



ITS ABOUT THE "L" WORD IN SAN DIEGO MAYORS RACE: ROBERTS PONDERES 2004 RUN

What a difference a catastrophe makes in the political life of a city.

Before 600,000 acres, including a chunk of suburban Scripps Ranch, went up in smoke, San Diego's Mayor Murphy was politically invincible. Everybody liked Dick, or so it seemed.

It was not because he fired anyone up. Quite the opposite---his decision style was programmatic. The ten bare bones objectives he laid out in his campaign still informs his administration.

Some call him dull, others uninspired. But Murphy has never pretended that he would rock anyone's world, even when campaigning against the more definable and passionate County Supervisor Ron Roberts in the last election.

He did promise a meat and potatoes approach to solving San Diego's problems. But, increasingly, many think that his leadership style has lead to a sorry stew of budgetary glop with no one at the helm to effectively stir the pot.

That is why Ron Roberts is considering another run for Mayor. And a lot of people who worry about the municipal fiscal disaster about to happen and the tattered public safety net that became apparent two weeks ago are encouraging him to get in the race.

Budget and pension deficits are boiling over. The Charger ticket guarantee still simmers three losing seasons after Murphy was elected. Public safety remains on the back burner.

Roberts made a career as a City Councilman and County Supervisor putting public safety issues at the top of government's agenda and insisting on fiscal responsibility at the same time. In fact, he fought like blazes for an emergency and fire helicopter for the County.

It is very unusual to find an incumbent San Diego Mayor challenged in his mid term---most special interests, even if they have to hold their noses, line up solidly behind office holders for fear of getting frozen out of the decision making process.

Port Commissioner and banker Peter Q. Davis already announced his intentions to run before the fires in a chillingly prescient news conference challenging the Murphy administrations decision to end the city's lease on an emergency helicopter.

Political consultant Bob Glaser says that Roberts's entry into the race would give us a lively and healthy public debate over the state of the city and its governmental priorities.

He also points out that a November general election is likely in a scenario that includes three campaign powerhouses--so much for the expected Murphy March coronation, the kind enjoyed by the last two Mayors.

With two strong challengers, Murphy will have to suffer the kind of campaign he said he did not want when he suddenly announced last year that he would not seek reelection.

He explained then at a startling press conference that he would rather focus on city priorities than bear the constant fund raising events and candidate forums campaigns demanded.

A group of business interests launched a "grass roots spontaneous campaign" to convince Murphy to run for reelection, promising to relieve him of fundraising burdens, a gift he kindly accepted three weeks after the infamous press conference.

Many of those interests were terrified that the San Diego Firefighters and Police Officers Associations, among other labor groups, might have an open field to elect someone who would better respond to their issues.

Roberts says that he is seeking feedback from people and groups outside the usual political circles before he makes a decision. When I spoke with him, his voice was hoarse from a lot of hard talking.

He can credibly point to the fiscal success of the Board of Supervisors---a group of strong characters who quarrel a lot among themselves, but eventually arrive at the kind of functional decisions that pulled the county from the brink of bankruptcy into a model of financial health.

And, he can legitimately ask where the taxpayer dollars are going when San Diego enjoys a lower ratio of firefighters and police officers to citizens than almost anywhere else in the country and the budget continues to bleed.

Mostly he can use the "L" word. Even in a City Manager form of government, the buck stops with the Mayor who sets the public policy agenda. Leadership will be a sure fire issue in the next election if Ron Roberts enters the race.