

Irvine Watchdog Featured on KUCI's *Ask A Leader* with Claudia Shambaugh

On April, 6th 2021, Claudia Shambough, host of KUCI 88.9FM's *Ask A Leader* podcast, posted the first of a two part interview with Branda Lin. [KUCI](#) is a volunteer, non-profit radio station broadcasting free from the University of California Irvine. Branda Lin is a co-founder of Irvine Watchdog.

Part 1 discusses the formation of Irvine Watchdog, the organization, and following campaign money, which can be heard [here](#) starting at the 31:41 minute mark.

<https://askaleader.com/?p=2211>

On April 13th, Part 2 aired and goes deeper to discuss All American Asphalt, the Great Park Advisory Committee, and the need for public benefits in Irvine, and can be heard [here](#) starting at the 29:30 minute mark. <https://askaleader.com/?p=2231>

Below is a transcript of the Part 1 interview only.

Host: Welcome back to the show. My next guest is Branda Lin in what will be a two part interview. Today we'll talk about her building and running Irvine Watchdog and next week, we'll pick up on the matter of asphalt emissions in the north side of town an environmental saga, and a case of Irvine Watchdog in action.

Branda Lin is an Irvine native and co-founder of Irvine Watchdog, a volunteer based website promoting transparency, honesty and accountability from our local government. Her passion is to promote civic engagement and empower residents on local Irvine issues. her professional life pursuits include paralegal work at several different Irvine law firms. She served as an Irvine Community Service Commissioner, Irvine Children Youth Families Advisory Committee member, a driver for Irvine's Meals on Wheels program, an organizer of Families Forward food drives, and is a board member of the National Women's Political Caucus Orange County. Branda completed her Bachelors of Arts in Political Science and Music Performance at UCI. She comes to us today from her home in Irvine. Welcome to *Ask A Leader*, Branda Lin.

Branda Lin: Thank you so much for having me.

Host: Well first, it's the classic, but I want for listeners who aren't as up to date as any of the total "muni geeks", talk about the formation of Irvine Watchdog created in May of 2018, and what is your charter, Branda Lin?

Branda Lin: Sure. So Irvine Watchdog grew out of what started in 2017, a citizen's effort regarding the Concordia University expansion project. Turtle Rock residents in the area were concerned about the increased traffic in their neighborhood, the increased noise, and what they started doing was looking into the traffic reports, environmental reports, and they had concerns.

And what they realized was, these concerns that they had with how these traffic reports were generated didn't just impact Turtle Rock, it impacted the entire City of Irvine. So they started what was called Irvine for Responsible Growth, which was a citizen's petition. And that's where I got involved. And through those efforts, we realized there were big forces in Irvine that were influencing the way decisions were being made. And so we created Irvine Watchdog. And it was to inform residents of the decision making process, what's being decided, and just keeping eyes on our electeds and trying to hold them accountable.

Host: And I must say it's a really huge service that Irvine Watchdog is rendering because having myself just casually before, I would host certain interviews about local government candidates, I would find it really, really difficult to follow the money around. The process doesn't make it any easy. So I just want to say, it's a marvel and I hope listeners can make the Watchdog a service that is useful to them in engaging in various civic ways.

So do you also, Branda, consider other local electeds, that's the Board of Supervisor representing us in the county level, the water board appointments and electeds, the Community College District Board electeds?

Branda Lin: So our focus is and has been really on Irvine City Hall. I mean, there's so much to cover between the City Council, the Great Park Board, our four Commissions -- the Transportation, Planning, Finance, and Community Services Commissions -- and there are numerous committees on top of the Irvine Community Land Trust, and now what's formed the Orange County Power Authority. There's a lot to cover just here in Irvine, so our focus is really on what happens here in our local municipal government.

Host: Okay, well, it takes a special person or a group of people to get into the weeds of city government and operate with no party affiliation and no ties to special interests, as your website spells out. Talk about the membership and how, you know, you sort of, maybe, sometimes, you have to rein in something as a hey that's a kind of a partisan piece here, or are partisan pieces allowed because of how it goes after an electeds accountability in a special way?

Branda Lin: So we have two sets of articles. We have just regular Irvine Watchdog articles, which are fact based, very dry, we don't get as many likes and comments on those articles as you can imagine. Then we have Community Opinion articles, which anybody in the community can submit and we publish. And those are the op-eds. And on those articles, you can go after a council member if you wanted to, you can take a more partisan position. It's really a platform for anybody in Irvine, any resident in Irvine, to voice their concerns about any given topic.

We have volunteers who really cover the whole spectrum. Susan Sayres is a known name in Irvine Watchdog. She's one who is one of our greatest champions for good government. She's probably watched nearly every City Council meeting for the last three years.

