

CONNECTING THE DOTS

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By Elizabeth Patterson, Benicia City Council Member

"The accomplice to the crime of corruption is frequently our own indifference."

Bess Myerson

"Don't buy a single vote more than necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide." Joseph P. Kennedy

"You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in the future." Steve Jobs

We are fortunate in Benicia to have clean government. But I was alarmed in November of 2005 when I learned of the unheard of campaign contributions by outside corporations. The warning red flags went up. What is going on? What is on the horizon that would be important to those who made these major outside corporation contributions to candidates and to a PAC that specifically targeted the incumbents? Who were these corporations with headquarters out of Solano county and the state? Valero from Texas and Seeno Development from Concord were the major corporate contributors.

Regardless of what I think of Valero (and I actually admire their business success story, business practices, labor practices including defined benefits, community support and one of the safest refineries in the U.S.) I had to think twice about the relationship of the City and Valero. Something must be compelling for Valero to openly, some say brazenly, get involved in local politics to influence the election. Their \$35,000 contribution to the PAC to oppose the incumbents was more than both of the council incumbents spent on their entire campaign in 2005. Post election issues for the "new" council were the City's User Utility Tax, most of which is paid by Valero in excess of a million dollars; also to be considered was reforming the Valero Citizen Advisory Committee(CAP) into a City ad hoc advisory committee governed by city rules and appointments; and the Industrial Safety Ordinance (ISO). Their fate? UUT at 4% for the next 10 years. No city CAP and no ISO. For 2007 the city and Valero will negotiate the water contract determining how much Valero will pay for half of the City's water supply. Also to be considered in 2007 is the completion of the administrative draft CEQA document for the waste water recycling plant and potential use of the remaining \$14 millions dollars from the Good Neighbor Steering Committee settlement agreement with Valero and the City. Other issues may be in the wings. As Steve Jobs of Macintosh said, ". . . you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in the future".

The other major outside corporation involved in Benicia elections was the Seeno Development Company, known as Discovery Builders. As a planner I know a little about developers influence on the planning process and the often stated "let the market do the planning". Unfortunately, leaving development to the market often results in bad

planning, something which the City of Benicia has been accused of in the past. Although the market might be able to maintain diversity, efficiency, and sustainability — three things we focus on in our General Plan — it has a very difficult time *creating* such necessities.

This is because the market is simply a network of individual interests and can't be expected to look out for the greater good – the community welfare; this is the realm of planners and politicians. However, the relationship between developers, planners, and politicians is often at odds with one another, leaving many to suggest that Benicia is a hard place to get development approved.

Pity the poor elected official who must answer to the public that they are free to render the best decision for Benicia and not the contributing developer. This is frustrating to good people. Evidence of this frustration is the eagerness of council members to pass campaign reform and fair election ordinances to get this 2005 issue behind them.

Another example of this frustration are Benicia elected officials supporting voluntary campaign expenditure limits. Candidates in other communities are openly refusing funding from developers in their campaigns. Candidates and elected official realize that there is a perception that developers can buy city hall.

Perhaps future candidates will be sporting a t-shirt that reads “developer free candidate”. Best of all would be adopting the restrictions on campaign contributions from developers; reporting requirements that include any contribution over \$1,000 be reported within 24 hours and posted on the City's website; a restriction on last minute campaign expenditures that include the detested “robo calling”, last minute attack mailers and the sudden appearance of campaign signs the weekend before the election. I hope it is not too much to expect the adoption of a fair campaign pledge that applies to candidates, corporations, independent committees and organizations for decent, honest and truthful literature.

What is at stake is the integrity of Benicia elections. The Seeno Benicia Business Park is proposed for over 500 acres along a good stretch of Lake Herman Road which could commit Sky Valley to future development instead of permanent open space which over 70% of Benicians supported in 2003. As Bes Myerson says, “The accomplice to the crime of corruption is frequently our own indifference”.

Connect the dots. It is a full time job.

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