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Rancho Palos Verdes rejects Measure P

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer
Posted: 11/03/2010 01:34:23 AM PDT
Updated: 11/03/2010 09:34:51 AM PDT

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Marymount College's \$1.3 million investment in Measure P did not pay off Tuesday, with voters rejecting an initiative that would have allowed student dormitories in a residential neighborhood.

With all 26 precincts reporting, about 55.1 percent of voters had cast their ballots against the small Catholic college's controversial effort to gain approval of a long-desired campus expansion plan.

Councilman Brian Campbell - a critic of the initiative who is no stranger to hyperbole - said in an e-mail that the outcome was the "biggest political upset in Southern California history."

"Against seemingly insurmountable financial odds and a ferocious Marymount College, the residents of Rancho Palos Verdes stood their ground and said 'No on P,'" Campbell wrote.

Initial results just after polls closed revealed about 56 percent of voters went against Measure P, a gap that narrowed but still held past midnight.

Marymount political consultant Ruben Gonzalez said when only those results were in that the race was too early to call and "we're confident that Rancho Palos Verdes voters will support Measure P."

Opponents, who raised about \$40,000 against Marymount's historically expensive initiative campaign, were happy with

preliminary returns earlier Tuesday.

Former city Mayor Susan Brooks, who was hosting the opposition's election party, said her camp had not expected to do well in absentee ballots because earlier voters could have been swayed by Marymount's campaign spending.

"Our opinion was that the absentee ballot vote was before the people really knew what (Measure) P was really all about. ... They just thought it was all about enhancement of the site," Brooks said.

Passage of the initiative would have allowed Marymount to build dormitories for 250 students on its 25-acre Palos Verdes Drive East campus, which is surrounded by single-family homes. Construction of a new library, athletic facilities and other improvements could still move forward under an expansion already approved by the City Council, which never considered student housing.

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The initiative's proposal for the campus was slightly different from the council-approved plan, and Measure P would have eliminated some municipal oversight. The latter issue was a major concern of opponents of the initiative, especially council members.

The dorms - opposed by many of the college's residential neighbors - were dropped from the college's plans last year during a lengthy review by the city Planning Commission.

But Marymount President Michael Brophy and college officials had said on-campus housing was crucial to the success of the school, which now enrolls more than 750 students. In March, they announced that they wanted voters to decide on their full plan and began gathering signatures for their 51-page initiative.

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The divisive campaign season was marked by disputed endorsements, accusations of lying and anti-religious bias, allegations of law-breaking, theft of lawn signs and a court battle.

Voters were bombarded with mailers and advertisements from Marymount. The "no" campaign, known as Save Our City III, sent mailers and relied heavily on robocalls. Council members, who unanimously opposed the measure, likewise employed many robocalls.

The election frenzy reached an extreme before before midnight Monday, with a call sent out to voters purportedly from former Rep. Steve Kuykendall.

The voice on the message - apparently not that of Kuykendall, who is a paid consultant for Marymount - encouraged a no vote and stated "my God, this is important for the sake of the area."

Both sides accused the other of "dirty tricks" in putting the call out. It remains unclear who indeed funded the call.

The two sides had offered starkly different takes on Measure P's potential impact. The City Council, which unanimously opposed Measure P, said it would undermine the city's "self-rule."

Some opponents suggested the initiative would set a precedent for other developers in the affluent coastal city.

Marymount supporters dismissed such arguments as fear-mongering.

"The college finds it hard to believe that we're going to be some kind of case study for multinational corporations who are going to figure out how to break into Rancho Palos Verdes," Brophy said last month.

Marymount's campaign emphasized that with a "rejuvenation," the new facilities - expected to cost more than \$50 million - would be an asset to the community.

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