Host: So like until 2am in the morning? That kind of watch?

Branda Lin: The City Council meetings, they haven't gone past, I would say even 10 o'clock in the last three years. But yeah, I mean, it's hours long because what we also have are the Great

Park Board meetings, which are right before the City Council meetings on the same day, and she's covered both those meetings. So it's 2:00PM until sometimes 10pm. And it takes quite a commitment.

And then we also have a lot of new volunteers who really cared about Irvine but never really understood how the government worked, how decisions were being made. And so, you know, David Ehrlich, Melisa Masri, they care about the city, and they're kind of coming up to speed on the issues now, and becoming more familiar with the political forces in our city.

Host: Okay, so would you say that your non party affiliation, I mean, that, admittedly, the City Council is these are non partisan elections that get them on there, but we know they have their sort of partisan affiliations. But does your non partisan affiliation and your independence, does it get you more access to speaking directly with electeds?

Branda Lin: Speaking more directly? I would say no. I mean, if anything, we're a force working to keep our city council members accountable, so depending on the issue, you know, we're gonna either gain favor or not from our electeds. But our volunteers use the same channels as the rest of our city, the rest of our residents via emails, public comments during council meetings, phone calls to City Hall, to city staff, to the clerks when we have questions.

I myself was an appointed Commissioner under a Farrah Khan between 2018 and 2020, and so I really had to take a step back from Irvine Watchdog just because of concerns within the volunteer organization about conflicts. And then we also have currently two volunteers who have completely taken a step back because they were appointed by a current city council member as well. But in terms of gaining access, no, we've tried to use the same means as the general public and we do public records requests for instance, to get information, and we call City Hall all the time.

Host: Okay, so that answers a question I've been wanting to pose at some point today, in a way it's a kind of a launching pad for eventual elected office for your own members, appointment, and possible election?

Branda Lin: Sure. I guess so. I mean, when I was appointed to the commission -- in 2018, we had our first Candidates Forum, which was a huge success in Irvine and I don't know if you got a chance to-

Host: I was there actually, so that's where we maybe first met.

Branda Lin: Oh yes, yes.

Host: Okay.

Branda Lin: It was at Irvine High and it was standing room only. And you know the city has other opportunities for the residents to hear the candidates on the issues, but none were as successful as ours. And I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that our questions were generated from the public. We do crowdsourcing, we put out articles saying, "What do you want to hear

from the candidates? What do you want to know? What are the issues that concern you?" And then we gathered all that data and then put our questions together. And there were a lot of questions but they were so much more hard hitting than the other forums in our city. And we wanted to, you know, jam pack it in, so we had long answer questions and also yes or no questions, and then we recorded all that and provided that for those who missed the forum on our website. So there was a voter guide breaking up all the different issues and where the candidates stood -- There was no other source in Irvine that provided that level of data and information on where the candidates stood on the issues.

Host: So you're talking about some of your projects, bringing these public forums together, maxing out what others are doing, but are there other yields you'd like to talk about that surprised you in this process?

Branda Lin: I think one of the biggest surprises was following the money charts. Our charts became what we were known for, these bubble charts, and it is quite a task because these political action committees, the independent expenditures -- I was very surprised to see how much special interest money is pumped into our elections every two years. When individuals in the last election, for instance, were only able to donate \$530 per person, then you see these independent expenditures spending thousands, hundreds of thousands to support their candidates... It's quite a battle, we need campaign finance reform. A lot of changes happened in Irvine after Citizens United in 2010 and it's been a difficult journey to try to get back control of our City Council. And to say that special interests don't have undue influence is just completely wrong. There are a lot of forces, the developers have a lot of influence, and their tactics are not always... ethical, I would say.

Host: So, this is not news in terms of the kind of influence. We've had huge land owners that determined major policy level decisions, major expenditure commitments around the city and the swath of the county as well. So I wonder how much Branda Lin, that you're bringing on the seasoned, you know, watchdogs that have seen this for a couple of generations? Are you reinventing this wheel all over again?

Branda Lin: I'm an Irvine native and I have not seen anybody track this type of money or publicize it the way Irvine Watchdog has. The developers are onto us. The special interests are on to us, and when we actually called one PAC, for instance, because of the way their filing was, and it was not clear, and they had not reported one of their mailers, we couldn't track it, we were told, "you need to go get another hobby". Nobody wants this information out there, especially from the special interest and it's definitely very difficult to track, it's very time consuming.

Host: It is.

Branda Lin: It's web of money going into one PAC and then it splits off to three different other PACs, and then those... And it's, they do that intentionally to make it difficult to track but it's very important because a lot of the decisions that are being made in the city impact the people, the organizations, the companies, that are funding these PACs and that's why they're there. And one thing I'd love to see happen is for any council member who has received money from any of these special interest groups to recuse themselves and we haven't seen that happen.

