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League of California Scam Artists

There is an unsettling possibility that you were conned

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If you voted for Proposition 99 last week, there is an unsettling possibility that you were conned.



Were California homeowners sold a bill of goods in the last election?

Proposition 99 handily defeated a rival ballot measure, Proposition 98, though both ostensibly targeted local government's abuse of eminent domain power. The principal difference between them is that the former protects only owner-occupied residences from government confiscation for private uses while the latter shielded all homes and businesses. In the overwhelming majority of eminent domain cases, it is businesses, not houses, which are gobbled up by county and municipal redevelopment schemes. Rather than face Proposition 98's limits on their authority to bully small property owners, the League of California Cities introduced Proposition 99, cynically tricked out as an eminent domain reform measure.

This was not the first time, nor will it be the last, that California voters have been scammed on a statewide ballot. But in this case the League looks like the worst kind of mountebanks and the voters who believed them the most gullible of dolts. The first clue for any thinking voter should have been Proposition 99's sponsorship. Why would the state's biggest abusers of eminent domain seek to meaningfully limit their own powers? The second clue came when the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office analyzed the two measures and concluded that Proposition 99 would have no practical impact. Redevelopment agencies target businesses, it reasoned, not homes.

The League's gulling of the voters persisted after the election. Prior to the statewide vote, League President Jim Madaffer, who doubles as a San Diego City council member, admitted to the media that Proposition 99 is toothless and that the League would participate in additional reforms after the election. Proposition 99 campaign consultant Brandon Castillo likewise told the media that the League is "willing to take the high road and look at anything" to further protect Californians from eminent domain abuse. But after the election, Madaffer did an about-face, telling the press that the League was not interested in more reform and that "any further restrictions should be left to individual cities." The "high road" Castillo described was really a short detour back into the high grass, and the League's sting was complete.

Leaving eminent domain reform in the cities' hands, as Madaffer would have it, is like leaving one's pet chicken in the care of Colonel Sanders.

The upshot is that Californians are no better protected than they were before from overreaching local politicians who would team with developers to tear down small business communities, churches and other uses and replace them with better tax revenue producers like resorts, large office buildings and hotels.

When that happens in a neighborhood near you, remember the League's Proposition 99 con job.

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