

A Community Supported Publication

Bell Type Scandal in La Habra Heights? Media and Residents must be more attentive

Are there similarities between what happened in the City of Bell and what happens in La Habra Heights?

The scandal in Bell included disproportionate salaries; illegal tax increases, stonewalling of public records requests and minimal citizen involvement.

Coincidentally, this reporter attempted to obtain the salaries of La Habra Heights employees in March of this year. The City stonewalled the request for a month and a half before releasing the information, well past the ten-day legal maximum.



2009 Whittier Daily News Front Page Story

The City Council, particularly Howard Viperman, rails against residents who request information saying it costs the City tens of thousands of dollars to provide the information.

La Habra Heights City Manager Shauna Clark receives \$160,000 in pay and about \$203,000 in total compensation.

In 2008, the City had a full time Fire Chief with total compensation of \$105,000.

The current part-time Fire Chief, working less than 20 hours per week, receives \$96,000 a year and use of a new City vehicle.

Like Bell, La Habra Heights has also increased taxes without required voter approval. In Bell, residents were charged an extra \$20 per parcel in sewer tax. The State required that Bell give the money back.

The La Habra Heights City Council raised the Fire Tax in violation of the code, with residents paying about \$23 extra per parcel. At one meeting, the Council would not take public comment on the agenda tax increase.

The Fire Tax also pays portions of the City Manager's and

other Staff salaries.

As reported in our May issue, the City Council reworked the Fire Dept Budget figures for the past 5 years turning surpluses into deficits, claiming the City now needs to increase the Fire Tax.

As of last July, there were no longer any full time employees in the Fire Dept. City administrative staff took over their duties making it more difficult to see where the Fire Tax money is going.

In La Habra Heights, residents DO want to volunteer in their City. However, the City Council has removed most of the City oversight committees leaving only one, the Parks and Recreation committee.

The City Council has cracked down on residents commenting at meetings, reducing time, prohibiting use of PowerPoint presentations and sometimes not taking comment at all.

The District Attorney's Office censured the Mayor in a letter for attempting to deny public comment.

The City Council gave a City Roads contractor \$31,000 that wasn't necessary. Residents have paid for gold jewelry for the mayor and gold embossed business cards for city employees.

It is up to Citizens to monitor their governments at all levels, listen to those who sound the alarm, and hold officials accountable on Election Day.

(FireWatch - Continued from Page 2)

The group once again proved its value as they monitored the growing fire on Colima for potential threat to La Habra Heights.

One of its most valuable services is an online resource that allows anyone to listen to the La Habra Heights Fire Dept, the Sheriff Dept and Fire Watch radio communications.

You can obtain 'real time' information on what's happening. More and more residents have tuned in when they hear sirens approaching and want to know what is going on. Access the link at www.LHHFireWatch.com. New members are welcome.

Exclusive! City Assessed Property Values Show Record Decline City Manager Says It's a Mistake - Assessor Says No It Isn't



The Los Angeles County Assessor released their Annual Report in August, stating that the total assessed value of the County fell by 1.7%. La Habra Heights had the 7th largest

Mr. Parisi broke down the \$73.9 million value decline into its major components.



Director Gil Parisi

-\$46.9 million for automatic and requested declines in value
-\$24 million for less oil depletion.
-\$6.6 million decline in personal property (including utilities)
-\$6.5 million due to Price Index decline
+\$3.3 million from new construction
+\$2.3 million from sales of homes at higher prices than they were purchased

How it Works

A home's assessed value is based on the purchase price with an increase of 2% per year or the rate of inflation whichever is less.

The total of all homes in the city plus new construction and remodeling, along with commercial and income properties (the last two not a large factor in La Habra Heights) is the valuation of the City.

As homes bought at lower prices in the past are sold, typically for a higher price, along with the 2% annual increase; total assessed value historically rises each year. While the potential value of an individual home can rise and fall dramatically with the real estate market and economy, the total assessed value of the City moves more slowly, but does follow the market trend.

Why would La Habra Heights have 4 times the decline of the county average, higher than surrounding communities, and a record decline while similar communities increased?

