

## Primal Scream--You Can't Shake Hands with a Clenched Fist--9/15/08

"You can't shake hands with a clenched fist." Indira Ghandi

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By Stephanie Gomes--Vallejo City Councilmember

I grew up playing sports &ndash; swimming, soccer and basketball. I was a fierce competitor who played with passion and gave it everything I had. Fortunately, that fierce competitiveness was tempered by the wisdom of my coaches, which I still call upon today. They taught me to play hard and play to win &ndash; but win with dignity and lose with grace. And always offer your hand to your opponent, whichever side you end up on at the end of the match.

I am in no way saying that our City's slide into bankruptcy was a game. But it was a challenge, unfortunately, that forced people to take sides and fight. I was fighting for the future of our city. The Public Safety Unions were fighting for the welfare of their members. It has been a time fraught with emotion and anger and betrayal. Of course it was &ndash; we're talking about issues that mean something to all of us.

A lot has happened. A lot was said. A lot was misrepresented. A lot was done. But it's time to put that aside, unclench our fists, and offer our hands to each other. Because in the end, we can't get out of this alone.

I'll start. I never intended nor wanted to break any union. I wanted to negotiate new collective bargaining agreements, though, because I knew we simply couldn't afford what we have in place. Was it fair that previous Councils agreed to these contracts and we're now saying we can't afford them? No. But unfortunately, that's one of our new realities. Those contracts should never have been agreed to in the first place because it was obvious that eventually the City would be unable to afford them.

I know that the work our employees do for me as a citizen, and for our City as a Council member, is not always easy. Some of the work is dangerous. And stressful. And many employees have had to do more with less for way too long now.

I also know that our citizens have been shouldering the burden of living with fewer services and a degrading infrastructure while continuing to pay the same or more in taxes and fees. Is this fair to our taxpayers? No. But unfortunately, that's one of the realities we've been living with for quite a few years now.

My goal for the next phase of the bankruptcy process is to negotiate new collective bargaining agreements that are not overly convoluted and complicated, that are sustainable in the long-term and still provide for growth as the city grows. I want every one of our employees to be well compensated for the work they do. I want a simple, fair agreement that provides market-rate salaries and benefits that lie somewhere in the middle &ndash; not 10 percent above, and not 10 percent below. I want contracts that are ultimately fair to both the employees and to the taxpayers of Vallejo.

We can do that. We have to do that. And it shouldn't be so hard to achieve if we approach each other with outstretched hands. I know it will take time to heal as a community and as a City. But there's only one way to go from here, and we should take that path together. The choice is ours.

Choose

The single clenched fist lifted and ready,

Or the open hand held out and waiting.

Choose:

For we meet by one or the other.

~Carl Sandburg