

Donald Turner: The Champion Is Missed

Bradley Inman
Inman News Features

In the red-hot Orange County, California, housing market, affordable housing is a welcome sight as renters scramble for fewer and fewer vacant apartments and buyers race against home price inflation.

Early in 1997, city officials, housing advocates, and citizens gathered in the affluent Southern California community of Irvine to celebrate the opening of an affordable, mixed-income garden apartment complex called Santa Alicia. The development is a tribute to leadership, particularly that of Donald Turner, the late president of the nonprofit BRIDGE Housing group that built the 84-unit project. Turner died in the April 1996 airplane crash that also killed Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown and many other talented people.

There was a time when the Santa Alicia complex did not represent joy and accomplishment. When it was under consideration by the Irvine City Council several years ago, the project stood for conflict, community disagreement, and shrill opinions about affordable housing. As often happens, opponents of mixed-income housing overwhelmed the supporters of Santa Alicia.

At one point, BRIDGE threatened to sue the city over its resistance to the development. California's anti-NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) law prevents cities from arbitrarily rejecting an affordable housing project, and BRIDGE claimed that a decision to reject the project would violate those requirements.

The threat was tested at a 1995 city council hearing held to decide the fate of Santa Alicia. Turner, representing BRIDGE, faced several hostile council members who used the threatened lawsuit to characterize the nonprofit builder as a bully of a developer. At one point in the hearing, Turner was confronted by council member Christina Shea, now mayor of Irvine. She challenged Turner to promise not to sue, suggesting that members of the council could be held personally liable.

Knowing that the lawsuit might be BRIDGE Housing's only means of obtaining approval for the development, Turner delicately skirted the issue but clearly left the litigation threat on the table. He made a positive case for the project, its future tenants, and its contribution to the community without retreating from the legal weapon that, in the end, helped to persuade Santa Alicia's most persistent foes.

This was the work of a creative, courageous, and agile housing advocate who knew when to be a gentleman, when to be a persuader, and when to “hold on with a bulldog grip” (President Lincoln, telegram to General Grant, August 17, 1864). He could be charismatic or coy, but he was eyeball-to-eyeball direct when necessary. And he could finesse like a master bridge player.

The Santa Alicia project was not the first time Turner was involved in Orange County housing litigation. In the late 1970s, he used his position as then-Governor Jerry Brown’s housing chief to sue the county for ignoring its obligation to build affordable housing. The suit was controversial, but Turner had made his point. He forced the hand of then-conservative Orange County to do more for affordable housing.

All of the projects Don Turner backed were mixed-income developments. He understood the importance of not “ghettoizing” areas, and he understood the value of developments in which income level is not of paramount importance.

BRIDGE is still in able hands with long-time housing advocate Carol Galante at the helm, but Turner’s swath cut wider than the work of this single nonprofit group. He represented affordable housing in city hall, in the State legislature, and on congressional committees. He sat on citizens’ committees on affordable housing, spoke at conferences, and participated in workshops.

Turner was a tireless champion who transformed the everyday issue of housing into a popular cause that the public could understand. Under his leadership, BRIDGE added 6,000 units of badly needed affordable housing to the Bay area. As the California housing market heats up, the State once again needs leaders like Don Turner who will stand up for high-quality, mixed-income developments while confronting the NIMBYs, government officials, and those who sometimes use issues such as the environment as an excuse to turn away the poor.