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Council's foolish hard-ball politics

by Guy Wilson

The Sebastopol City Council met on April 1, which happened to be the opening of the Major League Baseball season, not to mention April Fool's Day. Some foolish hardball politics were the result, and a brief highlight film is in order.

First, the game situation. Item 6 on the Council agenda was the innocuously titled "Amendment to Policy 62 and Reappointments to the Laguna Park Implementation Committee." As the name suggests, the Laguna Park Implementation Committee's mission is to develop a Laguna Park. Membership on the committee is subject to the approval of the Council — if three of the five Council members so choose, committee membership can be lost. Even a prominent, grass roots community organization like Sebastopol Tomorrow can be excluded from the committee by the will, or whim, of a 3/5 Council majority. And this was the agenda on April 1: getting three strikes, or Council votes, against Sebastopol Tomorrow to oust the group from the Laguna Park Implementation Committee.

To put this into a more historical and less metaphorical context, Sebastopol Tomorrow was the first local citizens group to promote the idea of a Laguna Park. Arguably, no other group has been more closely identified with Laguna-related issues. In addition, over the past decade Sebastopol Tomorrow has played a major role in the creation of the Downtown Plan and the updated General Plan, as well as in the passage of the Urban Growth Boundary Initiative.

Despite Sebastopol Tomorrow's record — or perhaps because of it — Mayor Sam Crump proposed, with a seconding vote by Council member Ken Foley, that Sebastopol Tomorrow be excluded from the Laguna Park Implementation Committee. This was pure political hardball — a mean fastball hurled by two Council members who have never enjoyed the support of Sebastopol Tomorrow, and who have consistently differed with the group on the major environmental and development-related issues of recent times, such as the Urban Growth Boundary Initiative and the construction of the Palm Terrace luxury home subdivision on the Laguna.

It looked like Crump and Foley would win big on this power play. After all, the decisive votes would be cast by Council members Kathy Austin and Bill Roventini, both of whom had joined Crump and Foley in opposing the Urban Growth Boundary Initiative and in supporting construction of the Palm Terrace project on the Laguna. Only Ann Magnie, the saint of liberal Sebastopolitics, could be expected to oppose the power play. The vote figured to be a crushing 4-to-1 loss for Sebastopol Tomorrow, an outcome that would be dispiriting and stigmatizing for the group. Crump had stated that, because Sebastopol Tomorrow was not formally incorporated or structured, the organization was not "legitimate" and was "not accountable" to the city. The not-so-subtle implication was that Sebastopol Tomorrow was not merely untrustworthy, but downright suspect — the group should be officially rebuked by the city government and formally banished from Laguna Park policy making.

And then came the late-inning rally. With Crump and Foley clearly against Sebastopol Tomorrow, and Magnie equally clearly in support of the group, the count was one and two. Kathy Austin was now in a position to deliver the strike-out pitch that Crump and Foley wanted. But it was not to be. Showing major league skill in dealing with a bush league proposal, Austin adroitly turned the issue around, pointing out that to exclude Sebastopol Tomorrow from the Laguna Park effort would be to exclude an important part of the community from what should be a community-based effort.

This was a rare and transcendent moment in Council business, with Austin affirming the value of public service while rejecting the temptation of a political payback. Her pro-Sebastopol Tomorrow vote created a 2-2 standoff that put Bill Roventini in the clutch spot he loves so well — the tie-breaking vote.

Roventini seized the moment. In his classic, clipped, and ultra-earnest style of speech, Roventini looked soulfully around the room (which happened to be packed with Sebastopol Tomorrow supporters), praised the "commitment" of the group, and announced that he would be voting for Sebastopol Tomorrow.

When the official vote was taken, 3-2 in favor of Sebastopol Tomorrow, the stunned crowd burst into loud, sustained applause, and it seemed that everyone in the room was smiling, except for two people.

(Guy Wilson is a Sonoma West Times & News columnist)

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