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PLAYING CATCH-UP IN BURBANK

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I've been swamped this summer and largely off-line. As promised, here's my attempt to "catch-up" on a few matters that popped up in my absence.

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A version of the story that swept Burbank last year is coming to a small screen near you. CourtTV is developing a new series that purports to look at the "real people" behind scandalous crimes. The story of former council member Stacey Murphy is among those that will be featured.

For those who've already forgotten, almost exactly one year ago Scott Schaffer, then-boyfriend of then-councilwoman Murphy, was arrested for trading handguns for cocaine. The swap took place in two steps in a Toluca Lake neighborhood sports bar characterized by police as a gang hangout, and the transaction involved a member of the "Vineland Boyz." A member of that gang has been accused of killing Burbank police officer Matthew Pavelka in Nov. 2003.

During questioning Schaffer reportedly told police he'd left some cocaine at Murphy's Burbank home, and that he'd also left behind some of the several handguns he owned. A search warrant was served later that same day and Murphy was promptly charged with possession of cocaine. Because Schaffer's handguns were left unsecured in her garage, she was also charged with endangering her 12 year old son.



Former Burbank Council Member Stacey Murphy.

The weapons found in the homes of Schaffer and Murphy were legally owned and registered, but Schaffer didn't have a permit to sell guns. Of course, there is no such thing as a permit to trade guns for a bundle of cocaine. Moreover, the purported "trade" wasn't a single transaction. On one occasion Schaffer took cocaine from someone at the bar, on a separate occasion some number of days or weeks later, Schaffer handed over two guns. It's debated among the various parties and police as to whether that was a "drugs for guns" deal.

For more details on the arrests and aftermath, which included guilty pleas and Murphy's resignation from the council, **SCROLL DOWN** to last year's columns,

and consult the "PREVIOUS COLUMNS" page. But among those who only heard bits and pieces of the tale, almost exclusively from the police department, many believed either that Schaffer and Murphy provided the Vineland Boyz with the very weapon ultimately used to kill Pavelka, or at least that they were jointly and knowingly trading guns for drugs with the gang that killed a Burbank cop.

Neither story was true. Murphy wasn't directly involved in the episode that saw Schaffer take cocaine from a gang member, or the later episode that saw him turnover guns to the gang member. Even the police department has conceded these points, though reluctantly, something like President Bush's infrequent, mumbled admissions that Sadaam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11, and that the promised weapons of mass destruction haven't been found in Iraq.

Police say Schaffer told them Murphy knew all about his transactions. Schaffer says police have grossly mischaracterized what did happen and what he's said, and Murphy says she didn't know. All of the players have their own agendas, and there's little reason to find any one of them more credible than another.

Alas, it seems the perspective foisted upon CourtTV viewers will be that fostered by those most ignorant of the facts, or immune to them. As pitched to me by a producer for CourtTV, the story for Murphy's episode will be a look into the "real person behind the woman who traded guns for drugs with the same gang that killed one of her city's police officers."

I won't defend Murphy or Schaffer on what they did do, and this space was the first outlet to publicly call for Murphy to resign her office. But I have no trouble denigrating the ludicrous inventions that have sprung up around the truth, and the self-serving embellishments and speculation promoted by the police.



Burbank Police Department Headquarters, "Fair and Balanced?"

The producer who asked if I'd sit for an interview explained that a "balanced" array of interview subjects had already committed to participate. Those are Tom Hoefel, Burbank's Chief of Police, the Lt. in charge of the investigation, one of the prosecutors and Matthew Pavelka's father. Please note, I didn't say these are AMONG the subjects to be interviewed – this was almost the entire list at the time.

Tim Murphy, Stacey Murphy's ex-husband and himself a former Burbank council member, was a potential interviewee. But he later begged off. I was also told some friends of Murphy's might participate if they could be seen only in silhouette with their voices disguised. Apparently there are some concerns that local police won't be happy if anyone calls into question the façade they've constructed.

The father of a cop gunned down by gang scum will have some insight into the “real person” behind Stacey Murphy? Why do I suspect Hoefel won’t be repeating for CourtTV’s cameras the words he spoke at Pavelka’s funeral, two years before Murphy’s arrest? It was a series of funny stories about how the murdered officer cut corners, skirted policy and generally acted like a cowboy, apparently surprised he still qualified for the department. The touching and very human tale told then may detract a bit from the story crafted since.

I said I’d consider being interviewed by the show, but told the producer that tying Murphy to the heinous murder of a cop is a ludicrous distortion, and grossly unfair to the whole truth. They seemed to lose interest in hearing from me.

I predict a hanging party, one hosted by CourtTV.

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Speaking of council members and drugs, voluntary drug testing is now in effect for Burbank council members, the aftermath of a second council member in 10 years having been linked to cocaine.



Councilman David Gordon (r) - a "thumbs up" for drug testing council members.

The program approved in July falls far short of what newby council member David Gordon pledged he would demand. But even he knew throughout his campaign that federal law flatly prohibits the mandatory testing he promised to see instituted. Gordon wasn’t big on discussing that reality in the midst of making his promises to voters.

