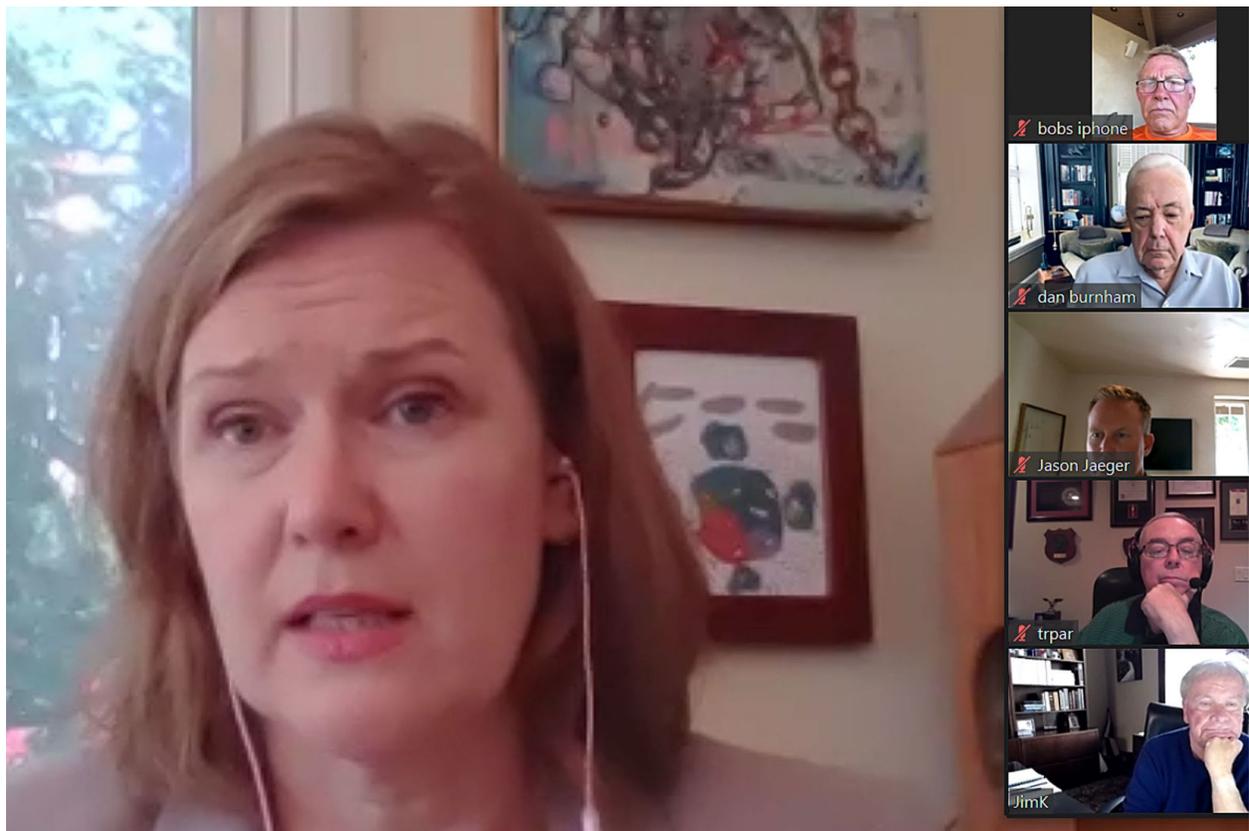


Santa Barbara Councilwoman Kristen Sneddon Says ‘Bring it On’ to Community Development Department

Business leaders want Paul Casey, George Buell fired; Sneddon says she's laying groundwork for changes



Santa Barbara City Councilwoman Kristen Sneddon came out swinging Wednesday in a Zoom meeting with about 30 business leaders, calling for big changes and even firings to fix the city's Community Development Department. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

By Joshua Molina, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@JECMolina](#)
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A frustrated and annoyed Santa Barbara City Councilwoman Kristen Sneddon came out swinging Wednesday in a Zoom meeting with about 30 business leaders, calling for big changes and even firings to fix the city's Community Development Department.

"I don't like what this one particular department is doing," Sneddon said.

Sneddon spoke at former Mayor Hal Conklin's Santa Barbara Leadership Team weekly gathering of business executives.

Jim Knell, chairman of the SIMA corporation, and Steve Epstein of Epstein Partners both called for the firing of City Administrator Paul Casey and Community Development Director George Buell **over a plethora of problems with planning and permitting.**

"These two people have got to go," Knell said. "If you want to make a change and you want to push this city toward prosperity and encourage people to create a business, come to Santa Barbara and make something happen and 'we will help you,' it's not with George Buell or Paul Casey."

Sneddon said she is ready to make changes — and has been ready since she was elected to the council three years ago.

"What's different I think now, since our new swearing in, is I think we have a council, at least a majority, that is ready," Sneddon said. "We're ready to move forward. I think management knows that."

