



## The Ross Retort by Lisa Ross

### Why The “Y”?

The subject of today’s column is Y, as in why a bubbling zeal within the San Diego’s bureaucracy to eek a living out of some city parks could destroy Carmel Valley’s chance to relieve the community’s recreational traffic jam, starting with a raid on the bank accounts of the real Y, as in YMCA.

For years, the city leased public space to nonprofits like the YMCA and about 80 others, including to the Boys Scouts in Balboa Park and on Fiesta Island, for amounts between \$1 and \$1000 a year. That’s because many of these organizations built great facilities at no cost to the taxpayer, and all served a community need, also saving taxpayer dollars.

At the risk of drawing howls from those bay view offices inside the old Naval Hospital in Balboa Park where the City’s Park and Recreation Department toils away, in most cases, these nonprofits provide superior recreational opportunities compared to the city’s offerings. In the case of the YMCA, this bigger bang for the buck is no small exaggeration.

So, five years ago it made very good sense to the developer of Sorrento Hills to talk with the YMCA about building a 40,000 square foot recreation center instead of a proposed city operated 3100 square foot facility or just plain playing fields on four acres of new parkland he was donating to the city.

And, unlike the rigidly regulation-defined Park and Recreation Department, the YMCA was as flexible as a 12-year old gymnast. While City staff refused to support a swimming pool for Sorrento Hills Park because city law allows only one pool per 50,000 residents, the folks at the Y, under no such regulatory straight jacket, agreed to build a pool in response to a community request.

But now, an unevenly applied citywide park lease policy is under evaluation by the San Diego City Council, and the lease for the new YMCA in Sorrento Hills, along with Y leases at three other sites, are on their way to becoming the city’s lease policy poster children.

The City’s Real Estate Assets Department is asking the Y to pay between “market rate” and some discounted amount credited for “service to the community,” an amount presently circling around 10% of the annual gross receipts, which means the Y would pay over \$200,000 a year in rent.

By comparison, a controversial for-profit and shoddily designed indoor roller hockey rink, skateboard park and BMX track complex proposed for a lovely city park in Rancho Penasquitos, heavily promoted by the Real Estate Assets Department, was to have paid \$40,000 a year in rent if the neighbors had not stopped the project.

Board Members at the Y say no way to \$200,000 a year, and they are sure to tell the city to hit the highway on the Sorrento Hills facility for some very good reasons.

The Sorrento Hills lease is for property donated to the city from the developer and the \$5 million high-end facility will be built and maintained entirely on the Y’s dime, parking lots and hillsides included. With crowded city run Park and Recreation facilities costing the General Fund as much as \$500,000 each a year, this is a sweetheart deal for San Diego taxpayers. Worse, the Park and Recreation department wants to regulate the Y’s fees, and in effect, run a business it clearly knows little about.

Given the controversial and high profile \$1 a year Boy Scout lease renewal coming before City Council this fall, a decision on the Y lease has big time policy implications far beyond Carmel Valley.

A bevy of Civil Rights groups, who object to the Boy Scouts’ policy of keeping out Gay scouts, are placing considerable pressure on Council Members to either charge the Scouts market rate for their camps in Balboa Park and on Fiesta Island or to stop leasing to them altogether.

It certainly would be outrageous to stick it to the Y, an organization that takes the motto “It’s for Everybody” so seriously that no one knows anymore what the letters stand for, and not apply the same terms to the Boy Scouts which by determined policy excludes 15% of the population from their ranks.

I would also hate to think that any Council Member would think about charging the Y and other nonprofits to the max to set a precedent for the Boy Scout lease, allowing the city to write a market rate lease for the Scout’s Balboa Park camp on the basis of fairness and avoid getting outed on a very controversial social issue.

Of course, such thinking is silly. But why the Sorrento Hills Y is in danger of getting hosed by the City isn’t a laughing matter, and the community will deserve some real answers if we lose this great amenity because of bureaucratic myopia.