For those hoping for definitive and compulsory tests, the program approved falls far short. Aside from countless other loopholes, existing law prohibits City Hall from releasing the results of testing done without the permission of the official(s) tested, or even announcing whether a council member showed up for the test.

The council voted to initiate “voluntary” tests for two members chosen at random on council meeting days every 60 days, and the program aspires to see each council member tested once each year. Council members will be notified by 11am on the morning of a test if they are among the two officials selected for that day.

Once the plan was approved, I gather I’m not the only one who read reported comments of Burbank Mayor Todd Campbell and interpreted them as his prediction he’ll probably be “out of town” when his turn for a test rolls around.

This is the guy who continues to remain silent and refuses to answer questions about police responding to a domestic abuse call from his then-fiancé in December. As residents haven't pressed him on the episode – and he's even since come up with yet another "fiancé," his third or fourth since he was elected in 2003 - it seems unlikely he'll fret over being unavailable for drug tests.



Todd "What, me worry?" Campbell - Councilman and serial fiancée.

When Gordon's time for a reelection race comes, I suppose we can anticipate his literature will boast all of his test results have come up "clean." It sets a pretty low bar for council accomplishments, but it's one most of the current council just might be able to vault.

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Over the last decade, literally every time an airline operating out of Bob Hope Airport has announced new flights, a familiar band loudly declared the additions are proof of a secret plot in City Hall to expand airport operations. They've stood at council meetings and berated officials for "allowing" the new flights. Just as Humphrey Bogart's character once explained with "geometric logic" the disappearance of strawberries from the galley, the "activists" explain to the public how the new flights fit into the city's secret scheme.



Scene of the crime? Bob Hope Airport.

Highlighting the years-long record of hypocrisy employed by this bunch, when airlines closed local operations, or eliminated flights, the gadflies have yet to salute city officials for boldly forcing airlines to reduce their imposition of noise, pollution and traffic on the city.

The latest examples were seen in recent announcements from JetBlue, first that the airline was adding flights to the east coast, and months later that it's abandoning flights out of BUR direct to Orlando. The former prompted the usual suspects to denounce officials for secretly promoting the expanded schedule, and/or for failing to somehow block it. The latter announcement, made in July, was greeted with utter silence.

That last, of course, makes sense. The city council holds no sway over the airlines, and cannot claim credit for one of them axing a route. Indeed, the airport itself can't compel airlines to reduce flights, as it has been well established over the years that the Airport Authority, the panel overseeing airport operations, can't legally refuse to sign leases or provide access to facilities it controls. Both have

been tactics considered over the years to provide some protection for local residents, but a variety of lawyers and aviation experts have unequivocally agreed federal law prohibits them.

Of course, pointing out the record of hypocrisy leads to my being identified as a coconspirator, notwithstanding authorship for well over a decade of headline-grabbing investigative reports busting the airport officials and City Hall on egregious sins they HAVE committed. Those realities aren't convenient to the personalities who have been busy building political machines premised almost entirely upon generating fear among voters who definitely hate jet noise, but who remain largely ignorant of City Hall, the airport, federal and state laws, and myriad other important facets of hideously complicated issues they simplify for craven political purposes.

So, just this once, I salute the all-powerful Burbank City Council for forcing the mighty JetBlue to discontinue flights to Orlando, thus providing respite to Burbank residents besieged by jet noise, jet pollution and traffic. Hell, it makes as much sense (none) as blaming them when new carriers or flights are added.

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I've been intrigued by recent publicity out of Warner Bros. promoting a survey of Burbank residents that the firm recently commissioned. In response to the survey revealing many residents are unsure what's going on over at the Warner Bros. lots, the studio has initiated a broad array of informational programs, a newsletter, apprenticeship programs, a web site, community meetings and more.

Perhaps my work as an actor has given me some insight not available to many. But I was surprised to learn the studio's survey revealed a lot of Burbankers don't know what work and how much of it is underway right down Hollywood Way. So, the studio is making a huge push to make sure we're more aware of our successful neighbor.

For the suspicious among you – including myself – the studio's sweeping "Master Plan" allowing vast expansion was approved in the 1990's, and very little of the now-approved expansion has ever taken place. In short, the PR push doesn't appear to be tied to the studio being on the brink of asking permission to impose some imposing new horror on residents. Warner Bros. can already do much more than it has, and without asking further permission.

Back to the survey conducted in Sept. 2005, especially intriguing to me is a comparison of the WB results with those of another survey done by the city in

2001. Apparently by something of a coincidence, the two asked many similar questions, and some surprising shifts arose in the intervening years.

Among the most significant, in 2001 the city's survey asked residents to list what they thought were the greatest challenges facing Burbank. Not surprisingly, the largest share, 34%, described efforts to battle airport expansion as the city's greatest challenge. No other concern came even close to that prominence.

Asked the same question in 2005 by the firm hired by Warner Bros., only 7% cited worry over airport expansion.

Conversely, in 2001 just 5% of those surveyed cited traffic congestion as a major concern. In the 2005 survey, 24% of the Burbank residents surveyed cited traffic congestion. As was seen with airport concerns in 2001, no other issue even approached the level of concern generated by traffic congestion.

For what it's worth, and "As if you had asked."
