

"THE GRADUATE"*God bless you please Mrs. Robinson—
Heaven holds a place for those who pray—***FUNNY
PAPERZ****ANNE BANCROFT**
"MRS. MEL BROOKS"
1931 - 2005**JOE KING**

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**Santa Monicans are getting hosed****Editor:**

Consider your washing machine: convenient, reliable, necessary — and soon to be on the front lines of the city's battle to become more "sustainable."

The City Council's latest lightning bolt is a plan to raise water rates significantly higher for those who use more water.

Who would these high-tier users be? Who would pay for this sustainability scheme? The minority segment of city residents who live in homes. We the wasteful people who dare to have a green lawn, or washing machine. Or lots of people under one roof.

Call it the Santa Monica Maytag Divide: residents with gardens vs. those with parking spots, a divide between families and single apartment dwellers, between those with washers and those who trudge baskets, and between those on our council who want our water bills to help save Lake Mead and those who first and foremost want a well-run utility.

I hope the council doesn't fall for this silly idea — soaking home owners with their own hose. Of course water is precious. If and when there's a water shortage, we'll drain the pools, kill the bluegrass and drive dirty cars. Until then, if we want to do our part for the Colorado River, and plant cactus, we will. Don't slap it on us. If we ever achieve some true measure of using less, saving more and living better, it will be because of voluntary efforts, not back-handed coercion. Incentives, not higher taxes, for things like shower-water recycling and rock garden installations.

Most importantly, I think it's wrong to confuse the finances of a potentially bloated city "enterprise" with a new, financially punitive environmental initiative, especially as utility bureaucrats want to increase our utility rates by four times the rate of inflation. (Remember, this department already receives an automatic CPI annual adjustment. This new increase is on top of that, with more looming.) Why? Because their cash reservoir may be low. Four times inflation! That's the average across the city. Under the current proposal, who knows how much higher the water tax increase will be for us, the infidel sprinkler minority.

Bobby Shriver was incredulous when he tried to understand the city's pitch for more cash: where's the discussion of utility costs? (One senses this question hadn't been asked in years.) How can we decide anything, Shriver wondered, about rate increases until we know what we pay for? And why we buy what we do, added Bob Holbrook. Do the people really know what we've been buying at premium prices — and recouped in extra high utility rates — in the name of "sustainability?" Does anybody care?

We should. Water bills easily top \$800 a year per household when you add the sewer part. These are bills, by the way, that most apartment dwellers never see nor ponder, bills the rest of us pay to an unregulated monopoly that holds us captive, that also wants higher taxes for trash and street sweeping. (What about landlords? The council tap-danced that question over the Rent Control Board. Let 'em figure it out, whenever. And by the way, higher rates will be in the mail as soon as legally possible, like, next month.)

Monopolies suck, always have, always will, unless tightly controlled. Which brings the question: Why can't we buy water from Los Angeles, if it's cheaper? It all comes from the same big pipe. Why can't we hire private trash haulers, if they're cheaper than the city with its cool new trucks? It all goes to the same big hole.

No, we can't buy DWP water; we're trapped in this system, and trapped until election day with this council, and its \$25,000-a-day-hedge-fine activist majority — liberal on social issues, conservative on development issues (except, it seems, with mall developers) and impotent to the one issue that matters most to most people: Vagrants. Meanwhile most of us, I suspect, don't really give a damn about this water issue one way or another, to answer Holbrook's question.

What the hell. It's only 15, 20 bucks a month more for water and trash, and good

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If city treats us like kids, throw tantrums

**OUR TOWN**

BY TED WINTERER

When asked how old she is, my daughter Eleanor recently stopped answering "three and a half" and now replies that she's "almost four."

Along with this quantum leap in development she's acquired a new intolerance for having her intelligence underestimated. Too often I forget how fast she's growing up, so I might remind her to wear her helmet when she rides her bike or to brush her teeth before bed. Her response is invariably an outraged "I know that!" as she feels I'm being patronizing.

Her newfound gumption got me thinking about the condescending manner in which city officials often deal with us as if we were small children. For instance, you may have noticed the new parking meters installed around town, which along with increasing fees have a slot in which to insert a prepaid debit card. Now there's a swell idea: If I'm going to pay more for parking at least there's a new and convenient means to do so.

A number of months ago I inquired at City Hall how I might obtain one of these ingeniously named "Santa Monicards," as I was weary of hoarding loose change to assure I had a dollar to park for an hour. A senior official in transportation management advised me these cards would not be available until each and every meter in Santa Monica had been converted to the new format. Otherwise, I was told, people "might find it confusing."

Great. So City Hall thinks we're all so dimwitted that we can't handle a simple analysis: debit cards can be used in new meters but not in the old ones. Does it really take a Mensa membership to figure that one out?

Anyone who participated in the first public input to the revisions to the general plan most likely also felt talked down to by our government. For instance, to gauge community priorities for the new circulation element, folks were given \$100 in play money and asked to allocate their allowance among fishbowls with labels like "parking" and "walking." We could have played this game at Eleanor's third birthday party. And if you tried your hand at the city's "5 Steps to Discover Santa Monica" walking tour, you were treated to definitions of apparently abstruse planning terms like "active living," "density" and "mobility." It seems we're all a bunch

of nincompoops.

But what really chaps my hindquarters is the way the city and the Macerich Co., the owner of Santa Monica Place Mall, have deigned to treat us in their joint effort to "Reimagine Santa Monica Place." To sell their vision for an immense, traffic-clogging new development in place of the aging mall, consultants were retained for a series of exercises masquerading as a comprehensive analysis of popular opinion.

First, surveys were mailed to residents, who were asked to rank a smorgasbord of "uses and opportunities" for a redeveloped Santa Monica Place and then provided only a few lines for additional comments, as if most of us were incapable of anything more complex than a simple sentence. No where did the survey address the questions most pressing to citizens, such as the size of a new project and the corollary increase in density and congestion. Also absent was the choice of simply gussying up the old dowager of a mall within its existing envelope.

Next came a series of "hands-on community workshops" at which people were told not to constrain themselves with worries about vital issues such as financing or zoning and handed building blocks to design their dream development. (Now there's a notion for my daughter's next birthday party.) And not surprisingly, once asked to behave like 4-year-olds, many folks did just that — fabricating enormous complexes which were then photographed as community support of enormity. Too bad residents weren't given little wooden cars to replicate the gridlock any such development would generate.

This summer, when many will be on vacation, we'll get to look at some amorphous concepts for a redeveloped mall, rather than specific plans with particulars about height, density, costs to taxpayers and environmental impacts. Once again an adult dialogue will be discouraged, but when the developers seek approval from the Planning Commission and the City Council, all parties will insist this sham be considered genuine public outreach.

And we're not supposed to see through this transparent con job? I really resent being treated like a child, so I joined the Santa Monica Coalition for a Livable City (www.smclc.net) to insist residents have meaningful input into the largest development our town has ever seen. I hope you'll do likewise.

(Ted Winterer is a writer and grownup who lives in Ocean Park. He can be reached at ourtownsmdp@aol.com.)

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