



Standing for Real Affordable Housing, Critical Infrastructure,
and Environmental Preservation

May 2025 Newsletter

Special Edition

The Dana Reserve as currently proposed is a socially & environmentally irresponsible mega-development in Nipomo

*Recently many of you may have taken the opportunity to experience the reading of excerpts of the locally produced play, entitled “**The Plot.**” by Kyle Berlin, a documentary style playwright, Princeton Graduate and founder of Rhizome Theater Company. NAC hosted one such opportunity and it was wall-to-wall attendance-Thanks to all who showed up.*

Rhizome creates socially engaged, community-based, ethnographic, and documentary theatre that explores the deep dynamics of place and people.

Throughout history, artists have been called on to illuminate and give voice to meaningful causes—and our work at Nipomo Action Committee follows in that tradition.

Many of us worked hard and long to try to effect some reasonable changes to such a destructive development in our beloved rural Nipomo. In hindsight, it appears as though the process was bought and sold before we ever entered into it. Misleading justifications for housing, inadequate and insufficient data presented to decision makers on water supply and the environmental devastation this development causes in both the short and long term.

*Kyle’s perspective is refreshing and honest. His play, “**The Plot**” invites us to pause, reflect, and find meaning in our shared journey. It gives shape to the messiness and holds the complexity. If this play can be the public memorialization of a questionably ethical process that is more common than not, then a significant contribution will have been left for future generations to learn from.*

Following are answers to interview questions with Kyle Berlin, the author of the play:

1) What drives you to tell this story?

I became interested in this issue as I just happened to arrive in town on the day of the final Board of Supervisors hearing about the fate of the Dana Reserve; I went into the chambers to have a listen and was impressed by the hundreds of people so passionate and informed about the land, advocating so clearly for its future and especially the 3-4,000 oaks at stake in this proposed development. I was moved by the passion of everyday citizens to speak on behalf of a piece of land whose future will affect us all--human and otherwise, on societal, ecological, and interpersonal levels. I was interested in the complexities of why people adopted the positions that they did, and the reason and feeling behind their arguments on all sides of the issue. I was interested in the decision-making process itself, and why certain supervisors seemed so beholden to the narrative of the developer; I was interested in why this was framed chiefly as a development in the public interest rather than as a money-making one. Overall, I am captivated by the voices of those who are moved to speak up in the context of opaque systems or challenging circumstances; I wished to amplify and specify that mysterious entity we call "the public".

2) How did you select the aspects of these circumstances to highlight in the play?

I decided to focus on a couple of specific issues within the larger context--zoom in to zoom out, as I like to say. First, to trace back the actual history of this very plot of land as far as we possibly could--using archives but also speculative history and storytelling, tracing the extremely brief history of European settlers, the present and history of Indigenous Chumash stewardship, and then the millions and billions of years of formation and emergence of geological, animal, and plant life well before that. How did we arrive at this particular moment in time, at this particular debate, which is so new and miniscule compared to all the history before? How does anyone feel they have the right to claim the land as theirs? Second, I focused on the conceit of the speaker slips which are required by the Board of Supervisors for public comments; anyone wishing to speak must fill out one of these slips for the record. I'm interested in what these slips allow, in terms of public input, and what they obscure, in terms of the differing time and authority afforded to different voices. How much are they a technology of control or a mere performance of participation? How much are they the very mechanism for what passes for public dialogue today? What does the term "slips" itself suggest about the slippages of public decision- and narrative-making?

3) What did you learn on your journey researching this piece?

I was surprised by how much audiences, even those who knew little about the Dana Reserve in advance, seemed interested in the fairly dry bureaucratic proceedings and complex histories leading up to this moment in time. I was worried the play would be boring, but that doesn't seem to have been the overwhelming response. I attribute that mostly to the compelling everyday voices of the public who spoke up at the meetings on this issue, and whose story this really is--especially the youth, advocating for their own future as carried in the oaks and other creatures who currently call this land home. Their articulate laying out of the issues, which features prominently verbatim in the piece, is the true heart and soul of both this play and the story it tells.

4) What do you hope audience goers will take away from the experience?

I hope the piece elucidates the complexity of the decision-making processes that go into collectively deciding the future of land use, from the arcane bureaucratic requirements to the larger philosophical conundrums. Especially as the need for more affordable housing runs up against ever-increasing strains on ecology, this very tension is presenting itself in different communities across California, the nation, and indeed the world. Who gets to decide how we use the land that we all depend on? How are those decisions arrived at? What histories and voices are obscured in those formal processes? What might we imagine as new ways going forward, both for this particular project and for other high-stakes ecological-social decision-making cases?

5) What's next for your play?

With our nonprofit Rhizome Theater Company, we are hoping to take the community feedback we've received and evolve the piece into a more fully-realized production that could be shared with a wider public. This would involve more complex staging, props, lighting, design, professional actors, larger venues, etc. We are currently fundraising, mostly via grant applications but also by individual donations, to get us to this next level. Anyone interested in supporting our efforts in any way can reach out at rhizometheater@gmail.com.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Sunday May 18th at 4.30 pm NAC Community Meeting, Blacklake Community Room, 498 Colonial Place

NAC website <https://stopdanareserve.com/> Email: nipomoaction@gmail.com

<i>The Nipomo Action Committee's (NAC) mission is to collaborate with all interested Nipomo and central coast stakeholders to maintain and enhance Nipomo's rural character and ensure appropriate and compatible growth consistent with the unique biodiversity and cultural heritage of this area now and for generations to come.</i>
