
Posted on Sun, Aug. 20, 2006

Herhold: A nod to those who put the not in NIMBY

By Scott Herhold
Mercury News

Ladies and gentlemen, please give me your attention. I don't have a monologue. My joke writers, pathetic as they were, left years ago. So I'd appreciate it if the hecklers would depart before I get nasty and summon the guys who write your homeowners' policy to finish this column.

We bestow today the most prestigious awards in Santa Clara County, the most coveted honor among those who fight to protect their turf -- the NIMBYs, given for distinction in the cause of a ``not in my back yard" crusade.

Although a few fools think adding jobs or building homes or helping the poor are important goals, these brave crusaders know that preserving the serenity of the back yard -- *my* back yard -- counts most.

After all, doesn't the Declaration of Independence guarantee life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Who can do that when the new condos next door let your neighbor watch your nude sunbathing, not to mention the tricks you do with your rubber ducky?

But I digress. This year's NIMBYs reflect a creativity and imagination we haven't seen. It isn't just property values or traffic anymore, though these remain time-honored narratives. NIMBY advocates today want to do more than define who their neighbors are. They want to control how they act.

Here, then, are the envelopes:

HONORABLE MENTION -- You're headed down Pierce Road from the foothills toward the intersection of Saratoga-Sunnyvale Road, listening to Vivaldi on your car radio. Pierce is a big, wide street. Suddenly you hit three sets of speed lumps that turn the music into heavy metal. Thank the neighbors, who want you to slow down to a glacial 15 mph and are willing to punish your car's suspension if you don't. Saratoga's traffic commission installed the lumps after years of complaints from Pierce Road residents about speeders. Drivers honk their horns in protest, asserting their own brand of NIMBYism in response.

THIRD RUNNER-UP -- It's not a typical NIMBY story. But that makes it all the more compelling. The award goes to the Los Altos Town Council for its decision not to hear any petition asking the town to proclaim a Gay Pride Day. If there are gays in Los Altos, we don't want to hear about it. If there are men kissing other men, we don't want to see it. Never mind that this made Los Altos the laughingstock of the Bay Area, or that the council eventually retreated under legal threat. It was a proud moment for walling off the world.

SECOND RUNNER-UP -- The folks who live on Aztec Ridge in the Los Gatos hills moved in long after the Lexington Quarry was in business. That hasn't stopped them from subjecting the quarry's operations to extraordinary scrutiny. They've nitpicked an environmental impact report on its expansion nearly to death. Their complaints have attracted state mining authorities. Sure, the quarry manufactures ingredients for concrete in freeways, driveways and airport runways we all use. But the ridge needs to be saved from the beep-beep-beep of its trucks.

FIRST RUNNER-UP -- As always, Cupertino finishes formidably in NIMBY competition. This year, the prize goes to the residents who have at least temporarily stymied two proposed condo developments near Vallco Fashion Park that would have brought about 500 new housing units to town. Who cares that the protest hurts plans for reviving the struggling Vallco, which threatens to become an economic sinkhole for the city? A special commendation for creativity goes to residents for using the referendum process to halt the plans until November. Keep an eye on Apple's plans for a new headquarters campus here. NIMBYism could stop that, too.

GRAND PRIZE -- In sheer drive and imagination, no NIMBY organization surpasses the Santa Clara-based SaveBAREC folks, who want to preserve the 17-acre site of the former Bay Area Research and Extension Center near Valley Fair for agricultural purposes. Never mind that there's a reasonable plan to develop the state-owned site for 110 single-family homes, 165 much-needed low-income senior units and three acres of open space. Forget the notion that the money could help hard-pressed schools or colleges funded by the state. The SaveBAREC folks think that land in the middle of an urban area could be better used for compost research or garlic betterment. A Web site (www.savebarec.org) and a truck parked outside the property advertise their views.

Certainly there are many more distinguished efforts by NIMBYs: The fight by Mountain View residents to limit the size and number of homes on the old Mayfield Mall site deserves mention, though the neighbors turned depressingly rational toward the end.

So, too, do the efforts of Santa Clara residents to tear down the building that has housed Martin's Cocktail Lounge since 1937. Instead of agreeing to the cheap answer of building a corridor for smokers, they persuaded the city council to move toward replacing the building with subsidized senior housing that could cost the city millions.

In East San Jose, the neighbors who fought an 18-home development by Braddock & Logan on Fleming Avenue just south of Alum Rock Avenue merit commendation, particularly because the compromise that passed -- 14 homes and a half-acre park -- didn't win universal acceptance. (The park could attract ``undesirables," some felt).

And in Willow Glen, the people who opposed the Beverages & More store on Lincoln Avenue deserve recognition, particularly

because they stretched for imaginative reasons to oppose the store. ("One more chain store on the avenue.")

Not all the NIMBY efforts succeeded. The benighted forces of affordable housing or sensible transit won a few. But all in all, it was a noble year of effort. Fire up the barbie, folks. The back yard is still safe.

Contact Scott Herhold at sherhold@mercurynews.com or call (408) 920-5877.

© 2006 MercuryNews.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.mercurynews.com>