

Open Letter to the San Diego County Democratic Party Executive Board 18 July 2020

The San Diego County Democratic Party has a serious problem. Chair Will Rodriguez-Kennedy, through his embrace of YIMBYism and its disingenuous agenda, is doing his very best to change the meaning of “CDP” from County Democratic Party to Corporatist Democratic Party, going so far as to deploy anti-Semitic tropes against those who challenge YIMBY dogma.

The YIMBY movement is, by and large, a Trojan horse. Though many rank-and-file YIMBY activists are sincerely committed to creating truly affordable housing, the movement today is sustained in large part by money from [Big Tech](#) and [Real Estate Investment Trusts](#) (REITs). As non-profit organizations join the YIMBY network, they become convenient vehicles for laundering corporate money into what appear to be local grass-roots campaigns but that are, at their core, corporatist puppetry from afar.

The best local example of how corporate influence gets peddled to Democrats under the YIMBY brand is Silicon Valley-surrogate Circulate San Diego. Its executive director is a Democratic elected official, and at least one other employee by day is a Democratic operative by night. The organization rationalizes deregulation and the silencing of the public on development matters as a reasonable trade-off to spark more housing construction. Yet democracy and regulations are not the reason we have a shortage of housing affordable to lower-income families. As the Urban Institute has pointed out, [“without subsidies, which can be hard to come by, it’s virtually impossible for developers to build homes that are affordable to low- or extremely low income families.”](#) Stated differently, the people Democrats claim to care about most don’t need deregulation or less democracy; they need politicians to put their money where their mouth is.

This is not to say everyone affiliated with Circulate San Diego is part of the problem; to the contrary, many are seriously committed to increasing the supply of truly affordable housing without harming existing neighborhoods and residents, and some have commendably done so. Unfortunately, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and on the whole Circulate San Diego is heavily funded by corporate donors pushing a supply-side housing agenda – the same agenda being pushed by [Donald Trump’s Administration](#) and [YIMBY cheerleader Ben Carson](#), also known as [“the newest YIMBYs on the block.”](#)

The central thesis in the YIMBY supply-side argument is that deregulation will prompt developers to build so much high-end and market-rate housing that they’ll stimulate sizable growth in the supply of less-expensive housing. That thesis is dubious on its best day. We can never build enough housing to appreciably drive down the cost of housing or increase the supply of truly “affordable” housing. If you don’t believe me, just ask the campaign manager for my opponent in the City Attorney contest. In texting me a copy of the [Federal Reserve Bank study](#) debunking the supply-side argument, he wrote that “trickle-down housing solutions mirror the failed theory of trickle-down economics.” When I jokingly referred to his characterization as “tinkle-down economics,” he further justified his choice of words: “People can get that. They know that helping the corporations doesn’t actually end up helping the people.” On that much, he and I agree.

The Democratic Party I once knew would have never tolerated doing indirectly what could not be done directly. Under Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy’s leadership, the formerly verboten now appears to be the rule.

Shortly after taking over as Chair, Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy told *KPBS* that [he is a YIMBY](#). During that interview, he claimed: “if you look at the Democratic Party, it is a minority, but a vocal minority, that opposes housing.” He was gas-lighting. After I debated the housing issue at the Foothill-La Mesa Democratic Club on March 6, 2019, *Voice of San Diego*’s Scott Lewis, who moderated the debate, had this to say: “[Briggs did very well there. His anti-developer remarks, hits against YIMBYs and contention that the housing supply arguments were bogus resonated.](#)” The truth is that most members of the public – including Asian, Latinx, Black, and other San Diegans – oppose turning their people-centric neighborhoods into investor-owned portfolios.

