

Primal Scream - Dec 18th, a Day to Remember

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Opinion Worth Pondering

Tom Bartee and Alan Davis Make December 18th a Day to Remember

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Perhaps it was the holidays, or the relative calm that settled over city hall since the recount was concluded, but I found myself feeling guardedly hopeful that a new tone had worked its way into Vallejo's politics. Regrettably, it took a single day—Tuesday, December 18th—for my optimism to vanish.

The first blow was a comment made by Alan Davis, attorney for the public safety unions, quoted in the Times-Herald: The unions do not believe the city faces a deficit. Anyone who has attended city council meetings lately—and I would encourage more citizens to do so—realizes that this ongoing refusal to concede the obvious is not merely willful delusion. It's a cynical attempt to confuse the public about what the real issues are in the budget standoff.

Anyone paying attention realizes that city and state governments across the country are facing the same problems Vallejo is. I have watched city staff explain the budget situation for weeks now, and to believe that these people are engaged in a devious conspiracy to hide money from the public service unions can't be explained by mere paranoia. It's Machiavellian brinkmanship, and Vallejo deserves better.

Unfortunately, the day's disappointments had only begun. That same night, councilman Tom Bartee, a long-time ally of the firefighters union, attempted the most shamelessly brazen, transparently dishonest, and politically cynical power grab I have ever had to witness in my years of attending city council meetings. And if not for the astute opposition

of councilmember Joanne Schivley, and a deft procedural countermove by Mayor Osby Davis, the ploy might well have succeeded.

The tactic came in the form of an ad hoc resolution to remove the fire chief and deputy fire chiefs and have both the police and fire departments run by Police Chief Nichelini for the next six months. Mr. Bartee also proposed abandoning the appeal of the arbitrator's decision in the fire department minimum staffing dispute, with the alleged purpose of giving the money "saved" to community-based organizations.

Mr. Bartee justified these measures by claiming there existed an immediate need to cut the city deficit—which his ally, Mr. Davis, claimed that very morning did not exist! This paradox was resolved when the real purpose of Mr. Bartee's cost-cutting was revealed: eliminating Deputy Chief Russ Sherman—a talented and independent administrator and the chief adversary of Bartee's political patron, union chief Kurt Henke.

First, Bartee seemed to have done no meaningful research whatsoever regarding what the potential effects would be of eliminating the two fire department management positions. Fortunately, Ms. Schivley was there to educate him. Prior efforts to gut the fire department's management staffing were a disaster. And further burdening Chief Nichelini at a time of rising crime is not just ill-considered, it's irresponsible.

Second, Mr. Bartee's attempt to conceal his ulterior motives was undone by the timing and manner of his move. He presented no documentary backup or analysis for his proposals, despite the potentially grave consequences they might have on public safety. He also submitted his resolution after public comment was cut off, so citizens could not comment on it before a council vote. If he had not been opposed so adamantly by Ms. Schivley, and out maneuvered by Mr. Davis, he might well have been able to slip this one through. The fact he chose a night when councilmember Stephanie Gomes was absent, and a night when most Vallejoans were busy with holiday chores, is also revealing.

Last, the fact Mr. Bartee did not seek a pay cut from Deputy Chief Sherman, but instead sought to remove him entirely from the picture (the week before Christmas), revealed his real motives: This was a hatchet job. And Mr. Bartee proposed no reduction in police captains, though they are also costly and arguably, by his logic, as superfluous as the firefighter management slots. No, only Deputy Chief Sherman had to go. And who becomes de facto head of the fire department without the chief or deputy chiefs? The union head, Kurt Henke.

Mr. Bartee attempted to justify removing Deputy Chief Sherman on the grounds that his salary is \$30,000 more than that of Chief Parker, the man he replaced. Conspicuously absent from this logic is mention of the Union Business Leave Abuse Scandal, to which Chief Parker turned a blind eye, and for which he was asked to resign. The abuse has stopped under Deputy Chief Sherman. Estimates of the money squandered range from \$60,000 to \$200,000. If Mr. Bartee was in any way serious about budgetary discipline, or funding community organizations with savings from the fire department, he'd seek to recover these funds. His silence on this matter, however, continues to deafen. Instead, he wants to pass off as fiscal responsibility his attempt to elevate to the position of department overseer the one man most

responsible for the leave abuse!

This goes beyond mere chutzpah. This is playing Vallejoans for chumps.

As for the arbitration, thankfully Ms. Schivley was there again to add perspective. Paying \$500,000 to earn back \$5 million is not a bad investment. As Half Moon Bay recently realized, one bad judge (or arbitrator) can wreak havoc on a city, but that doesn't make his ruling sound law. The arbitrator clearly overstepped his authority by ruling on a policy basis, not a legal one, and the city is rightfully pursuing a more sound ruling from a more impartial bench. That's what appeals are for. No mention of legal merits was made by Mr. Bartee, however. One wonders if, as far as Mr. Bartee is concerned, they are even relevant.

The kindest thing to say about Mr. Bartee's resolution is that it was the most perfect example of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic anyone could wish for. But such an innocent explanation doesn't wash once all the facts are considered. His cost-cutting proposals were blatantly advantageous to his political patrons at Local 1186, fiscally incoherent, and morally bankrupt.

Since all this concern about the budget came on the same day that Mr. Davis made his contradictory claim about the deficit's supposed non-existence, one can only conclude that the bad faith in the contract negotiation process is not, as Mr. Bartee continuously tries to imply, coming from the city. And his attempt to manipulate the budget process to the advantage of his allies, while trying to gloss the sham as cost-cutting or public largesse, only makes the underlying cynicism all the more reprehensible.