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November 2004 It was a hard day's night

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S.J. CAHN

My lasting impression from Tuesday night's Newport Beach City Council meeting, during which the council chose Planning Commissioner Leslie Daigle to fill Gary Adams' vacated seat, isn't so much the quality and poise of the applicants or the pointed questions asked of them as it is the lack of residents in the chambers.

At most, I counted 25 (after those in the audience there to see Olympic swimmer Aaron Peirsol get a key to city left), a number that dropped as the evening went on. Perhaps many were watching the events on television, but even if they were, they would have missed what the TV doesn't show -- everything not on camera, not to mention the sense in the air.

It's too bad more weren't there. They missed seeing the councilmen -- I'm running out of time to use that word -- do a fine job of staying fair and balanced. All eight applicants present were asked the same questions, with a few more being asked for obvious reasons: Councilman John Heffernan asked Chamber of Commerce President Richard Luehrs about his ability to separate himself from his business-booster job; Heffernan asked Daigle about the need for the council to have a female member; Councilman Steve Rosansky asked Gerald Hegger how he would bring a cost-benefit analysis tactic to bear on nonfinancial decisions; Heffernan asked Michael Browning about his references; and several members asked John Blom about comments he made about "mansionization" and property rights.

Heffernan, you might notice, comes up often in the list of additional questions. Part of the explanation might be that when he asked his first question of the night -- a straight-up "yes or no" of Charles Griffin about the planned hotel at Marinapark -- he was told by acting City Atty. Robin Clauson that he could not ask such questions because it would restrict the person's ability to vote once in office. (There was some legal mumbo-jumbo; that's the gist of it.)

The basic questions, for those curious -- and maybe interested in

deciphering what they say about the men who asked them -- were: Mayor Tod Ridgeway asked a "broad-brush" question about what one, two or three issues the applicants thought were most pressing; Rosansky asked what the qualities and qualifications for a council member should be; Councilman Steve Bromberg (who switched his vote from Planning Commissioner Barry Eaton to Daigle and therefore was the deciding vote) asked, simply, what made each applicant stand out from the others; Councilman Don Webb asked about issues specific to District 4 (the empty seat, of course); and Councilman Dick Nichols asked about how the applicants would handle future, worsening traffic.

Keeping the questions mostly the same struck me as a fair way to handle the situation, though perhaps a few more questions specific to each candidate would have helped differentiate them a bit. Everyone agreed the expansion of John Wayne Airport is the biggest issue around. Traffic along Jamboree Road and near Corona del Mar High are problems. I was struck by Daigle's mentioning how residents of the newly annexed Santa Ana Heights don't yet feel a part of the city; by Parks Commissioner Tim Brown's mention of the council picking someone electable; and by Eaton's addressing concerns that he was too technical.

I would have liked to see the council tell the applicants: "We know John Wayne, traffic, development and water quality are all issues. What's the next biggest on your list?" (Webb, to his credit, when he asked about District 4 issues, eliminated John Wayne.) Getting beyond the obvious would have helped illuminate who really knows what's going on in town and has fresh ideas about how to make the city better.

A final thought. If another vacancy occurs (we're two years in a row now, so it seems almost as likely as unlikely), I'd suggest this to those future applicants: Watch tapes of this meeting and the one during which Rosansky was appointed. See how Daigle and Rosansky addressed the council. They must have done something right.
Taj Ma-City Hall

I've heard plans for a new Newport Beach City Hall, which could cost \$30 million, derided as wasteful and unnecessary, with the most pithy attacks making reference to the grand Indian mausoleum. After another night in the council chambers, I now believe those opposing the plan never attend council meetings. If they did, they'd

know how uncomfortable the audience seats are in the chambers and be

begging for a plusher place to sit.

If anyone wants to convince me otherwise, I'm open to a discussion. It just has to take place in those terrible seats, so my point will be hard and clear.

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