



NO THANKS THIS THANKSGIVING FOR LOOMING ROAD MESS

Every holiday season it is instructive to take stock of the panoply of interests that should be giving thanks for the bounty brought upon them by the City of San Diego.

The prime feeder once again at the taxpayer cornucopia is our Chargers football team, who it appears have been including a few non-existent seats in their monthly bill to San Diegans for the empty stadium seats the City must contractually cover.

But certainly, the community of Torrey Hills, whose leadership is having a hard time keeping up with a never-ending train of consequences from a whole lot of decisions made before their community was born, will not be gorging at the feast.

One of the most ominous traffic messes on the west end of Carmel Valley and on roads circling around Torrey Hills will arrive sometime after the New Years celebrations are over, thanks in part to promises made during and after the 2000 election surrounding the permanent closure of Sorrento Valley Road.

The historically commuter-clogged old windy two lane road abutting the severely impaired Los Penasquitos Lagoon was temporarily closed several years ago due to overhead freeway construction.

While environmentalists were able to make the case that the old road must stay closed to maintain a viable wildlife corridor between Carmel Mountain and Torrey Pines State Park and help revive the lagoon, there was silence regarding future traffic impacts to Carmel Valley and Torrey Hills if and when the road was to morph into a bike path.

This turkey will come home to roost in January when the four-lane Vista Sorrento Parkway paralleling I-5 on the east opens two years early as the result of a deal made by the city with developer Westbrook Torrey Hills to hurry the project along to compensate for the closure.

That is when the 19,000 cars that would have used Sorrento Valley Road join the estimated 40,000 cars Vista Sorrento Parkway was built to handle, sort of, traveling along side Torrey Hills, up Carmel Mountain Road and dumping onto Carmel Valley's El Camino Real before any mitigation measures are in place or improvements to the SR56/I5 connection have begun.

The Sorrento Valley Road closure was the most explosive environmental issue at the time, as business tenants marooned with only one way out joined with developers hoping to turn the area into a real science research and development park, fought furiously to widen the road instead of closing it.

The focused and emotional participation from almost every environmental group in town and many local community planning board members took on a mystical zeal aimed at permanently closing the road that served as a dysfunctional rush hour outlet for Sorrento Valley businesses. There would be no compromise, here.

It was the Mayor's promise to the Sierra Club to keep Sorrento Valley Road closed that in part got him an undeserved endorsement from the club given his previous non-existent environmental record. And to the Mayor's credit, he kept his promise, as a good politician should.

But, while all the wheelin' and dealin' between the city and developers, businesses, environmentalists and planning groups over keeping the road closed, the growing suburban community of Torrey Hills was already the area's Industrial Dump Site for unwanted projects.

Soon after the election almost everyone on both sides of the Sorrento Road closure issue got something of what they wanted—everyone except

the communities that would bear the brunt of traffic and chaos that comes from squeezing the traffic toothpaste tube along side and through their streets.

To compensate for the impacts to angry businesses in the Sorrento Valley area, city fathers and mothers made one of their famous bend over deals with the developer of Torrey Hills to get the four-lane Vista Sorrento Parkway arterial road paralleling I-5 open two years earlier than planned.

In the deal, Westbrook Torrey Hills agreed to relocate a pile of dirt belonging to Caltrans that was in the way. Caltrans priced the job at \$2.8 million and turned over a check to the developer to do the job.

But, according to their October 2001 agreement, the city also agreed to cover costs beyond the Caltrans payment. And, the city also agreed to release virtually all of the builder's landscape and maintenance bonds for Torrey Hills before the opening of Vista Sorrento Parkway.

To some ears, this sounds like a familiar tune played like a fiddle by a certain football team that got a ticket guarantee gratis the taxpayer for unused and some say now for even non-existent seats. Clearly, this developer had little incentive to bring the job in under budget.

And this might be the first time in history that a government bureaucracy would have done the job cheaper than a private company, because the dirt removal project cost over \$3.1 million.

From the perspective of the city, by promising to relieve the developer of their landscaping and maintenance obligations early, the city did incentivize a quick road completion.

It remains a mystery how the landscaping, such as it is, will be maintained on the present amount of money Torrey Hills residents contribute each year, a fund hundreds of thousands short to even maintain landscaping already in place. Take a guess about who will pick up this tab.

But, most maddening to the communities soon to be blown back by traffic coming their way is that the Environmental Impact Report on the road closure sidesteps impacts to neighboring communities as if nothing is going to happen.

The report mirrors the utter indifference by almost everyone involved in closing Sorrento Valley Road to the future needs of the surrounding community.

Apparently, according to the same city agreement that hatched Vista Sorrento Parkway's early arrival, there was money available to take mitigation measures in something called a Sorrento Valley Road Construction Improvement Project fund.

However, that fund was offered as a source of reimbursement to the developer if costs escalated for the Vista Sorrento Parkway project rather than as a source of funds to provide traffic calming measures on Vista Sorrento Parkway and Carmel Mountain Road, improvements to the El Camino Real/SR56 intersection, and disincentives for regional traffic to roam through residential streets.

Next Thanksgiving, Carmel Valley and Torrey Hills residents could be sending letters of "No-Thanks" to the folks who stood up for wildlife and commuters, but turned a blind eye to families and neighborhoods. Let us hope that before then, these same people come to the aid of their neighbors.