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A Dream in the Works

Alliance digs in even as a movie studio honors its job-training pledge

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Photo by Virginia Lee Hunter

When DreamWorks SKG announced its withdrawal from the Playa Vista mega-development on

July 1, the shock wave threatened to collapse DreamWorks' concurrent commitment to fund a job-training program.

DreamWorks, however, stuck to its offer — even pledging \$5 million to the effort. The question now is who will be in control of the money and how well Westside City Councilwoman Ruth Galanter will work with the activists central to negotiating the donation in the first place.

"A key issue for us has always been a formal and active role for the community," says Anthony Thigpenn, head of the Metropolitan Alliance economic-justice coalition. "Now that we don't have the [Playa Vista] development agreement, that will have to be either worked out — or fought out."

Those words may sound harsh coming from an organization celebrating a win, but the Metro Alliance had to battle its way to the negotiating table in the first place, then fight to stay there. The first hurdle was cleared in 1998, when DreamWorks decided to deal with the Alliance after it organized a barrage of mail and phone calls from ordinary residents as well as movers and shakers. But DreamWorks wasn't the only hurdle.

Thigpenn's leeriness also reflects tensions with Galanter, who began conversations with DreamWorks five years ago about an ill-defined "JobLink" program. The particulars remained vague until last year, when the Metropolitan Alliance suggested a connection with the community-college district — an idea that Galanter did not immediately embrace because, she said, of concerns about how to set up an effective program.

Relations between Galanter and the Alliance deteriorated precipitously in April after Galanter resolutely opposed the Metro Alliance's insistence on a specific dollar commitment from DreamWorks in exchange for the city's own \$35 million subsidy to the studio. Galanter fast-tracked the subsidy vote to the City Council without any mention of a DreamWorks commitment to fund job training.

But in this matter, Galanter did not hold all the levers of power. The Alliance has a track record of mobilizing forces that could easily spell "PR nightmare" for DreamWorks. That reputation, and some brokering from Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, got the Alliance back into the negotiations.

The end result was a DreamWorks-supported employment-development fund to give inner-city residents access to entertainment-industry jobs. The company also pledged to raise funds from other industry sources. The deal was part of the City Council motion that gave DreamWorks as much as \$35 million in tax breaks for creating local jobs. And the Metropolitan Alliance was written in as a participant in the fund's administration.

This agreement became potentially meaningless in the wake of the DreamWorks withdrawal from Playa Vista. But Andy Spahn, the studio's head of corporate affairs, insisted in an interview, "I expect that the Metropolitan Alliance will serve on the board and play a strong role."



Some angry environmentalists had originally characterized the Metro Alliance deal with DreamWorks as a sellout. They wanted the Alliance activists to join with them in opposing Playa Vista and pushing to restore the Ballona Wetlands site. But with DreamWorks out of Playa Vista, it's hard for environmentalists to take issue. Meanwhile, Galanter, who maneuvered so carefully on behalf of the mega-development, is left without the big-ticket prize, the DreamWorks studio in her council district. Playa Vista itself is now in jeopardy without the movie studio as an anchor. And while Galanter can dicker over the \$5 million, that's a minuscule consolation prize from her perspective.

But not for Thigpenn, who perceives a victory bigger than the DreamWorks donation. The discussion, he says, has changed from "Let's give out public money and hope good things will happen" to the concept of formally structuring a return to the public on a public investment.