



RED MEAT POLITICS

I wanted to write a gushy column about hitting the polls with my daughter last Tuesday for her first experience with dangling chads. It was as good, and as weepy, as walking with her to her first day of kindergarten at Solana Highlands some fifteen years ago.

But, from the tone of the conversation that followed my last column, in I which took to task for a profligate facilities spending plan the very same Solana Beach School District that I entrusted with my kid's early education, it appears I must forgo sharing the new voter experience in favor of a discussion about raw meat politics.

I clearly stepped into the coliseum with the lions in the last edition. My newfound respect for education reporters is overflowing—they deserve combat pay for surviving slaughterhouse duty.

Those readers who have followed this column over the past several years know that there are few sacred cows that escape The Ross Retort cleaver. This column has traversed the local political landmines of land use planning, electoral politics, taxpayer rip-offs, community insults, and bureaucratic silliness.

But, it has been five years since I took on a school district. At that time it was over draconian music education cuts and even the people who complained the most about the dearth of music and performing arts programs in our schools ducked for cover in terror of imagined repercussions after my commentary on the issue appeared in that other big city newspaper.

No one has accused me of squeamishness lately, but after that experience I must admit that I had second and third thoughts about registering a complaint about a \$40 million elementary school that would end all hope of a real town center for Carmel Valley and put future school bond measures at risk.

In the past, I have at various times enraged developers for opposing plans that would demolish important habitat areas or destroy community plans, environmentalists for poking at regulations based on fairy tales, big business for protesting over-glandular projects in neighborhoods, labor unions for criticizing their support for under-qualified candidates, and government bureaucrats for swinging at them over almost anything.

The Ross Retort is an equal opportunity skewer and even the most aggravated sacrificial lambs seem to accept that columnists have a point of view. Readers are grown-ups who can be trusted to handle some controversy along with their breakfast meat and eggs as long as the facts are on the table and to know the difference between opinion and reporting.

Everyone, except some folks who for one reason or another, desperately want an elementary school built across from the Del Mar Highlands shopping center.

Throughout the years of writing for a variety of publications both locally and nationally, my You've Got Mail box remains full in

more ways than one. With very few exceptions, the communications I receive include heartfelt and honest disagreements that inspire interesting debate. Letters to the Editor have challenged my thinking, but never my integrity and rarely my research.

Until this week.

Apparently, my last column that questioned the wisdom of a Solana Beach School District proposal to shoehorn a very, very expensive elementary school for 5th and 6th graders into a site across from the Del Mar Highlands Town Center when another far less costly neighborhood site is available, has brought out the very, very worst in people who claim to serve the public good.

During this absurd week, several emails, telephone communications and "through the grapevine" whispers to colleagues and friends, have attacked the integrity of this column by suggesting directly and through innuendo that my criticism of the Solana Beach School plan was motivated by money, that I am a hired gun for one group or another interested in inhabiting the Towns Gate site.

Remarkably, one such patently unfounded suggestion came from a real hired gun.

Throughout my intermittent relationship with the Carmel Valley Town Center saga, conspiracy theories worthy of an Oliver Stone script about people opposing the school plan have wafted about like smell of boiled corned beef and cabbage, leaving education reporters around town to sift through the shaft looking for the wheat.

One conspiracy theory revolves around my support for a mixed-use performing arts center on the Towns Gate site that seems like a much better idea—a public facility for the entire community, including the schools, and housing that would produce \$8 million in builder fees (not chopped liver) to help get the Town Center a facelift. Get out the meat cleaver.

There is one incontrovertible truth that cannot be drowned out by the over amplified and shrill tone exhibited by people who are supposed to serve the public: Carmel Valley deserves better than the Town Center we have, and the Town Center we are going to get if current plan proposals come to fruition.

And, with two out of five school bond measures going down and a third barely squeaking through in last weeks election, even my big hearted new voter daughter might balk at replenishing the school facilities kitty if the Solana Beach School District is allowed to chow down the funds, now.

There, I said it again. Grill me.