Recent Council actions including significant Code changes have tilted towards encouraging building, over protecting residents' property rights of views and privacy. The Council has also insulated itself from the public by removing almost all citizen committees and cracking down on opportunities for public comment.

When property rights aren't protected, property values tend to go down.
See 20 years of assessed values at www.LaHabraHeights.net

decline in the County of 6.3%, just behind Lancaster, Palmdale, Inglewood and Compton.

The picture was brighter for other communities that La Habra Heights usually tracks with.

Bradbury, Hidden Hills, Rolling Hills Estates, Sierra Madre, Pasadena, all INCREASED in value. Nearby communities of Diamond Bar and Walnut increased as well. Whittier declined 1.6%, and La Mirada 0.4%.



City Manager Shauna Clark attributed the record \$73.9 million decline in value to a mistake by the Assessor's Office, a utility revaluation, and a disproportionate amount of Height's property owners

seeking reductions in property value to reduce taxes.

However, in an exclusive interview, Assessor's Office Director of Administrative Services Gil Parisi was firm that the decline was not a mistake, and that requests for reductions in value in the Heights were little different from other cities.

A \$5 million decline in utility equipment value was due to Time Warner correcting the location of its equipment to Orange County.

**Fact Check:
LHH Property Tax Rate Misleading**

The Los Angeles Times reported that La Habra Heights had the second lowest property tax rate in Los Angeles County at 1.036%, compared to the county average of 1.16%.

However, La Habra Heights' property owners also pay extra for services included in other cities, an annual Fire Tax and Road Assessment.

The average assessed value for a house in La Habra Heights is about \$500,000.

For that average house property taxes would be \$5,180, with a Fire Tax at approximately \$464 and Road Assessment at about \$173, for a total of \$5817.

That is an effective rate of 1.163%, or just about exactly average for the County.

At that rate, the City still provides fewer services than most other cities. Residents accept that as a trade-off for maintaining a residential community with little commerce to finance City services.

The Fire Tax would be lower, but the City Council passed effective tax increases two years in a row in violation of the Code without required voter approval.

City Budget in Deficit for First Time in Ten Years!

The 2010-11 City budget approved in July squeaked by with a projection to break even.

Since then, the City was hit with a retroactive insurance experience charge of \$250k.

The City Manager reported that the decline in assessed values would reduce City revenue by \$60k.

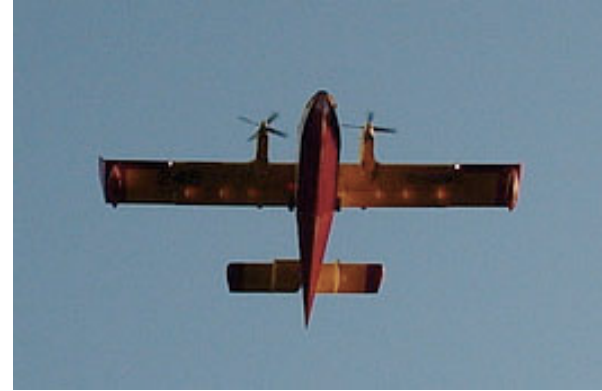
With Public Works projects likely to come in over budget, and other unforeseen costs, the deficit may be in the half-million dollar range by the end of the fiscal year.

The City has not had a deficit since 2001.

Volunteers Key to Keeping Residents Informed!

A brush fire in Whittier on September 16th exposed threats to the community and a valuable service provided by volunteers.

The fire was on the east side of Colima Rd. with smoke



Super Scooper Provided Water Drops on Fire

blowing into the Heights. Colima Rd was shut down during the fire, which was fought on the ground and from the air. Some diverted traffic used Hacienda Rd, backing the road up from one end of town to the other for several hours.

In past years resident Volunteers on Patrol would have been available to direct traffic, provide breaks for residents to get out, and ensure that emergency vehicles could get through. However, the City Council let the Volunteers on Patrol program lapse during the purging of resident involvement.

