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A Bargain Nobody Likes

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Yesterday former Burbank city council member Stacey Murphy pleaded guilty to charges she possessed cocaine and endangered the safety of her 12 year old son by allowing unsecured handguns and ammunition to be stored where he had easy access. In exchange for her plea, and as had been predicted by many since she was first arrested on July 13, the 47 year old Murphy will be allowed to avoid jail by taking a six-week parenting class and entering a drug program. By the same token, the deal allows prosecutors to avoid having their accusations tested against Murphy's defense in a trial.

According to Los Angeles County prosecutors, if Murphy fails to complete the programs or is arrested on new charges while on probation, the mother of three could face more than three years in state prison.

The sentencing also included a 5 year period of supervised probation. Under terms of a state proposition approved by voters last year that favors treatment for nonviolent drug offenders, and once Murphy has completed the parenting and drug program and a portion of her probation, she will be entitled to ask the court to dismiss the charges from her record and release her from probation.

Widespread predictions that Murphy's sentence might also include some community service requirements proved wrong, and since her arrest Murphy has virtually vanished from the social and community service circles she once traveled in on a daily basis as a council member and longtime, prominent, active member of the community.

Sources in law enforcement and active in the case who asked not to be named noted the lengthy period of probation imposed on Murphy, opining that typical terms of probation would normally run for only 18 months to three years. "Even if she can clean up her record and lose the court supervised probation a year and a half from now, today that 5 year term lets the prosecutors say they were extra tough," one source said. "It's there to appease cops who whine that she didn't cooperate, and anyone else who complains they went easy on a community leader."

"There won't be headlines if she's released from probation, and the prosecutors know that as well as Murphy and her attorney do," another source said.

Murphy, who has declined to speak with me since the day I published a call for her resignation, did resign from office on August 29. She's remained silent on the race now underway to replace her on the council, an election that, as a felon, she won't be allowed to vote in.

Though drug testing of council members has been advocated by most of today's candidates, Murphy's name and council priorities have gone virtually unmentioned through the brief campaigns. One of the five candidates, however, has criticized one of his competitors for having worked on Murphy's reelection campaign.

According to friends of Murphy's who also insisted they not be identified, today the former council woman continues to maintain she is the victim of a former boyfriend she trusted when he claimed to have turned over a new leaf several years into their relationship. That boyfriend, former cab company owner Scott Schaffer, was arrested on charges of trading his guns with members of a notorious street gang for their drugs.

Schaffer was arrested after police searched his Glendale home, also on July 13. According to police and prosecutors, during questioning Schaffer claimed to have used drugs with Murphy and said he'd left some of his guns at her home. That prompted a search warrant for Murphy's Burbank home, the discovery of three handguns in her garage and cocaine in her bedroom closet, and then Murphy's arrest.

In his own deal, Schaffer has already pleaded guilty to one count of trading guns for cocaine. Currently free on bail, he's due to be sentenced in June to five years in federal prison.