

Booker T. Lewis II: Make Darling follow the rules

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The struggle for economic and environmental justice continues for the citizens of Fresno. For more than 60 years, people in our community have labored to convince the city to enforce laws in our municipal code with equity and without prejudice. Nevertheless, here we are 43 years after a rendering plant was annexed into our city still demanding that our city actively enforce the law.

The Darling International facility, once located in the county, was issued a variance to operate as a slaughterhouse and permitted to process 4,000 pounds of tallow daily. By 1965, Darling had far exceeded the boundaries of its initial variance, processing as much as 2 million pounds of raw material per week.

By the time the plant was annexed into the city of Fresno, various permit requests and representations made by Darling indicated that the plant renders up to 850,000 pounds of raw material each day.

Once annexed into the city and the location zoned as M-3, Darling International should have been required by City Hall to apply for a Conditional Use Permit congruent with the disposition of the business at the time of annexation. Not only have the processing levels increased over the years, Darling is using this Fresno location as a transfer station for raw material business in other areas.

In 1979 our family moved into the house at 440 W. Florence, just across the street and around the corner from the Darling plant. This home became our family home for over 20 years. During our stay there we were plagued by unbearable odors, swarming flies and gatherings of stray dogs attracted to the odors and residue around the plant.

The odor often became so pungent that picnics were impossible and spending time in the yard was insufferable. Imagine not only having to endure the stench of dead animal carcasses in your yard but having that same intolerable odor passing through the ventilation system of your home while you eat and sleep in your home.

Some of us have witnessed trucks traveling through our neighborhood dripping with runoff from the waste being transported. These are the same streets that our children and citizens use daily.

Every day that Darling International is allowed to operate, they are out of compliance and in opposition to justice and fair business practices for everyone in our city. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Our city, over several administrations, has allowed Darling to continue to violate the trust of every citizen in Fresno.

All other businesses in our city are expected to comply with the laws and policies of our municipal code to continue operating — including churches. When our church considered building an additional facility on our property, we were required to meet all of the rules and get a Conditional Use Permit for that project. Darling should be held to the same level of compliance applicable for its business type.

Another interesting variable in this conversation is that as City Hall did not mandate Darling International to acquire a Conditional Use Permit, the city also allowed additional development on the site and residential development in areas around Church and Fruit avenues.

It is an unfortunate and horrendous fact that our city has continued to approve and allow housing, schools and other community projects to be developed in close proximity to the Darling plant as sickening odors continue to travel across our community like a plague, a sweltering plague, in the heat of summer.

It is ironic that directly across the street from the Darling plant, the city redeveloped a garbage dump into what we know today as Hyde Park.

West Fresno has a rich history in our city. There are thousands of families that have deep roots in our community. When you have grown to love a community and the people of that community, in spite of the multifaceted areas of underdevelopment and poor maintenance, it is extremely difficult to simply pick up and move. Therefore we choose to demand that our city represent us vigorously and equitably.

Today we solicit the citizenry of Fresno to join us in demanding that the governing officials of our city enforce our laws of governance and require Darling International to comply with the laws and regulations that govern the operation of businesses in our city. City Hall can do this by compelling the rendering plant operators to get a Conditional Use Permit appropriate for the business they do in our city.

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