Recognizing the importance of preparedness, the City's General Plan requires the City to have an Emergency Preparedness Committee (EPC). The Committee consisted of CERT trained members who met monthly. There was a stock of emergency supplies, and evacuation plans were rehearsed for earthquakes and fires. The EPC educated the community on how to preparing for emergencies and potential threats.

However, under the current City Council leadership, there no longer is an Emergency Preparedness Committee.

Seeing a need, a group of residents got together and started La Habra Heights Fire Watch.

The group has a radio network consisting of individuals throughout the community with portable radios. A transmitter network (Repeater) exists in and out of town to provide coverage under most conditions. The group patrols the city during times of high fire danger looking out for problems before they develop, and during other significant events.

(Continued on Back Cover)

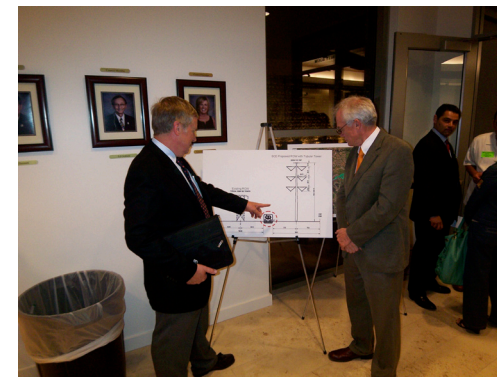
Urban Blight: Edison Towers Coming Soon



The 20 story tall Edison Towers and power lines are one step closer to completion with the submittal of plans to the City on August 23rd.

The towers will run along the City's northern edge and through Powder Canyon.

Residents opposed the towers because of visual blight, noise and incompatibility with a nature preserve. Council members Bergman and Carroll spoke before the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) opposing the towers on behalf of the residents, but were unable to get a third Council member to join them for official and stronger opposition.



Councilmembers Bergman & Carroll at 2009 CPUC meeting

While the La Habra Heights Council has done little to stop the project, the City of Chino Hills has fought tooth and nail to oppose the project on behalf of its residents. They filed multiple lawsuits with one currently before the California Court of Appeals, and submitted an application for rehearing and stay of decision before the CPUC.

There was a Council inquiry to City staff about joining Chino Hills in the opposition, but was not followed up. Additionally, concerns over the towers unprecedented height causing interference with fire fighting aircraft during a wildfire have been publicly raised.

Follow-up: Improvement Association Assault

This past June, at the Annual Meeting of the La Habra Heights Improvement Association, members of the Association attacked resident George Edwards as he attempted to videotape the meeting.

The Improvement Association attack was captured by two separate video cameras.

The District Attorney's office did not press charges.

When asked why two videos of the incident and an eyewitness statement were insufficient, DA spokesperson Sandi Gibbons said, "I am not a lawyer" and referred us to ADA Jim Hickey who made the decision.

Mr. Hickey said there was "insufficient evidence to prove unlawful conduct beyond reasonable doubt."

When asked what more would be needed beyond 2 videos and statement, he said he doesn't get into hypothetical's. He said that he didn't interview witnesses.

Questions remain as to whether all evidence and witness interviews from both sides were considered.

You Decide: Both videos of the attack can be found at www.LaHabraHeights.net

Lowell Joint School Board Election November 2

Eight candidates are vying for three seats on the Lowell Joint School District Board.

A two-hour Candidates Forum sponsored by the League of Women Voters was held on October 13th and can be viewed online at www.LJSDforum.com.

Whittier and La Habra aired the forum on the local cable channel. At the time of press, La Habra Heights had not aired the program.

Issues before the Board include reducing costs, approving a teachers' contract and continuing to provide a high quality education for the students.

In a field of qualified candidates, we recommend La Habra Heights residents Kevin DeMera and Bill Hinz to bring Heights' interests to the table.

City Council Election March 8, 2011

The seats of Councilmembers Baroldi and Viperman are up for election.

Nomination papers will be available November 15th at City Hall and must be returned by December 13th, or December 15th if one or more incumbents does not file.

Correction and Retraction Policy

To report errors or omissions requiring correction or clarification, e-mail the editor at LHHnet@aol.com or mail to the address on the back of this newsletter.