

Next Mayor Must Make Some Bold Moves

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San Diego is well familiar with things nautical and so it's a natural temptation to depict next year's mayoral campaign as a boat race. Several candidates already have launched their campaign craft into the political waters, looking for fair winds and following seas in campaign contributions, endorsements, volunteers, and issues they hope will resonate best with voters.

Of course, only two will survive the storm-tossed primary next June as all others will go down with all hands aboard. Sails and oars will be replaced by hydro jet turbines as the surviving candidates turn the campaign into a two-speedboat race, each running at full throttle into the November general election.

Boating metaphors aside, what is it that San Diego's business community needs the next mayor to do when he or she takes office in December 2012? Members of this important community segment employ a goodly number of workers who live and vote in San Diego. So, the new mayor will need to pay attention to factors that impact the city's ability to recruit and retain businesses.

Five action items San Diego's next mayor needs to do:

1. Lead economic development.

By the end of next year, the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp. will have had a new CEO in place for the better part of a year and supposedly will have begun to do what the organization is in place to do. But a city's mayor has special clout in attracting businesses to expand or locate here. The new mayor has to embrace economic development in the first-person tense – using the pronouns, “I,” “my,” “me,” “we,” “us” – not “they,” or “them” – when referring to the parties responsible for growing the city's jobs base.

Best example of perhaps our city's best jobs ambassador was former Mayor Pete Wilson who, despite the confines of San Diego's weak-mayor form of governance, personally hammered and otherwise cajoled companies to locate and invest in what was a pretty dingy business environment locally in the early '70s.

Now decades later, our next mayor will be able to tout San Diego as a world-class city with unlimited potential. He or she needs to exploit that important talking point.

2. Make pension reform happen.

There's nothing here that isn't intuitively obvious or hasn't been widely discussed, given the soaring costs of maintaining the bloated pension benefits our public employees have enjoyed. However, there are still too many who are dancing around the problem. At that, the campaign will continue to be filled with rhetoric from all sides, including bold proposals to totally revamp the system that is no longer financially or politically viable. Actions speak louder than words, though. The ever-growing cost to support the present level of pension benefits poses the biggest financial threat to our city. Our next mayor needs to grab the issue by its political throat and deal with it once and for all.

3. Find new financing for redevelopment.

Now that the state has essentially done away with redevelopment as we know it, cities, including America's Finest, need to find ways to finance projects and other infrastructure that will make the city better able to attract and retain jobs. This priority fits in with the new mayor's economic development imperative.

4. Cure the city's structural deficit.

I use “cure” as the action word here because it connotes doing away with the disorder permanently. The city's \$33 million structural deficit is too big to try to fix with more creative accounting or symbolic cuts that make essential services political scapegoats. If the city is survive financially, its budget problems will be solved once and for all on the next mayor's watch. Solutions won't wait for his or her successor.

5. Engage the community.

Is it not obvious to one and all that the city is on the brink of insolvency? Can we not agree with the age-old adage that warns one cannot continue to do the same things and expect different results? We need leadership that brings the disparate parts of our community together to establish a common understanding of what the problems are and then reach consensus on the need to change the way we do and pay for services, keeping in mind we need to do so if we're to survive as a municipality, much less prosper as one. Facilitating that process should be the next mayor who will take office a little more than 16 months from now.

Next month: What San Diego's next mayor *doesn't* need to do.

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