"It's been a slow-building drumbeat, and we're at a critical mass now of really being able to move things forward, and if things cannot move forward I think it's pretty clear. We already know what the issues are. The people managing the issues have known what the issues are. If they can't move it forward, it's a matter of choice."

"I am not going to take the fall for that," Sneddon said. "I think our other council members don't want to take the fall for that. So I think we are at a place where we have to hold those who have those choices accountable."

A **civil grand jury report** released on Friday asserted that within the Community Development Department "there is a lack of strong leadership at several levels, insufficient coordination and communication between the Building and Safety Division and the

Planning Division, an impression of a slow-growth policy, inconsistent customer service and a fee structure which could be a deterrent to building development."

An \$86,000 consultant's report, which is still in progress, also pointed out a string of inefficiencies and inconsistencies in rules and regulations in the Planning Department, although it was less harsh and direct than the grand jury report.

Business leaders have been calling for the termination of Casey and Buell for months.

Developer Ed St. George launched a petition in February calling for Casey to be fired, and Santa Barbara resident James Fenkner **launched a petition** calling for Casey and top city officials to take a 30-percent pay cut amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The turmoil at City Hall can no longer be dismissed as just a few in the business community unhappy with the pace of the planning department, as had been the perception at City Hall for a long time.

Business leaders are regularly communicating with council members about their unhappiness with Buell and Casey.

Mayor Cathy Murillo has also been a target of business leaders' contempt, and now she's tangled in a public relations nightmare over her refusal to take a knee during a Black Lives Rally matter on Sunday.

With the council splintered, and no unifying leader pulling the panel in a singular direction, the business leaders have angled successfully into the position of holding significant power over the city's top administrators.

"I am happy there was a Grand Jury investigation," Sneddon said. "To all of these things, I say 'bring it on.' We need this cracked open. We need transparency. I am so frustrated that we continue to commission reports that tell us what we already know."

Sneddon struck a conservative economic tone during the Zoom meeting.

"People have no choice, and that is what is so frustrating," Sneddon said. "If you could go to a different community development department, I am sure you would."

When pressed specifically on firing executives, Sneddon said she needed to lay the groundwork first.

"If you are talking about firing people, which I know people are talking about, you have to have measurables," Sneddon said. "You have to have things in place that aren't being met. That's what has to happen. And I am gonna tell you from my perspective, that's what is being put in place.

"These are measurables. If you can't make your measurables, you are not doing the job."

She said she wants to put a task force together, "very highly focused" on performance measures.

Knell said the city cannot fix the community development department with Buell and Casey leading the change.

"The sense of urgency is that we cannot rebuild with what is in place right now," Knell said.

He said the grand jury report alone should be enough to take action.

"If I had a Grand Jury report and I was a CFO or CEO of a Fortune 500 Company and I got this report and I was to look at it, I would fire everyone that worked for me because this is totally unacceptable," Knell said. "It is unacceptable at any level."

Knell said every day he has merchants who are moving out and going to Santa Ynez and Ventura because the building department actively works against the business community.

"They don't have to put up with the garbage they have to put up with in Santa Barbara," Knell said.

Sneddon reiterated her goal of laying the groundwork for changes. She believes there is support on the council to make a change in the Community Development Department.

"I am one," she said. "I have been clear in meetings over the past two years, over the entire time of my term so far, of how strongly I feel that one department can't be sinking like a stone and dragging everything else with it. The two people involved know very clearly my view on that.

"I do want to be a little bit careful with personnel issues. I do deal directly with the people I am having an issue with. I think what's different now is that we are at a critical mass of council members who are also ready to make this change."

Attorney Steve Amerikaner was the only business person in the meeting to come to Casey and Buell's defense. He said the situation was like standing in a hospital with a patient dying and wanting to fire the doctor.

He said the city instead needs to suspend the rules immediately because it's the rules and regulations that are the problem, not necessarily the people in management positions.

He said the city should suspend the rules for signs, tables, colors, whatever they are, to fuel the economic lifeblood of the community. Amerikaner suggested doing it for six months, or two years, or however long it takes.

He said the city can put controls in place immediately for design review boards. He suggested that if board members miss meetings, they don't get to take part in future meetings.

He said maybe there should be a limit to the amount times a project goes back to a design review board because back-and-forth meetings lead to uncertainty and time delays.

"The council has the ability to do that," Amerikaner said.

He said cleaning house may not be the answer.

"To me, whether Paul and George are in that job or not, whether they are the right people to lead us into this brave new world is not the core question," Amerikaner said. "And I think focusing on the issue of whether they should be fired or not fired, I think is a distraction."

Tom Parker, retired FBI agent, disagreed with Amerikaner's doctor analogy and stated that Casey should be canned.

"If a doctor is having trouble improving the condition of a patient, they get a new doctor, they don't change the rules," Parker said.

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