

Tuesday, February 6, 2007

Lifetime benefit

Sunnyvale council should end perk

With an unexpected vote last week, Sunnyvale's city council broke faith with the public by extending the lifetime insurance perk that became controversial during the last city council election.

Tonight the council can remedy that self-serving action. All it takes is a motion from one of the six members who supported the lifetime benefit to ask for reconsideration.

Sunnyvale should phase out this lifetime gift at taxpayer expense, at least for new council members. Chris Moylan, the lone councilman to vote against the perk, says that's what voters told him they wanted during the 2005 campaign.

At a minimum, the council should reschedule a discussion and vote on the issue so there can be a public debate. Residents who had been following the issue felt blindsided by last week's surprise vote.

It's also a matter of trust. And trust in this council, or lack thereof, is already on tonight's agenda in the form of the Town Center mall project. Some residents feel the city botched the last attempt to level the mall and restore a real downtown.

THE OPINION OF THE MERCURY NEWS EDITORIAL BOARD

Skeptics question whether officials are capable of delivering on the new proposal, and the surprise benefits vote handed them one more reason to be leery.

The benefit is available to elected officials who serve at least five years and are over 50 when they leave office. At community forums in 2005, no candidate argued for continuing the perk — yet after the election, the question never made it onto an agenda.

In December, the council listed the benefit as a 2007 study issue, which opponents understandably took to mean there would be public review. The vote last week was primarily on a new benefit plan for management retirees, with council benefits tacked on as an afterthought. Residents could be forgiven for missing the notice. The agenda item met the letter

of the law, not the spirit.

But only a council member who voted for the benefits has legal standing to seek reconsideration.

John Howe or Tony Spitaleri could do it. Both campaigned in 2005 and heard the same voter sentiment Moylan heard. Neither publicly expressed support for the benefit at that time.

Ron Swegles, Dean Chu, Otto Lee or Melinda Hamilton have an even better reason. They're up for re-election this year. They don't need this dogging their campaigns.

Howe says the lifetime insurance was passed by the city council some 30 years ago, so why should this council rethink it?

Moylan observes that lots of decisions 30 years ago look bad in retrospect — like leveling the city's historic downtown and building that great lump of a Town Center mall. Tonight the council will try again to remedy that mistake. Why not make it two?

Tonight's meeting: The Sunnyvale City Council meets at 7 p.m., Sunnyvale City Hall, 456 W. Olive Ave.