

Rocky journey through this local election

By Roger Straw, October 28, 2018

Almost five months ago, I received an invitation to take part in the great democratic tradition of promoting a neighbor for local city governance. Along with others, I spent limited funds and as much time as I could to talk to folks, organize and campaign. Some of my friends came to join me and others got behind other good neighbors, and the race was on. Two of our neighbors would be elected to our Benicia City Council in November.

News broke in late September that a major worldwide corporate power had bullied its way into our local democratic process. Valero Services Inc., based in Texas but with 115 subsidiaries in Delaware, Michigan, Canada and several wealthy Caribbean nations, decided it wanted to buy a seat on the Benicia City Council.

Their first strategy was to spend an unknown amount of money to employ two national firms, EMC Research and Research America, to conduct a nasty telephone “push poll,” blatantly mischaracterizing and demeaning one candidate for Council and painting rosy pictures of two others. When our City Attorney challenged the polling firms, Valero Refinery executive Don Wilson admitted that Valero paid for the poll, but neither he nor the polling firms would comply with our demands for more information.

Valero went about scaring its workers – those employed by Valero and others who contract for work at the refinery – into believing that my candidate wants to close down the refinery and take away the workers’ livelihood, their jobs. This is far from true, but the tactic resulted in the amassing of a small fortune by Benicia standards, \$155,000 in an “Independent Expenditure” fund known as a political action committee (PAC). Unfortunately, this PAC is free to use its massive resources to damage a candidate and to promote other candidates. Under U.S. law, corporations are considered “people” and have been given rights like you and me, to participate with voice – but not with a vote – in our tiny local elections.

Fortunately, Benicia enacted a fair campaign ordinance in 2008, which requires everyone, real people like you and me, and these monstrous shadow “people” like Valero Services Inc., to detail their campaign contributions and expenditures. So in September we were shocked to discover not only how much money the PAC had gathered up, but also detailed descriptions of their new telephone poll and negative digital ads. Complying fully with Benicia’s law, the PAC submitted names of its contributors (Valero Services at \$14,200 and various contracting trade unions at \$30,000 each). Complying fully with Benicia’s law, the PAC submitted a telephone caller script that showed a blatant false attack on my candidate. Complying fully with Benicia’s law, the PAC submitted a photocopy of a mean digital ad showing my candidate in an unflattering pose. As required by law, the City of Benicia posted all of this on its website, and the news went wild. Incensed letters went to the newspapers and lengthy hot conversations blossomed on social media.

In the ensuing month, more money was contributed to the PAC and more was spent. Going into the final week before the election, they have spent over \$58,800 to attack and promote candidates. They have an additional \$96,000 which can be spent in a final push this week!

Benicia candidates are required by law to spend less than \$30,000 on their campaign. The PAC has five times that amount to buy a seat on Council.

So I'm back to sharing about my recent sojourn in local democracy. I don't mind competing with neighbors. I've participated in local elections before. I enjoy the behind-the-scenes organizing, the competition, the excitement at the end of the race to learn the public's choices. But it is simply not fair to have to go up against Valero Services Inc. Our local absentee Texas/Caribbean giant has mobilized our unions into a sickening fight to openly tear down one candidate and to champion two others.

The only good news in all this, the only antidote to this illness, is that we, the people, the REAL people, still reserve the right to vote. I don't care if you are for my candidate, Kari Birdseye, or any of our other Benicia neighbors. EVERYONE who is a real breathing human being needs to ignore the elephant in our room and send in their ballot or show up at the polls on Tuesday, November 6. Everyone needs to vote!

Roger Straw
Benicia