

The Washington Post

In Anaheim, the Mouse Finally Roars

Disneyland Has Filed First-Ever Suit Against City to Stop Nearby Planned Housing

By Sonya Geis
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, August 6, 2007

ANAHEIM, Calif. -- It's a tale worthy of a Disney classic: wicked plotters, oppressed workers, an uphill battle that leads, one hopes, to a happy ending. But this time the bad guy is in the mouse suit. At least that's how affordable-housing advocates in Disneyland's home town of Anaheim tell the story.

This sunny city 25 miles south of Los Angeles is divided over a housing developer's plan to build 1,500 apartments and condos, 225 of them for low-income families, a few blocks from Disneyland. Disney doesn't want the project, arguing that the land is zoned for tourism.

But Disney's resistance to housing -- affordable housing, especially -- is fueling frustration in Anaheim. Here, as in much of Southern California, home prices are beyond the grasp of service workers such as one might find, for instance, operating a ride at Disneyland. A coalition of service workers unions, churches and nonprofits has turned Disney's resistance into a rallying cry.

Talk of affordable housing brings on "ridiculous" rhetoric about "poor people and crime . . . and 'They're taking away our police and fire,'" said Councilwoman Lorri Galloway. "If [Disney] doesn't want to support their workers, don't stop a private developer from doing it."

The conflict has become increasingly bitter. In the past few months, Disney filed its first-ever lawsuit against Anaheim, charging that the legal planning process was circumvented. Thousands of residents signed petitions to force a vote on the project. Police have broken up several fights between signature-gatherers in grocery stores.

Last week, as the Anaheim City Council discussed the project, about 50 affordable-housing activists staged a skit in front of City Hall. Actors in "evil queen" and Mickey outfits ordered Disney workers to get out of town.

"They want to make money, but they don't care about the employees," Gabriel de la Cruz said at the protest.

De la Cruz has worked as a banquet server at Disneyland for 10 years. He lives with his wife and two teenage children in a one-bedroom apartment near the theme park. "Rent is too high," he said. "We don't have a choice to go some other place."

The median home price in Orange County rocketed from \$185,000 in 1997 to \$645,000 in June. Rent has climbed too, to an average of \$1,531 at the beginning of the year. The nationwide housing slump is only slightly modulating housing prices here, as job creation far outstrips new building. Overcrowding is a huge problem.

Advertisement » Your Ad Here

What is the most critical issue facing government today?

- Health Care
- National Security
- Economy
- Environment

But don't blame Mickey, Disneyland spokesman Rob Doughty said. "Unfortunately, in the heat of this debate, the real issue has been lost," he said. "It's a zoning issue, not a housing issue."

In 1994, the city created a special resort zone designation so that land around Disneyland would go only for tourism. Disney and Anaheim spent millions cleaning up the area. Nearby streets, once lined with fast-food joints and cheap motels, are now wide and clean boulevards of flowering trees, long-leafed palms and sunset-colored adobe hotels.

Local developer SunCal wants to put a condo project across the street from Disney property that is widely rumored to be the site of its next theme park.

Disney, along with business groups, residents and Anaheim's mayor, argues that the housing project is the beginning of the end for zoning that keeps cash flowing into the city -- \$80 million last year from hotel taxes alone. That number climbed from \$46.2 million in 1999, several years after the city created the resort zone.

Two other developers also have proposed housing projects. "If the city allows development in the resort area, there's a dangerous precedent that will be set," Doughty said. "How are [City Council members] going to be able to say no? They're not going to be able to."

Much of the battle has played out in the City Council. Three members have welcomed the housing, and two other members, including Mayor Curt Pringle, have fought it.

Pringle points out that the city has 10,000 condos and apartments under construction near Angel Stadium, home of Major League Baseball's Los Angeles Angels, and a four-year plan to build 1,200 affordable homes.

That's not enough for Galloway, who sides with SunCal. "There's no hotel crisis. There's a housing crisis," she said.

Yet a resolution is likely to come not from city government but from Disney and the housing developer. They are negotiating while the City Council has delayed a referendum on its vote to allow the housing project. The council decided last week to give the private parties until Aug. 21 to devise a solution.

"It's really easy to go after a big company like Disney," said Lucy Dunn, chief executive of the Orange County Business Council. But, she said, housing is a regional problem not solved with one project: "Affordability begins with availability, and we just don't have enough housing for the people who want it."

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Sponsored Links

[Mom Makes \\$65/Hr Online](#)

Mom makes \$5,500+ a month! Read her story to find out how she did it.
TheCaliforniaGazette.com

[30%-50% Return w/ Silver!](#)

Control \$25k Silver w/ a \$10k Investment! IRA-Eligible. \$10k minimum.
DirectMetalsInvesting.com

[Holland America Line](#)

Request your free Alaska & Yukon vacation guide.
www.hollandamerica.com

[Buy a link here](#)

© 2007 The Washington Post Company