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Five Things San Diego Needs: Bring More People to the Table

By Gil Cabrera

I. Publicly Financed Campaigns

Those who have read my opinion pieces before know that this is a fairly important issue for me. I strongly believe that we need a public finance system for our campaigns. As I have noted before, there is no serious competition in our council races and often there is little competition in the citywide races.

This year will be an exception in that both the city attorney race and the mayoral race will be hotly contested. But remember that no incumbent has lost a reelection bid in at least 10 years. This, during the same time period when we have had political scandals and government management issues in the form of the pension crisis, an SEC investigation and a loss of access to the public bond markets.

There is something seriously wrong with our campaign finance system.

I would support a clean money system that is completely voluntary to candidates who are able to demonstrate a significant grassroots level of support before qualifying, and would give candidates enough money to be competitive though not necessarily as much as top tier candidates can raise privately. The clean money system could be financed, as it is in other jurisdictions, by adding a 10 percent surcharge to fines and penalties collected by the city -- such as parking tickets and moving violations.

This would generate approximately \$2.5 million per year to put into a public finance system.

Let's try this out for eight years (through four elections) and see how we like it and whether it generates greater competition and new faces in our local elections. Adding a public finance system, in my opinion, will increase the number of fresh young faces brought into the political process -- which I believe is the second thing we need in San Diego.

II. Fresh Crop of Young Politicians with Private Sector Experience

This is not meant as a criticism of our current elected officials or candidates, but the fact is we have been dealing with the same pols or people who have worked for pols for a long time. A downside of term limits (which I am generally a fan of) is that politicians tend to move from position to position.

Rarely do you see someone leave public life to work in the private sector and then come back.

I think there is a role for experienced politicians, but I also believe we need fresh new faces with private sector experience in the mix. After working within a government bureaucracy for any period of time, expectations of how things work seem to warp. Efficiency and quality is not necessarily the desired outcome of bureaucratic entities and bringing private sector actors in can sometimes improve operating standards. Moreover, outsiders will often bring new ideas to the table that people who have worked within the bureaucracy might not otherwise think of.

III. An Independent Auditor

Presently, the City Council is considering the role and independence of the city's auditor. Like the independent budget analyst, a truly independent auditor would provide another check on the use of public funds and transparency to our expenditure process. The auditor need not be separately elected, but should be selected by a mixture of mayoral, council and city attorney representatives.

Once selected, the independent auditor should be insulated from political pressure and removed only for cause with the approval of both the mayor and council.

Think of the benefits we could get from an internal watchdog reviewing how the city spends its money without fear of political retribution for bringing embarrassing or incompetent uses of public money to light.

IV. Upgraded Public Transportation Infrastructure

I am specifically talking about two things here: an improved trolley system and an expanded Lindbergh Field. First, having lived in Boston and spent time in San Francisco, I am in awe at how poor our public transportation system is. When I fly to San Francisco for a court hearing, I can take BART and am dropped off right in front of the courthouse downtown. We have nothing anywhere near as user-friendly here. A trolley line down University or Washington (and then El Cajon), for instance, would tie downtown to the mid-city in an incredibly useful way.

Add a line to the airport and you have the makings of an alternative system to cars.

Second, we need to expand and upgrade Lindbergh Field. I am one of the many San Diegans who loves the convenience of Lindbergh Field. It is centrally located, close to downtown, but not too far from North, South or East County and one of the easiest airports to navigate once inside (I am usually in my car or a cab within 10 minutes of touchdown).

But it is clear we need more capacity and I have found ideas that add a runway (either a V or two side-by-side) intriguing. This will be a tough political discussion because it will certainly involve some eminent domain issues and difficult choices, but our leadership must recognize the need to expand the airport and get going with it. Doing this by committee has not worked and we need a leader who can move the process along.

V. Neighborhood Gourmet Restaurants with Easy Take Out

I cannot write a column about what San Diego needs without talking about food. One thing we are missing is some good neighborhood restaurants offering quick and easy gourmet take-out.



Those who have lived in San Diego a long time will likely recall Piret's in Mission Hills. From what I am told, this was a restaurant you could eat inside in, or select from prepared high-quality gourmet take out meals. More of these in our local communities (in particular, another one in Mission Hills would be greatly appreciated by me and my family) would allow us working stiffs to take a night off from cooking from time to time.

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