

Redondo Beach group sues city over legal costs related to harbor rezoning measure

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Posted: 03/30/2011 07:03:18 PM PDT

Updated: 03/30/2011 08:29:11 PM PDT

A Redondo Beach citizens group is suing the city in an attempt to force disclosure of records pertaining to outside legal expenses for a public vote on harbor rezoning.

The lawsuit, filed Monday in Los Angeles Superior Court by slow-growth proponent Building a Better Redondo, alleges that the city's response to a November 2010 public records request was incomplete and violates the California Public Records Act. The action seeks disclosure of the records and payment of attorney fees.

Among other requests, Building a Better Redondo asked for all writings related to invoices submitted by two firms that advised the city in its fight against the group's efforts to allow voters to decide on harbor rezoning issues in 2008 and 2010.

What the group received, the lawsuit said, were invoices detailing only fees charged and paid. The city withheld itemized time and expense records, citing attorney-client privilege and exemptions for litigation records.

Frank Angel, the attorney representing the citizens group, said the city is trying to cover up a conflict of interest for one of the law firms retained by the city.

The firm, Sohagi Law Group, employed an

attorney that formerly advised Building a Better Redondo.

According to the lawsuit, a document that the group did receive in its request last fall showed that the lawyer billed Redondo Beach for work related to harbor rezoning.

"It's fairly transparent what they're wanting

to hide," Angel said. "Among other things, those documents would give us more information on the ethical conflict."

Redondo Beach City Attorney Mike Webb said more than 300 records have been turned over to Building a Better Redondo, detailing "every penny" spent regarding the items requested.

Established privileges allow the city to refuse to release the more detailed information, Webb said. "It hurts a city in any litigation to show 'researching this issue' for X number of hours."

Angel disagrees.

"The overall point is that courts over the last decade have repeatedly ruled that there is strong justifiable public interest in disclosing how government spends its money," Angel said.

Knowing what attorneys worked how many hours is not work product, he argued. "If there's any legal advice that would be contained in these entries, you can redact the information."

The city and Building a Better Redondo are still battling in court over \$313,000 in attorneys' fees awarded to the group after its successful lawsuit to get a public vote on a Harbor Area Zoning map.

Measure G passed in November and added the possibility of 400,000 square feet of development near the city's harbor and pier, but the wounds from the contentious campaign obviously still linger.

Councilman Steve Diels has not been shy about expressing his personal distaste for the actions of Building a Better Redondo.

"They're acting like petulant children that constantly need attention," Diels said. "They're obviously highly litigious. It's shameful but it's not an unsurprising result."

Jim Light, president of the group, said residents have a right to know how the city spends tax money and decide if officials are good stewards of the money.

"Redondo Beach has a heritage of slow-rolling information that should be public," Light said.

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