



WILL ROGERS,
Columnist
www.WillRogersHome.com

THEY ELECTED WHO?

April 5, 2007

It was early in the candidate forum sponsored by the Northwest Glendale Homeowners Association, and as moderator I was guiding candidates and the packed house into the “Lightning Round.” It’s a feature I invented for NWGHA forums a little more than 10 years ago, and have expanded to others since - always very popular with audiences, and disdained by most candidates. In short, asked a simple question, candidates are allowed only to answer “yes” or “no.” They do this simultaneously by holding up cards printed with the appropriate answer.

Some candidates decline to answer some questions. Others try to blurt out explanations or qualifications, which I drown out by moving to the next question. More experienced candidates know enough to give the most appropriate answer, and then use some of their time in subsequent rounds to provide any follow-up remarks appropriate to the issue.

At this year’s NWGHA forum, the first Yes/No question – one composed by the association’s board members - was “Do you favor a railroad crossing at Pelanconi?” It was a reference to a 2005 proposal to allow traffic between Glendale and Los Angeles on a small street in south Glendale. Once advocated by a city council majority, a bloc that even fired two council appointees because they publicly opposed the idea, later study appeared to kill the plan.

While most candidates at the forum raised their answer cards, one loudly said “What?” I looked over, and councilman Rafi Manoukian, an incumbent seeking reelection, looked at me and said with a shrug, “What crossing? There isn’t one.” I declined to provide more information or explanation and moved on. I had no concern that Manoukian didn’t know what I was referring to. It appeared to me that, since there is no crossing today, he was asserting THAT should stand for his answer.

The second question in the series asked for promises not to run for an office that would require leaving the council early. The other candidates held up their answers, and everyone waited a moment for Manoukian. He held up a card on which he’d scrawled “Maybe.” The third question asked about support for a recent proposal to close fire stations at night, staffing them only with paramedics. Manoukian kept his hands in his lap and asked somewhat belligerently, “Whose proposal? Who proposed that?”

And so it went through the rest of the questions, with Manoukian becoming more difficult with each, and, to my mind, more belligerent. To be sure, some of the questions confused or surprised other candidates. But Manoukian seemed to have an argument with most of the questions posed by voters who'd invited him to tell them where he stands.

That attitude was rolling through my mind in the hours after Manoukian lost his bid for reelection in Tuesday's election. It occurred to me we saw a similar attitude from him at a forum two weeks earlier, an irritation with those who disagreed with him so naked that tensions grew and, at the forum for the Chevy Chase Estates Association, audience members had to be scolded for heckling him.



Councilman Rafi Manoukian: Irked, annoyed, out of office.

I can't claim I disagreed with many of Manoukian's arguments, or that I didn't at least understand his perspective on others. But in retrospect, I have no trouble understanding how Manoukian's attitude was perceived as contempt.

After the NWGHA forum an irritated member of the audience told me he's convinced that, especially when the citizens mass in sufficient numbers, "Manoukian will almost always take the hint and do the right thing [on the city council]. But he really pissed all over us tonight, didn't he?"

Added to those experiences was, of course, the now infamous fiasco that saw Manoukian skip a March 13 city council study session to discuss a controversial new ordinance so that he could attend a local Democratic Party meeting. The group's board had chosen to endorse two of Manoukian's challengers. He went to the membership meeting to argue for overturning the decision.

The councilman was ultimately successful in those machinations, and won the endorsement. But because the council fell short of a quorum in his absence, the session was cancelled, and citizens who'd turned up to talk about the proposed "View Ordinance" were sent home. Even the Glendale News-Press subsequently reported on the cancellation, and so word of the choice Manoukian made spread even further.

When I talked to Manoukian about the episode, he told me he'd had to go "to fight for the endorsement." He said it with the same matter-of-factness that he might have said he went into a burning building to rescue a child. There was no sign of regret, or any hint that, looking back, he wished things had gone otherwise. Not so much as a wry wince or grimace that might say, "That one bit me in the butt."

I suspect Manoukian's recent attitude, plus the fracturing of his Armenian community base among so many other Armenian candidates, led to his loss. It's also possible that Manoukian's record-breaking success at fundraising – his campaign war chest may reach \$250,000 when all the receipts are in – created some additional resentment or mistrust in the community. Campaign dollars make it possible to reach the community, build name recognition and tout platforms. But in municipal races, I believe there is sometimes a pushback effect.

Local voters have said to me of wealthy candidates, "If he has THAT much money supporting him, chances are that he isn't good for ME." But I don't claim to know of any means of measuring that potential impact.

On the other side of the election results coin, of course, is trying to figure out how in the hell incumbent Dave Weaver managed to win reelection.

That challenger John Drayman won with more than 23% of the ballots, 2,000 more votes than Weaver, is both testimony to Drayman, and evidence of the electorate's lack of satisfaction with the status quo. Save for principles like good government, preserving city services and other "apple pie" slogans, the two share nothing in common.