In this regard, San Diegans find themselves in good company. Statewide opposition to last year’s legislative magnum opus for YIMBYs, Senate Bill 827, “[included the Black Community, Clergy, and Labor Alliance; 96 cities, including San Francisco and Los Angeles; and the Sierra Club; along with advocates for social equity, tenants’ rights, and local control.](#)”

YIMBYs purposefully misrepresent their opponents as defenders of single-family zoning, knowing perfectly well that it’s not about zoning at all. What people are defending is something far more fundamental: the right to pursue their slice of the American Dream, which for owners and aspiring owners alike includes having somewhere they and their families can call “home” and build financial security and independence, in a place surrounded by those they call “neighbors.” If successful, the YIMBY agenda will turn homes and neighbors into commodities controlled by investors and mega-corporations, ushering us, as one commentator has described it, “[to an age of neo-feudalism.](#)” Land might be susceptible to commoditization; “homes” and “neighbors” aren’t.

Consider the issue from a different angle: Many YIMBYs promote themselves as fighting the good fight against climate change (as I myself have done and still do). Locally, one of today’s biggest climate-change battles involves a move toward municipal utilities, away from investor-owned utilities, because profit-seeking tends to impede progress on carbon reductions. If investor-owned utilities are bad for the environment, how will investor-owned housing be good for residents? In the City of San Diego alone, we already see the deleterious effects of investor-owned housing caused by thousands of units taken out of the residential stock and converted to short-term-vacation stock. Scaling up this model will only benefit the investor class.

As a lawyer, I have spent many years defending marginalized communities from the loss of their affordable housing, against the scourge of gentrification, including nearly 20 years as a lawyer for the Affordable Housing Coalition of San Diego County. I’d like to say it’s “funny” that key people now pushing the YIMBY agenda were, in the pre-YIMBY era, actively working on the side of gentrification and displacement of lower-income San Diegans, but it’s not funny. It is, however, quite telling. Do leopards really change their spots?

Because I’ve seen it time and again, long before this election cycle started, I can tell you that the go-to YIMBY attack against anyone who dares to defend communities from gentrification and displacement either is itself racist or involves accusations of racism; yes, even I’ve been on the receiving end. Such attacks have no merit, but they often hit their mark. I’m sure many remember when San Diego City Councilmember David Alvarez, himself a foe of corporate speculation in his constituents’ neighborhoods, ran for Mayor in 2014 and became the target of a [blatantly racist hit piece by the Lincoln Club](#). Well, racist attacks from political operatives are back – except this time they’re coming from within. That is why I feel compelled to call out Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy for deploying the tactic and encouraging others to do the same.

Anti-Semitism is the [oldest form of systemic racism](#), and one of its oldest tropes is the slur associating Jews with money (so much so that it's become the subject of a [London museum exhibit](#)). Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy has trafficked in this trope in two Dem-on-Dem races involving Jewish candidates, one with Sara Jacobs and the other with Barbara Bry. His Twitter and Facebook accounts are replete with examples.

In a tweet on October 17, 2019, Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy began a criticism of Ms. Bry's anti-YIMBY position by referring to her as "[a wealthy mayoral candidate](#)." Two days later, he began a Facebook post asserting that "[\[w\]e should not allow wealthy candidates to buy political seats](#)." The post itself took no issue with any policy position but was critical of some unnamed "oligarch." In the post's comments he not only made clear he was primarily attacking Ms. Jacobs, describing her as a member of "[one of the wealthiest, most powerful families in the county](#)," but took the opportunity to [ratify his tweet against Ms. Bry](#) from two days earlier.

Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy also fixates on where Ms. Bry lives, especially when she speaks out against the YIMBY agenda. This, of course, is a preposterous attack on at least three levels. For starters, it suggests that the CDP opposes material rewards inuring to women. Moreover, it wasn't that long ago when exclusionary land covenants prohibited Jews from owning a home where Ms. Bry lives. And finally, even though Ms. Bry is not the only non-endorsed Democrat who both lives in that part of town and is running for office in a Dem-on-Dem race, she is the only one derided by the Chair for living there. (That's right; the other Democrat who lives there is not Jewish.)