Host: No, they tend not to, right. So what about, the line isn't drawn though, at the filings for campaign financing at the election. Are you also watching, I mean there's the classic, some contributor, some donor will pay off somebody's house or retire their campaign debt, I mean are you watching all that after election money flowing?

Branda Lin: We have a couple of volunteers who try to keep watch on the money flowing. We really only have the same resources that the general public does, in terms of the public filings going to the FPPC reports, the 460 forms, the 497 forms. And so if it's not disclosed there, you know, we don't really check anything else, we don't know where else to go. So we're really just checking the public portals that are available to us and unfortunately if it's not reported there then we're not going to be able to find it.

Host: Well, but you have resources. Back to those seasoned participants in community politics, they're a fund that might be a way of pursuing financing that is off the, you know, the radar of the conventions that you're following, do you not see that?

Branda Lin: We have, but we have not been able to gather enough evidence to report on it.

Host: Okay, okay. So are you finding your membership, is it expanding because people are really now finding that geeking out on municipal campaign financing is pretty, it's pretty, it comes sexed up, just at the outset, because as I just interviewed Democratic State Party Chair candidate Delaney Easton. She was talking about wanting to make sure that more and more Californians know about the joy of participation. That was her chosen term, joy. So, is that joy starting to register locally, where your own Irvine Watchdog organization keeps growing?

Branda Lin: Definitely. I see, you know, people want to know about the money. Those articles get clicked on the most. And they almost expect Irvine Watchdog now to report on it because we did so in 2018 and it was such a success. You know we're not experts, again we're just volunteers who care about the city and we started noticing a certain trend and we want to report on as much as we can. But all our volunteers, we have jobs in the day, we have families to take care of and we can only commit so much time. We don't get paid in any way. So we do the best that we can. But our group is steadily growing. And we don't do any advertising -- companies have wanted to advertise on our website, but we've just kept it very simple and very transparent, and it's an exciting venture because there's really no other source like Irvine Watchdog. There's nobody committed to watching council meetings, and commission meetings, and board meetings the way we do, and giving the residents an opportunity to weigh in before the vote.

If there is an agenda item that's coming up that's of interest or that we think would be of interest to a particular neighborhood or to the city, we report it and we let them know, you know, give them the staff report, give them the links to participate in the meeting whether it's via Zoom or ICTV, and this is how you submit an e-Comment, this is how you call in. We provide all those links to really make sure that the residents have an opportunity to weigh in on the decision making process. You know in Irvine, there are a lot of complaints from the residents about, "I didn't know this building was going up next to my home, I didn't know about this, I didn't know about the asphalt factory." And, you know, we really want to make sure that residents are given that opportunity to voice their concerns and their opinions before the final decision is made.

Host: So for those of you who've just joined us, my guest is Branda Lin, co-founder of Irvine Watchdog, holding local elected officials accountable. These are municipal electeds that they're focusing on and here on *Ask A Leader*, this recording is taking place on April 3. This is a two part segment so that we can finish off what more Branda has to fill us in on the asphalt emissions story next week when we continue.

So back to what the time we have remaining. So you've got your own blog you're talking about and folks can follow you on Irvinewatchdog.org and there's a Facebook page and all that. We'll include that the podcast summary, but are you also working collaboratively with other media? I'm thinking the Voice of OC, Cal Matters, other media are you doing this, Branda?

Branda Lin: We appreciate the support and the work of the Voice of OC, and any coverage from the Orange County Register or the LA Times. We do share articles that they publish and we do, you know, give them a heads up on certain issues that we'd like them to cover since this is what they do and they get paid to do whereas we're just volunteers. And if it's too much for us to handle we do kind of give them a lead for instance, but ultimately we all work on our own and we all have the same goal, I believe, of increasing transparency and accountability. There's just been such a void in independent journalism and keeping a watch on our local government, that we, all our volunteers are really committed to keeping watch on our Irvine City Council, Irvine City Hall and all the decisions that are being made there.

Host: Yeah, this media desert issue is a real concern and that's where the onus I feel a real responsibility on community radio to be very topical and, even if somebody comes from another place to bring back to Orange County, where their participation is critical, so *hear, hear* about that.

So one thing that leaps out at me is your recurrent use of "just volunteers". Now I would like to see that that vocabulary goes away. That is equivocating your power. You're doing an amazing service. There's such integrity in it I think, and that -- maybe you're not paid but I see there's an art rising and the kind of power you're wielding.

