

# How a California rink owner saved his rink from eminent domain

By Susan Geary

Imagine building your rink business to more than three decades, with a loyal customer base and steady stream of revenue, only to have a government project seize it through eminent domain. That's what almost happened to one Southern California rink owner, who fought the measure and won by rallying customer and community support through social media, petitions and email campaigns.

Bob Labriola is a veteran skating coach and has been the owner of Fountain Valley Skating Center in Fountain Valley, Calif, for 36 years. He learned about seven years ago that Interstate 450 was about to get wider, and his rink was right in the way of their plans. "I immediately went to an attorney who deals with eminent domains," said Labriola. But a year later, the lawyer returned Labriola's retainer fee and told him it was a dead issue.

In early summer of 2011, Labriola received a notice in the mail that the project had been resurrected. Of the numerous plans for the expansion, one of them would include a toll lane and would require a braided off-ramp to be built on the rink's property. His attendance was recommended at four community meetings, since his rink would be directly



*Fountain Valley Skating Center continues to welcome skaters after being saved from eminent domain.*

impacted. He found a new attorney, who looked over the plan and told Labriola, "Don't get too excited. It's inevitable."

Labriola changed his approach and instead hired a public relations firm. Using petitions posted at the rinks, with deejay announcements to spur the crowd, the rink started a Facebook page, and urged followers to send letters and emails to the Orange County Transit Authority (OCTA.) There was also a template letter posted on the FVSC website for those who didn't know what to write. Emails and letters poured in from throughout the country, with one from Italy.

By the time OCTA received its 200th email protesting the rink demolition, the

agency complained, "Stop bombarding us with these emails." Labriola stated it was time consuming. Every single piece of mail had to be checked in and recorded. So he stepped up the campaign. He got a news story on a local Los Angeles television station. The reporter mentioned that the rink could be taken away and urged viewers to write to OCTA.

At one of the community meetings, Labriola stood before the board and enlightened them as to why the rink is so important to the community. "You state I only have 4 employees. It's actually 44," he claimed. He also made corrections to the grossly understated annual revenues, and reminded board members the rink

had been around for 35 years. "That's fundraising for about 75 schools, returning \$35,000 back to the schools."

Labriola noticed the board was quite surprised by that information and feels that's what swayed it in his favor. He also mentioned the four world champions that had trained at Fountain Valley Skating Center, and the 185 first place national titles. Additionally, he presented more than 1000 Facebook postings protesting the rink's seizure.

What also helped is that Cal Trans still had to approve the project; it was over-budget, and Cal Trans couldn't afford it anyway. Plus the plan involved knocking down 12 bridges, and a nearby community of constituents balked, because they just had their bridge rebuilt.

The I-405 project had alternate plans to the braided ramp that would take Fountain Valley out of the picture, and when OCTA voted on the final project, they decided to do away with it to save money. Labriola was able to get another TV story on how the project had been killed and the rink was spared.

Labriola advises other rink owners in a similar situation to get involved with local politics and join a chamber of commerce. "If you own the land, you have a stake in the community. Don't lock yourself in the four walls of your business," he said.

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