke in support of the governor's plan.

Schnaubelt said the governor's strategy of pitting supporters of schools against those who champion economic development was a savvy one, referring to state backfills for schools to compensate for revenue cities invest in eliminating blight.

"What is blight?" Schnaubelt asked. "Well, blight is whatever the government says it is. All of Coronado is 'blighted.' San Diego once declared a Ferrari dealership as blight," he argued.

National City Mayor Morrison pointed to job creation, a statewide economic catalyst he pegged at \$40 billion a year, and voter approval to defend redevelopment.

“It has allowed National City to keep \$14 million a year here in our community. And, as some would say, it ensures it doesn’t go to a rat hole in Sacramento,” Morrison said.

The debate lasted an hour and also included Chula Vista Assistant City Manager Gary Halbert. It was hosted by the South County Economic Development Council and moderated by Scott Lewis, the CEO of the voiceofsandiego.org.

The location of the event, Morrison pointed out, was formerly a gentleman's club before redevelopment dollars were used to transform it.

Imperial Beach Mayor Janney offered a perspective on the issue from a small town of 30,000 people.

Imperial Beach has ranked among the lowest in the state for sales tax revenues per capita, and thus limited on revenue for its general fund.

“The people of I.B. supported redevelopment. It was debated for many years before it was enacted and the people got behind it. They’ve seen a lot of amenities with that money - sidewalks, skateparks, soccer fields - things that really make a community what it’s supposed to be,” he said.

Janney said he did not believe redevelopment agencies needed more oversight, an assertion Lewis later said was "stunning." Morrison disagreed saying “all arms of government are susceptible to abuses.”

Some members of the large audience said the debate would have been more well-rounded if two panelists had offered views that support the governor’s proposal, instead of just Schnaubelt.

South County Economic Development Council Cindy Gompper-Graves said: “The list is long of people who support the governor. The list is very short of people who are brave enough to get up in front of everyone and stand up here and support the governor’s proposal.”

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