

Supervisor shows up colleagues by actually doing job

By Ken Garcia
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It's a routine honed through time: Whenever I hit a pothole in San Francisco, I think of the Board of Supervisors.

It's not because of the brain injury I suffered right around the time Ed Jew was experiencing his (who knew a soccer ball could cause such damage?). And funny how I still love the game.

But it definitely kept me out of politics — I have never given a speech without notes since, and even some of those are rambling.

No, my board flashbacks have more to do with the fact that the teeth-jarring rides I experience across town every day are a direct result of inaction by supervisors on the very things they are elected to deal with. The board instead spends most of its time trying to be a sort of UNICEF organization for San Francisco's most curious populace.

It's like making sure felons are provided "due process," especially if they are residents of other countries. Or making sure pot is legal — as if anyone in San Francisco treats it otherwise.

It's actually become a rare thing that the panel elected to pass laws in San Francisco does something other than approve symbolic resolutions. Perhaps that will explain how The City found itself in such a financial mess, with the board viewing our tax dollars as Monopoly money.

I can think of only one piece of legislation pushed forward in the past few months that actually might make a difference, and that's only because one supervisor was actually paying attention to a situation that a number of city agencies were not.

That would be **Supervisor Carmen Chu**, who took notice when vice cops from the Police Department busted a massage parlor in the Sunset district for fronting for a house of prostitution. Chu did not really have to look that hard: Parents from the elementary school across the street started staging public demonstrations outside the shop. But unlike many of her colleagues, she at least addressed a problem within her district's boundaries.

When Chu asked the City Attorney's Office to look at how massage parlors are licensed, she found it involved a bureaucratic labyrinth that contained more characters than Alice's looking glass.

The Health Department, which is in charge of licensing and inspecting massage businesses, said it was only concerned with health-code violations, not whether criminal acts might be performed on the premises. And no matter what the police did or how many times an establishment was cited, it was not up to the department to shut a parlor down.

The Planning Department's role in issuing conditional-use permits further complicated the process — another layer of agency involvement that showed just how loopholes operate.

“There just seemed to be a cycle, and I wanted to see if there was something that we could correct so that we could hold a business accountable for the activities that take place there,” Chu said.

Last week, she introduced legislation to amend health codes that would serve to shut down brothels fronting as massage parlors by increasing fines for illegal operators and allowing police reports to be used as ground for revoking licenses. Spa managers would also be required to allow a health inspector on the premises during operating hours.

Of course, since San Francisco only has one person currently doing such inspections, that portion of the legislation might not have as much immediate impact, but you get the general idea. It’s a common-sense approach that’s designed to put various city agencies on the same page to deal with a specific problem.

The Mayor’s Office has also made a contribution, offering a new ordinance that would increase civil and criminal penalties for rogue parlor operators employing unlicensed or underage masseuses.

In a city where many political leaders recently supported a measure to make prostitution legal, it’s possible the new legislation could face some hurdles. But assuming that reason prevails for a change, Chu’s proposal could begin to have an impact on a burgeoning neighborhood industry in which police estimate about one-third of San Francisco’s 150 massage parlors are really fronts for illegal sex trade.

One point of the legislation is also worth noting: It’s not focused on the women who are forced into prostitution, just on the operators themselves. So it takes aim at sex exploitation, just the kind of problem our sensitive supervisors like to give lip service to when the occasion presents itself. The occasion has arrived.

The board would do well to back the new regulations and take a stand against the sex-trafficking trade. If it helps them do the right thing, they can think of their gesture as symbolic. It will not fill those potholes, but you know that in dealing with San Francisco, it’s always going to be a bumpy ride.

http://www.sfexaminer.com/opinion/columns/ken_garcia/Supervisor-shows-up-colleagues-by-actually-doing-job-42569212.html