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YEARS
1977-2002

GRUNION GAZETTE

LONG BEACH'S FAVORITE COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

VOL. 26 NO. 24 JUNE 12, 2003

A Pinch Of Salt

When people start complaining about special interests influencing politicians, it's a pretty sure bet the complainers are representing — you guessed it — their own special interests.

That, after all, is what politics is all about. A good politician weighs all of the interests impacted by a particular decision, and then tries to come up with the fairest, most viable solution. In rare cases, one special interest loses out completely to another. More often than not, there is some sort of compromise, with a nod to all the interests involved. (That usually means no one is happy, but that's another story.)

Things become unbalanced when one special interest has a much louder voice than another special interest — which is what is usually happening when people are complaining the loudest. For ages, the complainers were "the little people," moaning that corporate robber barons had the politicians in their pockets.

There was some truth behind the complaints. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the people with the money made all the decisions.

Some argue that's still the case today. But I respectfully disagree. Thanks to the labor movement, the women's suffragist movement, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement and tons of other movements, the pendulum has shifted. The "little people" have not only joined together to have a voice, in many instances they have become the loudest special interest of all. That's particularly true as the government involved gets more and more local — closer to the little people, if you will.

There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is much healthier than the opposite. Still, I always have been the guy who is looking for a little balance, the one who tries to keep the pendulum from swinging too far.

That is why I am excited about a growing initiative from our Long Beach Chamber of Commerce to become a vocal advocate for business on the political front, not just on the business front.

A couple of years ago, the Long Beach Chamber began endorsing candidates for city office.



They helped put Mayor Beverly O'Neill over the top in her historic write-in victory, and a separate but affiliated Political Action Committee (PAC) actually threw some money into the mix. (Huge labor, attorney and even Indian tribe PAC contributions have swayed elections for years. It's past time business owners had a PAC with the business label attached.)

That got the Chamber a seat at the city table for budget reviews and other talks. But decisions, or lack of decisions, at the state level have been walloping business interests just as hard as the rest of California's populace. By the way, when businesses are forced to cut back, shut down or move because of high energy costs or out-of-control workers' compensation or health care costs, the owners usually survive. The workers, the "little people," are the ones who find themselves without jobs.

So for the last year, the Long Beach Chamber has attempted to influence state legislation. Under the direction of CEO Randy Gordon, a youngster (I can call the Chamber's vice president of public affairs, Shaun Lumachi, a youngster because he's the same age as my 24-year-old son) has created an award-winning Web site, www.longbeachadvocacy.biz, to not only track legislation but also help people effectively lobby to change that legislation.

And last week, the Chamber board decided to start endorsing candidates for the state Assembly and state Senate. It's hard to say exactly how much that endorsement will mean, especially when it is put up against teachers' union or AFL-CIO endorsements. But it's a step toward pushing the pendulum back toward the middle again. It's a special interest offering a little balance.

I have a special interest in that.

Henry M. Sathgaur