Most recently, Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy decided to insert himself into a tweet-storm in which the same Republican operative behind the racist attack against Mr. Alvarez tried to paint Ms. Bry as racist for her anti-YIMBY communication asking, "[There goes the neighborhood?](#)" One of San Diego's most respected and accomplished leaders and a supporter of Ms. Bry, Geneviève Jones-Wright, responded by pointing out that those four words (sans question mark) are the [title of an anti-gentrification podcast by nationally recognized Black journalist Kai Wright](#). She added that she finds it "[interesting that people wanting to help \[People of Color\] by unlimited housing development think the solution to bottlenecks is gutting our democratic institutions and working against us equity advocates](#)." That's when the Chair piled on to accuse Ms. Bry of "[embracing policies that have racist consequences or using terms that derive from racial tropes](#)" – which was entirely predictable because, as I noted above, the YIMBY playbook calls either for racist attacks or accusations of racism whenever anyone questions their agenda. Birds of a feather – namely, the Republican operative and our Republican-cum-Democrat leader – flock together.

In other words, not only does Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy employ anti-Semitic tropes against Jewish candidates, but he simultaneously accuses YIMBY opponents of supporting racist policies. He has managed to exploit racism from both directions in order to protect and advance the YIMBY agenda, to a degree that would make Lee Atwater proud.

What's particularly shocking about Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy's animus toward Ms. Bry and even Ms. Jacobs is that he is attacking members of his own party. As the Chair, it's his job first and foremost to help get Democrats elected to public office. That will happen no matter who wins the Mayor's race or the 53rd Congressional District. Given that San Diego will have a Democrat as Mayor and a Democrat representing the 53rd by year's end, why is the Chair doing everything he can to alienate candidates with whom we might have to work on policy and governance issues? There's obviously something more important to him than seeing Democrats get elected.

Any suggestion that Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy's negative references to Jewish candidates and money merely reflect his antipathy toward wealth generally is belied by his eagerness to join forces with corporate interests. He was more than willing to glide up to land speculators when he helped the CDP [oppose Measure A](#) (which would have protected the backcountry from speculator-sparked urban sprawl) and [support Measure C](#) (to subsidize corporate hoteliers' convention-center expansion). The wealth of his advocacy's beneficiaries didn't seem to bother him in the slightest – at least not enough to speak out against them with the vitriol he has directed at Jewish candidates.

I tried privately to counsel Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy and offered to help him engage in honest policy debate without resorting to anti-Semitic tropes. I thought we were making progress, but a few days ago he decided he'd fare better by accusing this messenger of – you guessed it – using racist language against him. He must not have meant it when he wrote on Facebook that he would crack down on [“toxic political behavior”](#) and that [“for allies, it is important that you step up and stamp out the racism in your midst.”](#)

At this point, I want to make three things clear. First, I know Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy's statements and conduct are not representative of the overwhelming majority of Democrats or San Diegans. Because he is the Chair, however, the slurs reflect directly on the CDP. As a Jew, I object to anti-Semitism and racism everywhere in society but most strenuously when it comes from a leader of my party.

Second, I'm not writing this letter to express political support for Ms. Bry or Ms. Jacobs as candidates. As I've stated since the first day of my campaign, I believe no candidate for City Attorney, whether as challenger or incumbent, should take a public position on any other candidate in any race; my integrity and neutrality – and maintaining the public's confidence in my integrity and neutrality – are more important than political back-scratching. I wish both candidates and their opponents the best of luck – nothing more, nothing less.

Third, I struggled over how best to respond to what I'm witnessing. I considered keeping quiet because I don't want to be accused of playing politics, especially given my promise to be a non-political City Attorney, but I've never veered from calling out corruption when I see it; this time will be no different, the corruption here being obvious. I even contemplated changing my voter status to “no party preference.” However, that didn't feel right because of all the honest, decent Democrats – particularly in the clubs – who believe in my ability to clean up the City Attorney's Office. I owe it to them to stick it out and try to do the same within the CDP.

In sum, I urge the CDP to take a very close look at what it is becoming with Mr. Rodriguez-Kennedy at the helm. Ask yourselves what's more important: protecting corporate speculators or protecting San Diegans? Then ask yourselves how the CDP should approach tough policy questions: with open, honest, inclusive debate or with intolerance, disdain, and derision toward those offering a different viewpoint? The Chair has made it clear how he answers those questions. What interests the public most is how you will answer them.

Yours for a brighter, peaceful future,

Cory J. Briggs