

Letters to the editor

October 31, 2007

County needs its own fire department

The loss of any homes in Rancho Bernardo should send shock waves to all San Diego residents. Rancho Bernardo is not Alpine, Ramona or Julian. It is an urban suburb with large boulevards, streets and set backs – it has never been a fire-prone area. Homes, possessions and family histories were destroyed because of one reason only – insufficient quantity of fire suppression equipment and personnel.

This is a victory, if you will, for those who espouse the concepts of no taxes, no government, no services.

FRANK FERRONE

El Cajon

In your editorial “Strong leadership” (Oct. 26) you noted that a crisis “brings out the worst” in some elected officials. I nodded and waited for you to condemn city attorney Mike Aguirre's irresponsible suggestion to evacuate the entire city. But instead you blasted Sen. Barbara Boxer for pointing out the obvious: our ability to respond to an emergency is diminished because the war in Iraq has depleted our National Guard.

Irresponsible? Cheap shot? Gov. Schwarzenegger said exactly the same thing last May. He worried about the personnel and especially the equipment that have been taken from California and sent to Iraq.

When he wanted National Guard troops for this crisis, he had to pull them off the international border. He couldn't simply activate the National Guard; too many of them are on duty already.

People can have different opinions about President Bush's decision to invade Iraq. They can debate the wisdom of using large numbers of Reserve and National Guard troops to augment the professional military in fighting that war. But it is not a matter of opinion that those decisions have left the states less able to respond to emergencies; it is simple fact. Don't ask us to pretend it isn't so.

MELANIE NICKEL

San Diego

I am a local Red Cross volunteer and live in the San Diego area. I have been turned away from two local shelters when I went to assist during our fire disaster. It was the local San Diego chapter that assigned me to these shelters.

When I arrived at my assignment, I was met with some not-so-friendly National Red Cross crews who were surprised at my arrival as I was a local. They told me I was not needed and to basically go away. All of the volunteers were from New Jersey, North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Pennsylvania and places nowhere near San Diego.

To me, it seems apparent that these volunteers have blocked some of the local volunteers' efforts to assist. In addition, these out-of-state volunteers may have been using precious hotel rooms that could be used by

evacuees.

Interpreters were also sent from out-of-state to translate Spanish, a language very well known right here. Did we really have to bring interpreters in from elsewhere?

MARCIA DAVIS
San Diego

On behalf of the San Diego Convention Center Corporation, our hearts and thoughts are with those who have suffered emotionally, and in many instances, great personal loss due to the devastating fires of the past week.

Some have questioned the Convention Center's decision to remain open for business throughout this crisis. It is important to remember a number of things – first, many of the people impacted so hard by these fires earn their living working in the tourism, convention and meeting industry. The conventions held in our building – contracted four to five years in advance – attract more than 600,000 out-of-town attendees annually. Hotels, restaurants, shops, museums, taxis, etc. depend on events in the Convention Center for their livelihood.

Events scheduled to occur in the Convention Center over the next 10 days will generate nearly \$2.5 million in tax revenues to the city of San Diego – revenue which helps pay for the very public safety and fire protection we needed more than ever last week.

Last week attendees at the American Society for Human Genetics convention shared hotel rooms to make room for evacuees, and medical personnel attending the show volunteered to work at shelters. The society also established a fund to assist with local relief efforts. This week, the Convention Center will host our largest convention all year when 32,000 attendees and exhibitors arrive for the Society of Neuroscience which begins on Saturday. The economic infusion of those attending this meeting will help San Diego's visitor industry recover from these fires.

CHERYL KENDRICK
Board Chair
San Diego Convention Center Corporation

Who says San Diego doesn't have four seasons? We have Tourist Season, Earthquake Season, Fire Season and Mudslide Season.

GREGG FERRY
Carlsbad

Sunday's editorial, "Curb housing?/Backcountry not alone in facing fire threat", omitted an interesting fact. All five residential communities survived unscathed, as you reported. However, all the residents of The Bridges, The Crosby, Cielo, Santa Fe Valley and 5S Ranch left their homes, under mandatory evacuation.

San Diego needs to take a hard look at the threatening water shortage crisis and the unacceptable lack of connector roads and public transportation before any jurisdiction, including the unincorporated areas under supervision of the Board of Supervisors, approves more new housing.

MARIANNE V. PLANK
Lake San Marcos

As I watched and read about our firefighters and law enforcement officers in the past week, I was amazed and awed. I wondered what the world would be like if everyone faced their jobs with the same dedication and passion as they have. The bravery and caring they demonstrated as they fought to save lives and possessions went way beyond their job descriptions. The entire world saw pictures of firefighters in the midst of raging fires

for days, and then trying to catch 15 to 20 minutes of sleep in all their gear on the pavement. How proud I am to be a San Diegan. Thank you to all who worked so hard for so long.

MARCIA SACHS

San Diego

So consumer safety doesn't need help?

Regarding "Consumer safety chief opposes bid to aid agency" (Oct. 30):

Once again, we see firsthand why this country is headed in the direction it is.

This administration has continually chosen to leave the protection of its citizens more and more to their own devices. This administration has no interest whatsoever in expanding protection to its citizens from increased product safety threats.

