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MY WRITE

By Bill Bauer

There was a changing of the guard in one of the city's oldest neighborhood organizations last Saturday.

In a coup backed and organized by school board member and Pico Family Youth Center executive director Oscar de la Torre, nine persons seized control of the Pico Neighborhood Association Board of Directors.

Most long-term board members lost their seats to newcomers, some of which had been PNA members for only a couple of hours. Four directors not up for election will stay on.

A rush of approximately eighty new members, most from the Mothers for Justice, an activist group backed by de la Torre, joined the PNA in the hours and minutes before the annual election held during the organization's annual Congress. The organization represents the Pico neighborhood, which is on the city's eastside, south of Interstate 10.

Armed with preprinted slate cards with candidate names and talking points, nine new members declared themselves write-in candidates joining another dozen (mostly incumbents) seeking reelection.

Outnumbering the PNA regulars by more than two to one, the newcomers literally cleaned house. Gone were Chair, Don Gray; vice chair, Peter Tigler; secretary, Cece Bradley (who co-founded the PNA 23 years ago); long time board members, Clyde Smith, Laverne Ross and Mat Millen.

Maria Loya — a leader of Mothers for Justice — Michael Jackson, Ana Jara, Irma Carranza, Bernice Onofre, Gina DeBaco, Belinda Ramos, Gina De Baca, Wes Thompson and Marc Sanschagrín received the highest number of votes cast and took seats.

But, what was up with City Councilman Kevin McKeown and Santa Monica's Renters Rights co-chair, Patricia Hoffman who were invited to observe the vote count but ended up contributing lots of unwanted and unwarranted advice and suggestions? Observe means observe, not debate the counters.

Loya issued a personal press release stating, "the PNA board was definitely out of touch with its working class constituency and failed to push key issues such as affordable housing, jobs for youth and schools. The organization was not serving the interests of the community and our goal was to increase representation in the Pico neighborhood."

According to Tigler, the goals of the PNA were virtually identical to those stated in Loya's press release and slate card. "There were minor differences. We advocated for ownership of affordable housing as opposed to rental housing," he said.

"Most of the new members had never approached the PNA with comments or suggestions. They had never attended a board meeting or made their positions known," Tigler continued. "We represented our members who supported us wholeheartedly. As a result, membership was increasing."

This raises some issues as to the real reason for the well-organized coup. If de la Torre, Lora and others were truly interested in the neighborhood, wouldn't they have made an effort to work with existing leadership?

It looks as if the real reason for the coup d'état was to seize a well-established platform to promote self interests and a specific agenda rather than working in harmony with all the people that constitute the neighborhood.

The Pico neighborhood is the most diverse in the community. Thirty-five per-cent of its population is Hispanic, 35 per-cent is Caucasian, between 12 and 15 per-cent are African-American and the rest Asian or other.

Loya and de la Torre's claim of representing working class families is public notice their PNA will serve only one segment of Pico's population. Unfortunately, this could further divide neighbors along social and ethnic lines.

Takeovers in Santa Monica politics are nothing new. City Council candidates Mike Feinstein and Abby Arnold both showed up at Santa Monicans For Renters' Rights pre-election conventions with dozens of supporters who "bullet voted" them as SMRR endorsements.

I hope the new PNA leadership broadens their outlook, maintains an open mind, is tolerant and helpful in of other points of view, and works with others for positive change.

However, other politically naive statements from Loya, de la Torre and directors-elect don't bode well for the organization.

Too bad most neighborhood groups have become little fiefdoms that promote the agenda of the handful of people who only speak for themselves — in many cases, not even their own membership, let alone the entire neighborhood they claim to represent.

Meanwhile, you can bet that SMRR leaders are wondering if de la Torre will power politic the important SMRR pre-election convention next year and seize power from their old guard like he did the PNA last weekend.

Stay tuned.

(Bill Bauer is a freelance writer and a longtime Santa Monica resident.)