



COMMISSION APPOINTMENT PRESTIDIGITATION SPELLS TROUBLE FOR COAST HIGHWAY AT TORREY PINES

My good friend, master magician Harry Maurer, is a genius at “close-up magic,” sometimes known as sleight of hand. He once made the hands of a Baum et Mercier watch advance two hours while the \$5000 bauble was, no kidding, clenched between my two hands.

But, Harry’s “now you see it now you don’t” cannot hold a candle to the prestidigitation demonstrated by politicians in the making and the seeking of commission appointments, particularly to the power grubbing California Coastal Commission and the influential San Diego Planning Commission.

These appointments have spectacular implications far beyond the acrid political smoke signals wafting out of the process, particularly in the case of the Coastal Commission which in July will wave their magic wand over the coast highway between Torrey Pines State Park and Del Mar, transforming the south bridge into a major enhancement for the lagoon, or a visual blight.

The commission appointment process, where politicians seeking a political leg-up turn themselves upside down for attention and those already in charge mete out thanks for election time support, usually meanders on its silly way, under reported in the press, presumably because the public considers commissions benign—until they must get up close and personal with a bad one.

Just ask property owners, municipal governments, school districts and transportation planners up and down the coast with projects in front of the Coastal Commission about costly and time consuming requirements invented by the commission staff, an oppressive milieu that was bound to create a certain and unfortunate backlash.

Within weeks, Assembly Speaker Herb Wesson, Jr., who makes several Coastal Commission appointments, will likely replace San Diego’s pro-environment commissioner, Patricia McCoy, just before the commission hears the City’s strange plans to add 42,000 square feet of useless pavement to the highway bridge over Los Penasquitos Lagoon during a very necessary renovation project—reason enough to watch this appointment closely.

Wesson wants to curb the commission’s growing propensity to trump and trample local land use authority, undermining years of carefully crafted deals between conservationists and landowners, by replacing several ultra-green Coastal Commissioners with more business friendly representatives

While the Speaker is seeking to curb some of the Coastal Commission’s goofiest inappropriate behaviors by appointing a business savvy commissioner during this round, San Diego’s Mayor and City Council moved in an equal but opposite direction, shoving the formerly balanced and thoughtful City Planning Commission into the nuthouse with their latest choice.

By appointing the imperious Caroline Chase, an environmental power broker with an articulated rigid agenda for how the rest of us should live and an uncanny talent for pulling Sierra Club

endorsements out of a hat for candidates with marginal environmental credentials, a grateful Mayor and City Council presto chango’d this former class-act commission into a bona fide bumper experience.

But, the City’s Planning Commission, with its authority largely limited to recommendations to the City Council, is a lounge act in comparison to the Siegfried and Roy California Coastal Commission, whose powerful whip lashes with equal ferocity lions of industry on major coastal projects and pussy cat homeowners who just want to replace a fence.

And, because the City has kept the Coast Highway Widening Project in the vaporous recesses of the city manager’s office, staying clear of a sensible though political public review process, this important project is already in front of the Coastal Commission without the city’s Planning Commission input, with full support from City Councilman Scott Peters.

Reportedly, the Speaker’s A-List for the coveted Coastal Commission appointment includes Scott Peters, along with Councilwoman Toni Atkins and Oceanside Mayor Terry Johnson, a former Planning Commission alternate.

And that is because magically, the Green Peters of yesteryear disappeared under a cape not long after his election, emerging as Gray Peters, recast as a property rights Democrat, oxymoronic perhaps, but in politics, anything is possible. In tandem with some serious Mayoral brown-nosing, it is not surprising that his name comes up most often as a leading candidate for the Coastal Commission.

Unfortunately for the City of Del Mar, Sierra Club, Torrey Pines Planning Group and the Carmel Mountain Conservancy who oppose the widening of the coast highway bridge, Peters could prevail against another top choice, Councilwoman Toni Atkins, who has been soliciting letters of support from prominent local environmentalists and is reportedly getting help with the Speaker from mentor Assemblywoman Chris Kehoe.

The fault for the “righting” of the Coastal Commission lies with their staff’s excesses and the inability and unwillingness of reasonable commissioners to rein them in. The Speaker has no choice but to search for Commissioners who might tilt this sinking ship in another direction, or at least look like they might.

Environmentalists can only hope that if appointed, Scott Peters will get another green flash, perhaps at a Torrey Pines State Park sunset, bringing back the guy they supported for office, or that all those developer contributions pouring into his campaign coffers are simply an extravagant illusion for the commission selection gods.

Prestidigitation was *dictionary.com*’s February 26, 2000 word of the day. It says the word means a show of skill or deceitful cleverness. Take your pick.

Lisa Ross can be reached at www.lisaross.com