Congress offers a bill that would increase personnel to a severely understaffed department, increase penalties for company criminal safety violations, make it easier for the government to make public reports of faulty products, protect industry whistle-blowers and prosecute executives of companies that willfully violate laws.

What governmental organization wouldn't want these increased powers to protect its citizens? The Bush administration, that's who.

HAROLD SEGAL

San Diego

South Bay Expressway and meeting standards

Regarding "Rush to open / Toll road fails environmental, safety standards" (Editorial, Oct. 29):

South Bay Expressway is committed to building a first class road, which will deliver significant benefits to the entire South Bay region. Our team has worked diligently over the last four years to ensure we deliver a project that not only meets the needs of our customers, but also meets safety and environmental standards. South Bay Expressway has spent an unparalleled \$20 million on the environment and has received awards for its environmental program, including recent honors from the Federal Highway Administration as an Exemplary Ecosystem Initiative and from the Association of Environmental Professions for our environmental training program.

We have been working diligently with Caltrans to ensure that we have all the necessary approvals for opening South Bay Expressway. We invited the Regional Water Quality Control Board to tour our project in September and at that time we received their input. We're now implementing their recommendations.

The safety of our customers is our number one priority, and we take the publication of any news article or editorial questioning this very seriously. This is a hallmark project for the region, and the community has waited a long time for South Bay Expressway to open. Rest assured that when we open on Nov. 19, we will deliver a first class, environmentally responsible, safe expressway.

GREG HULSIZER

Chief Executive Officer

South Bay Expressway

Otay Mesa

"Rush to open" seems itself to be too quick to judge the South Bay Expressway, making some very strong

accusations which might be misunderstood by the public.

For those in South San Diego – including Otay Mesa – the opening of the South Bay Expressway next month means saving tens of thousands of workers significant commuter time each day, reducing the idling and air pollution of thousands of vehicles stuck in traffic both in Otay Mesa and along Interstate 805, and creating a much better safety situation for many Otay Mesa workers and residents.

The editorial rightly points out that SR-125's “importance can hardly be overstated,” and that it is important for Otay Mesa's international trade and a future East Otay Mesa commercial crossing. That is true. However, implying that “potential safety violations” exist seems to both go beyond the facts and ignores traffic studies by engineering professionals not only at Caltrans, but by SANDAG as well.

Speaking for myself and hundreds of our members, I'm confident that we'll be “rushing” to try out the South Bay Expressway when it opens on Nov. 19.

ALEJANDRA MIER y TERAN
Executive Director
Otay Mesa Chamber of Commerce

The Union-Tribune's editorial notes with dismay that the South Bay toll road is not only behind schedule, but also has failed to meet environmental conditions for its opening. Trust me, that won't be their only failure. I live in San Clemente and we've been exposed to the promises, excuses, shuckin' and jivin' from our toll way agency for decades. You'll discover the real disappointments soon enough.

Twenty-five percent of Interstate 805's traffic to be diverted? No way. Orange County Transportation Authority's figures prove that our toll roads carry at most 20 percent of any parallel freeway's volume – and that only along small, specific sections. Even it takes longer to get there, San Diego drivers will be asking themselves why should they cough up \$7.50 – soon go higher, trust me – for a round trip. I-805 is only 5 miles farther.

I predict South Bay Expressway will miss its revenue projections. You'll be looking at tax subsidies of their tolls just as we are now, and asking yourselves, “Why didn't we make the developers pay the arterials in the first place?”

PETE VAN NUYS
San Clemente

An editorial Oct. 29 provided an opinion based on outdated information questioning the safety of the South Bay Expressway (state Route 125 South).

It should be simply understood that this highly anticipated toll road project is still under construction, and in the end will have achieved a series of comprehensive checks and balances to make sure it surpasses all safety and environmental compliances when it opens on Nov. 19.

The California Department of Transportation has oversight on this public-private partnership, and our role is simple: to provide the people of the state of California with a safe, first-rate, highly functional return on their investment. This project had input from various controlling agencies, including the Regional Water Quality Control Board, and is implementing the requirements. This type of critical input was not ignored.

Caltrans has extensive professional expertise in the area of water quality and recently earned the Environmental Protection Agency's 2007 Clean Water Act Recognition for Stormwater Management.

Caltrans and our partners at South Bay Expressway will not allow the toll road to open until we are 100 percent

satisfied it is safe. There are still some construction work and inspections ahead of us; however, your readers and the customers who will use this expressway can rest assured that it will have surpassed all the highest safety standards when opening day comes – or it will not open. It's that simple.

PEDRO ORSO-DELGADO
District Director
California Department of Transportation

Your editorial and environmental criticisms about state Route 125 seemed out of place as I sat in traffic on Monday evening trying to drive from Otay Mesa to El Cajon. “Rushing” along with hundreds (thousands?) of other people in their cars and trucks on the only egress out of Otay, Otay Mesa Road, it took more than 20 minutes to go three miles – all of our vehicles, cars and semi-trucks, putting out who-knows-how-much air pollution into our environment.

Worrying about landscaping and water runoff in a drought-stricken region, when we in Otay Mesa and South Bay suffer some of the worst particulate and emission pollution in the county, is a bit hard to comprehend for those of us who deal with this daily. There's nothing more “environmentally” needed (and safety-oriented) than getting state Route 125 open.

STEPHEN GROSS
Otay Mesa

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