Weaver's three terms in office to date have been a seemingly endless series of train wrecks. Take a gander at the columns below this one for just a small sampling of the fixes Weaver has gotten himself into over just the last two years. I mean, voters reelected the guy who asked city staff to look into a means to provide council members lifetime health insurance, even after they've left office?



Councilman Dave Weaver: A columnist's best friend?

Voters reelected to a fourth term the man who has been caught in lies about the activities and finances of his beloved "Dreaming of Roses" organization for so many years that he's recently had enough time to actually achieve some of the accomplishments he falsely claimed in his second term? The guy who viscously attacked from the dais critics of what used to be the city's animal shelter, this right up until the day investigators revealed the critics only knew the tip of the iceberg? Would someone reelect the man who took loans without reporting them as required by law, and who then gave city appointments to his creditors? Could someone fill in a box to support an official revealed to have turned over the city's police department and other city services to a pal's for-profit beauty pageant for years running? The guy

whose biggest idea has been to erect a large "Glendale" sign on the hillsides was reelected? Would someone reelect the guy who has repeatedly pursued appointments and raises because he says he really needs the money? Isn't this

the guy who has boasted to us for years about his background as an engineer giving him special insight into the city's building projects to protect taxpayers, but when the largest of those - the new police headquarters building - ends up going millions over budget, years past due and leads to lawsuits, he's about the only person NOT at fault? The only candidate I can remember from over the decades who was running WHILE waiting to hear his punishment from state authorities looking into his improper acceptance and reporting of cash in a previous election - THAT'S the guy who won?

The mind runs amok with all the possible comparisons. It's like reelecting Marion Barry to Washington, D.C.'s city council. Oh, that did happen. It's like sending the Army Corps of Engineers in to assess and repair the levees in New Orleans that were shoddily built by the Army Corps of Engineers! Oh, that did happen. But still, Weaver back to the council?

In recent weeks I've met with several groups of Glendalians to talk about current events and the upcoming election, and in virtually every instance there were one or two at the table who told me they had friends or neighbors who had pledged they'd continue to support Weaver solely because he's not Armenian. Of course, literally every one also denied harboring the sentiment themselves.

"There's no question part of it is racism," one resident told me as we sat at a local country club overlooking the course. "These are old-timers who've lived here their whole lives. Weaver and Drayman are going to get votes from some of my neighbors only because their names don't end in I-A-N."

Another longtime resident, one who so vehemently disparaged the point of view that she had heads turning in the restaurant where we met, told me many of her friends and neighbors talk the same way.

"That's the way they think!" she said. "They are getting out there and getting active because they see that most of the candidates this year have 'foreign-sounding' names or accents, and they're fighting to keep this the Glendale they remember in 1970."

It's no reflection on Weaver if racism drives some segment of his base of supporters, and I've never seen or heard of him doing anything to exploit such tendencies. Indeed, I haven't even heard an unfounded accusation of racism leveled against him, and this a guy who has been accused of a lot of things! But it would be ironic if one flaw the guy has never had, bigotry, played a role in his victory.

Ultimately, I suspect that Weaver was the largest beneficiary of Manoukian's missteps. When one considers the tier of candidates who followed behind the leading trio of Drayman, Manoukian and Weaver, there isn't another to whom

one's attention naturally falls, thus prompting an "Aha! That's who I'll support instead!"

In no particular order, Herbert Molano carried the baggage of a gadfly. (I happen to believe many of his arguments are substantive, but that doesn't overwhelm the common perceptions.) Indeed, he was the only candidate to support the proposal for closing fire stations, revealing just how far out of Glendale's mainstream his thinking can be.

Chahé Keuroghelian kept having to answer questions about his arrest and conviction on a weapons charge, and about his having been fired from the police department. Vrej Agajanian's greatest and most frequent boast was of being a cable television talk show host, and his sweeping accusations were rarely followed by well-organized details. As I've noted elsewhere, I thought Lenore Solis was a terrific candidate for all the conventional reasons, but she had so little base and virtually no money that no one had heard of her by election day.

The best I can do is imagine I'm an established, active voter in Glendale who might be willing to support a proven and stable leader such as Manoukian. If he scares us off or offends us in the final weeks before election day, there is no obvious back-up pick for me and others like me to flock around.

So, I suspect those voters who were effectively turned away did just as some of the Armenian community did, fracturing their votes among players on the bottom of the card, this while others held their noses and picked Weaver.

Hey, it's all good news for me. I'll look forward to seeing how Drayman makes good on his promises to change things in Glendale, this as he goes from being one man with a microphone, to one of five at a dais. And goodness knows Weaver is likely to keep me busy in the coming four years, protecting my readers from those rambling columns that focus on my home improvement skills when the stories are lacking.

Finally, of course, I don't live in Glendale. So I can afford to be entertained.
