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Tiny Potrero Battles County and Blackwater USA

By Don Bauder

The hamlet of Potrero in southeast San Diego County, 45 miles from the city and just 8 minutes from Tecate, is being ambushed. The attackers are county bureaucrats marching alongside Blackwater USA, the private military contractor that is getting so much bad press while being labeled one of the biggest mercenary firms in the Iraq War.

Blackwater wants to build an 824-acre training facility three miles north of Potrero. It will have 15 shooting ranges, an armory for storing ammunition, a course on which moving vehicles will be strafed with paintballs, a helicopter pad, several buildings, and other military accoutrements. But Potrero's oft-stated community goal is to "maintain the existing rural lifestyle by continuing the existing pattern of residential and agricultural uses on large 40-acre lots" alongside "generally undeveloped meadows, open spaces, and hillsides."

A paramilitary base hardly fits the bill. The town has 435 registered voters. Well over half have signed a petition opposing the project. Among many things, the petition notes that the 350 staff and students at the proposed Blackwater West constitute more than one-third of the current Potrero population "and will substantially increase traffic." The project is "a large commercial operation with possible future expansion that violates our character and the spirit of our general plan." Overwhelmingly, the residents fear ear-splitting noise.

The town, which has two restaurants and a general store, has a population well below 1000. Almost 26 percent of the people live under the poverty level -- more than double the national average.

The little village is definitely the underdog, because this is the first project under the County's year-old plan to halve the environmental review process. Normally, getting approvals for such a construction program would take 45 months. But San Diego County wants this one done in 20 to 22 months, unless it gets stymied along the way.

Developers have been promised faster and friendlier service by county government. Last April, at a roundtable put on by the *Daily Transcript* and the San Diego Building Industry Association, Chandra Wallar, the County's deputy chief administrative officer and general manager of Land Use and Environment Group, promised the builders, "We can get you guys on the ground more quickly." Developers, planning groups, county land-use bureaucrats, and environmentalists should "get together very early when you've just got a big chunk of raw land and say, 'What makes the most sense here, and how do we do it?'"

Opponents of the Potrero project understand that under the law the County has an obligation to work with developers. However, there has to be public participation early on. The planning for this assault was well down the road before Potrero citizens even knew about it. "They have been trying to build support without notifying anybody here," says resident Carl Meyer. "I have proof that since May they [Blackwater] have been meeting privately with Department of Planning and Land Use personnel. They have been trying to get standards lowered" in noise, roads, and other parts of the plan. For example, county planners profess to be satisfied with Potrero's narrow, substandard roads, even though big trucks would rumble down them.

Last July, Blackwater hired as a lobbyist Nikki Clay, a longtime cheerleader for corporate welfare (Chargers, Padres) and former president of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. Blackwater brought on the developer-friendly environmental firm of Mooney, Jones & Stokes, along with other companies to make up their project team. The team quickly snuggled up to the County, which was *not* playing hard to get.

The Potrero public didn't hear about the project until October 12. But before that, technical studies were "well underway," according to records on file with the County. Clay said she was communicating regularly with the supervisor's office and the office of military powerhouse Congressman Duncan Hunter, even though Potrero is not in his district. Potrero's supervisor is Dianne Jacob. The Blackwater project team proudly noted that although Jacob "has historically required secondary access," in this case "she will be in favor of only requiring primary access." After the 2003 fires, Jacob emphasized that some fire personnel couldn't get to some homes because there was no secondary road access. (Wallar says a supervisor would not make such a decision, although the board of supervisors will ultimately decide on the overall project.) On October 3, a

bureaucrat and Blackwater team member visited the site to do a formal wetlands delineation. Groundwater details were worked out with two departments.

"We anticipate submittal of the formal application and technical studies at the end of October," said the Blackwater project team on September 26. "The overall project schedule is being finalized" by a county staff member along with the project team, said the Blackwater group in late September. The schedule was being finalized? Remember, the Potrero citizenry did not hear about this until October 12, more than two weeks later. And prior to the Potrero planning group meeting, the County and the project team staged a "murder board" (a military term for a tough question-and-answer session in preparation for a meeting).

Clearly, the County and the Blackwater project team were getting ahead of themselves -- certainly ahead of poor Potrero.

Back in April of last year, Wallar advised builders to get their supporters out to meetings at which their projects were being considered. That appeared to be the strategy October 12 in Potrero. Before the meeting of the local community planning group, there was barely any advance notice, says resident Barbara Chamberlain. A discussion of "Blackwater USA" was listed. "Nobody had any idea what it [Blackwater] was," and few who might have opposed it went to the meeting. But those who would favor it were out in force, and in a show of hands, it appeared there was strong backing.

There was a second local planning group meeting in December. By then, word had gotten into the community, and some skeptics showed up. The show of hands was about evenly split, but the community planning group voted 7 to 0 to see the project proceed. "We are surprised at the speed at which they [County, project group, and Potrero planning group] are going," says Chamberlain. "They are going at it so inappropriately; why are they pushing this so hard?" Two-thirds of the citizens initially in favor of the project have now signed the petition opposing it, she says.

Blackwater's formal application came December 20, after the second Potrero meeting. The County would like to see the environmental review process completed in 20 to 22 months from that date.

Resident Tina Brown points out that in 1995, the planning group okayed an off-road vehicle park. Citizens protested vehemently, and eventually the proposal was scrapped. It was widely believed then that a planning group member had received a finder's fee. Could this have happened again? Gordon Hammers, chairman of the current planning group, says "that's strictly forbidden," and he would take no such fee. "That's innuendo." The planning group has given the go-ahead because, among several things, Potrero may get 30 to 45 jobs from the facility. Hammers was briefed by the project group and visited the site prior to the October 12 meeting.

Duncan McFetridge of Descanso's Save Our Forests and Ranchlands says that half the property is in the Cleveland National Forest, even though it is privately owned, and the other half is in an agricultural preserve. The County's general plan "does not account for this type of plan with forest and agriculture," he says. Blackwater West also goes against the county general plan "with respect to use of the property, with respect to the density, with respect to incompatibility with the environment."

The brouhaha comes at a bad time for Blackwater USA. The head of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform wants to know why Blackwater has been paid so much for Iraq work. On February 7, the committee looked into the company on several grounds. One of its contracts with Halliburton may not be kosher, for example. The committee probed a lawsuit against Blackwater. People who lost loved ones when four employees were massacred in 2004 have charged that the company provided the men with inadequate equipment. In its defense, Blackwater has hired famed attorney Ken Starr and sued the lawyers who filed the case. Last month, five more Blackwater employees were killed in a helicopter crash. The company's owner, Erik Prince, has given lavishly to politicians, including former representative Tom DeLay, who left Congress in a lobbying scandal, and Duncan Hunter (\$1000 in 2004).

Blackwater is one of the companies pilloried in the movie *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers*. Save Our Forests and Ranchlands will show the film March 1 at 6:30 p.m. at Descanso Town Hall.

Wallar says the abbreviated environmental process is a "win-win-win situation for the community, county staff, and the developer." Potrero and environmentalists disagree. It appears the County's new fast-track process serves developers, not the public.

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