

City Beat: Mike Wells discusses his District 7 mailer

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I bumped into Fresno City Council District 7 candidate Mike Wells at about 3 p.m. Tuesday. I was walking on Mariposa Street and had crossed O Street on my way to City Hall. Mike was walking west on Mariposa Mall, headed in the direction of the county library.

We stopped on the sidewalk between the Burns State Building and the Sisk Courthouse. We talked for 15 minutes about the campaign flier.

Bee reporter BoNhia Lee had [an excellent article](#) in Tuesday's paper on the flier. BoNhia reported that a Wells mailer sent to homes on Saturday showed a run-down building surrounded by barbed wire with a wooden sign. A closer examination revealed what looked like a building from the Auschwitz death camp, several religious leaders and District 7 incumbent Clint Olivier said at a news conference Monday.

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The religious leaders said the use of a Holocaust image in a political campaign was offensive to the community. If the image was of Auschwitz, Wells said in BoNhia's story, then he was sincerely sorry.

Wells held his own news conference on Tuesday afternoon. BoNhia was there. I look forward to reading her article.

The Tuesday news conference had ended when my path crossed Mike's path.

This is Mike's statement on the press release announcing the conference:

"With deep regret, I have concluded that the photograph in my May 3 mailer, which was doctored, is an image of a concentration camp. Let me be clear: I find the image offensive, at odds with my faith and with the faith based community with whom I have worked many years. I sincerely apologize to anyone offended by this. That includes Rabbi Winer, with whom I met yesterday. Those who know me know that hatred does not live in my heart.

"These are the facts: I asked a volunteer graphic artist for a photo of urban blight for the piece, something familiar to residents of District 7. For some reason, the graphic designer took this horrible photo and completely altered it. That person has been dismissed from my campaign, and the piece has been removed from circulation.

"I also apologized to Clint Olivier. While I could not disagree with him more on policy and urban issues, that photo could be construed as challenging his faith or decency—which I do not. I question the way he governs and his service to the people of District 7. We need to get back to the real issues. The people of District 7 deserve nothing less."

I hadn't read the statement when Mike and I met. However, it underscores my first thought after reading BoNhia's story: Something odd is going on here.

I leave the significance of the use of a Holocaust image in a political campaign to District 7 voters and editorial writers. I did ask Mike about two issues that stump me. Mike and I have talked many times at City Hall. He didn't shy away from my questions or get angry.

The two issues:

1.) When he saw the photo of the building, why didn't Mike say to his staff: "I've walked every square foot of District 7 more times than I can count. I've never seen a building that looks like this in District 7. Where can I find this building in District 7?"

2.) Did Mike know full well (before the mailers went to the post office) that the building was of Auschwitz, and therefore the purpose of the mailer was to generate an Olivier-inspired storm of protest so Mike could then apologize with such humility that he became something of a victim and at the same time acquired a "little guy vs. the 1%" image, all the while substantially boosting his name recognition?

As to Issue No. 1, Mike never gave me a clear answer.

Mike said his aim with the flier was to call attention to blight in District 7, and lay the problem at the feet of Olivier.

No one disputes that portions of District 7 need considerable help. In 1980 I lived in an apartment complex on First Street, halfway between Clinton and McKinley avenues. Radio Park is across the street. That area is now part of District 7. It was a rough neighborhood 34 years ago. I have no doubt it's as rough, if not rougher, now. Other neighborhoods in District 7 are troubled, as well.

I asked Mike: Why not simply take a photo of a run-down neighborhood in District 7 and use it for the mailer?

Mike said his goal was to show blight. He said the building used in the mailer didn't look like anything he'd ever seen in District 7, "but it looked like urban blight." That was good enough, he said, because his team was under intense deadline pressure.

"We had to get the flier out," he said.

If I understand correctly, Mike would have also said OK if the photo had shown urban blight in, say, Detroit even though Detroit isn't in District 7. The key, apparently, was to tie Olivier to urban blight. I know politics ain't beanbag, but it seems odd that Mike would figure any photo of urban blight is OK when you might think a mailer with a photo of District 7 blight, something District 7 voters see weekly or daily, would be more likely to generate the passion that boots an incumbent out of office on election day.

But Mike's apparently casual approach to photo selection makes sense if issue No. 2 is true — the Auschwitz photo isn't a mistake, but a tactic. I asked Mike about that on Tuesday. I said he can now bare his chest to the community for 24 or 48 hours. I said he could become a martyr. I said he could be humble and contrite over the mailer, but unyielding in his crusade to save (in his view) District 7 residents from Olivier. I said he could talk to any number of reporters, apologize profusely, then say, "but I still promise to get rid of District 7 blight." I said Olivier has money. I said he (Mike) doesn't have much money. I said news cycles are such that the mailer controversy could soon blow over, but his (Mike's) name recognition would only grow, not to mention his desire to be seen as the people's warrior.

"It might turn out that way," Mike said. "But not today."

Today — Tuesday — was his day to put politics aside and apologize in front of all of Fresno, Mike said.

Which, of course, can be good politics.

“If anyone calls to do a follow-up story, that’s when I’ll say, ‘Yes, I’m sorry, but I also want to say this about blight,’” Wells said.

If money is any indication, the District 7 race is really heating up. Mike and I shook hands, then parted. I went to the City Clerk’s Office. Campaign finance documents there and on the City Clerk’s Web site indicate this (if I read the them correctly):

* Olivier through March 17 had raised about \$55,000.

* Wells through March 17 had raised about \$10,000.

* In the weeks since March 17, Olivier has raised about \$18,000.

* In the weeks since March 17, Wells has raised about \$18,000.

The final push is on. That’s when political gambles are made. That’s what we may be seeing in District 7.