Branda Lin: Oh, thank you very much for saying that. And you're absolutely correct. Our volunteers are committed and they work hard, and many hours putting our faces for articles. If you click on any of our articles, you'll see we try to be as transparent as possible. We have a bio and our faces, which not all the publications in our city can say. And we're excited.

I mean, we keep growing every year. There's definitely a need. And it's a big commitment that more people have been joining to really increase the efforts and ultimately, we really have a passion to empower residents. If residents aren't aware of the decisions that are being made then they're not going to be part of the decision making process, and that really takes away from good government. It takes away from having a representative government, especially if those who they represent aren't participating. So, we're thankful for all the support that we get from the community. If there are ever concerns or questions, we're an open book. You can reach out to us at info@irvinewatchdog.org, and we'd love to have more residents jump in and cover an issue, a committee, something they're passionate about. Each of our volunteers has an issue that they care

about and that they focus on and there are so many committees and so many concerns in our city. The more the merrier.

Host: So Branda, in all earnestness, do you think that Irvine Watchdog had an impact on voter turnout in 2020, and how many voted, and how they voted?

Branda Lin: Absolutely. Our voter guide was shared amongst several social media platforms by residents. We saw the number of hits, and that's actually when the most number of Irvine residents tune in to Irvine Watchdog. During the off-years, we don't get as many clicks. We don't get as many likes and comments. But when it comes to election time, that's when it's a significant number. In the last election, we received over 40,000 hits on our website.

Host: Wow

Branda Lin: The voter guide, really, because there really is nowhere else for Irvine residents to go to get this type of information and to hear each of the candidates speak on the issues that matter to them. And we make sure that we don't give them softball questions at our forum. These are questions that Irvine residents have and they're concerned about. And what has been at the top of the list in 2018 and 2020 is the increase in traffic, the affordability issue, and actually, transparency.

We're seeing more residents engaged in public comments during council meetings than ever before. We brought to light the importance of commissions. Nobody knew or paid attention to the commissions and even now at some meetings, it's only the Irvine Watchdog volunteers attending the commission meeting and reporting on it. There's no one else in a city that is reaching almost 300,000 residents, we have perhaps one or two residents attending a commission meeting.

And for instance, the Planning Commission is very powerful. They make, often, the final decision on development in our city, not the City Council. And, you know, these are the things that impact us. There's a lot of development happening in the Great Park. The Great Park residents are tuning in more, in part to Irvine Watchdog. They have reached out to us and we've become a resource for Irvine residents. When there's a concern, we receive emails. When the two Albertsons in Irvine decided to close down and two new grocery stores are coming in, we received emails asking for clarification. When the affordable housing units go up in Irvine, we receive a lot of emails actually asking about how to get on the waitlist so we, you know, redirect them to the Irvine Community Land Trust that handles all that. So we've really become a source for residents, when they don't know where else to go, they have a lot of questions, they reach out to us, and it's been a wonderful process. It's been a learning process for us. We don't always have the answers, but that encourages us to look into other issues and report on them, just seeing what is of importance to Irvine residents, what they're concerned about, and really just to empower them at the end of the day with information.

Host: So my last question, while we're together in this segment, Branda. We're going to go into the weeds in the second segment for next week, so we'll talk about the All American Asphalt emissions and I want to know if you have any homework assignments for our listeners and

whether you, including in what we will cover in the next week, what areas of substantive areas that you're sort of shorter on that you want listeners to sign up with Irvine Watchdog and contribute? So, what kind of assignments do you have for our listeners before they hear you next week.

Branda Lin: Well I would actually love to hear what issues matter to your listeners and what they'd like to see Irvine Watchdog report on more, especially during the off-years. During the elections, we know what people care about: where the money is, how much money they're getting from where, and the general bigger issues. But, when it's not election season, what are the issues that are concerning you about the city's future, the way that we're developing the way that we're growing, to even smaller things -- public works issues in your neighborhood, is there an area of concern regarding the sidewalks, regarding the crosswalks? We'd love to hear from the community and we love to hear what they want us to report on. It doesn't guarantee we can get to it, but we will do our best and it's always great to just receive feedback in terms of the types of articles they love to hear from Irvine Watchdog and what issues matter to them the most.

Host: So the angles here are folks, that info@irvinewatchdog wants you to email, or you can email cshambaugh@uci.org and put that question right into my script for talking points with Branda Lin, next week.

Well, Branda Lin, I want to thank you for giving us this time today. You're doing a tremendous service for all of us. Thanks for joining us on *Ask A Leader*.

Branda Lin: Thank you so much for having me.

Host: My guest was Branda Lin, co-founder of Irvine Watchdog, holding elected officials accountable. This is part one. The next week we'll have part two. Thanks again, Branda.