

## Patience Milrod: Bad optics cloud plan hearing

By  
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As the politicians like to say, “the optics are bad.” Less than two weeks ago, the Bee reported on Granville Homes’ \$520,000 in contributions to candidates in November’s elections, and quoted Granville president Darius Assemi promising more of the same in future political contests.

Three days later, on its op-ed page, The Bee published Assemi’s explanation for Granville’s half-million-dollar burst of generosity: Motivated (among other things) by “poor planning decisions,” Assemi sends dollars to candidates as part of Granville’s increasing corporate “attention and emphasis on policy and the promotion of good leaders.”

Eight days after publication of his boss’ op-ed piece, Granville Vice President Jeff Roberts confers with Fresno City Council President Steve Brandau to make special arrangements for testifying on the 2035 General Plan Update: Roberts will appear at the end of the hearing and will consolidate “15 to 18 minutes” of other Granville witnesses’ time into nine minutes — for “procedural efficiency.” Brandau doesn’t mention this option at the hearing, so other commenters can’t take advantage of it. Possibly as a result, the hearing goes on for six hours.

Now, everybody knows these kinds of hearings often end after midnight, because a lot of people want to speak. That’s why they held this one at the Convention Center. Everybody also knows most people don’t stay until the bitter end. So — no surprise — Roberts didn’t get to the microphone until midnight or so; and by then, only a few die-hards remained in the auditorium.

Back story: the general plan the City Council considered Thursday is the plan that developers love to hate: Among other things, it prefers infill to building on the fringes of town and it requires developers to pay for a fair share of the utilities that will serve their profitable projects. The Building Industry Association and Granville made their distaste for these ideas abundantly clear at hearings in April 2012; council members chose to pursue the anti-sprawl plan anyway

But that was long ago, at the beginning of the plan process. Now after hundreds of community meetings, public comments, edits and rewrites, on Thursday the plan was ready.

Or not. When Roberts got to the microphone deep into Thursday night, it was the building industry’s last chance to make its dent in this plan, after almost three years of public process. Roberts intended to get the last word — and he did. He spent his nine minutes pitching changes to the plan’s policies. At the end of Roberts’ presentation, Council Member Paul Caprioglio made a motion to “do what Jeff said.”

We won’t know until this Thursday if the City Council is actually going to “do what Jeff said.” But here’s the thing: It just looks bad.

The council did not treat Roberts like the rest of the public because he’s not — it’s his job to create friendly working relationships with council members, and he’s really good at it. So it was easy for Roberts to arrange with Brandau to do two things: to make an argument the rest of the public had never heard, and to do it when most of the rest of the public had already left the hearing.

I promise you nobody’s getting paid off here. I don’t even know if Granville contributes to any of the council members who were so accommodating on Thursday. But that’s not the point.

The point is that the City Council needs to avoid treating developers one way and the rest of us another way. Like I said — it looks bad. It has the appearance of impropriety, even though there has been no legal impropriety. Even if motivated by friendship, by common political views, or just by the desire to avoid meeting a Granville-funded

opponent in a dark alley come re-election time — council members need to get into the habit of making Granville play by the same rules that apply to council gadfly Barbara Hunt.

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