

UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL

## Just who's 'sleazy'?

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### National City mayor can't handle the truth

August 31, 2007

Next year, California voters likely will be asked to choose between two rival initiatives limiting the use of eminent domain – the procedure through which governments seize private property, after paying fair compensation, for projects meant to benefit the public.

The squabbling between the two sides is already intense. The measure pushed by local governments has been denounced as a sham reform that would continue to allow abuse of eminent domain. The Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association's proposal has been blasted as so radical it would prevent the seizure of land for badly needed water projects.

We reserve judgment for now on the merits of each initiative. But what's going on in National City certainly gives credence to a central argument of those in the Howard Jarvis camp: that strong restrictions are needed given local officials' bullying, deceptiveness and all-around bad faith.

We refer to National City Mayor Ron Morrison's chronic dishonesty about the city's threat to seize the Community Youth Athletic Center if its owner wouldn't sell out to a well-connected local developer who sought to build a big housing and retail project. Yesterday's Union-Tribune reported that the developer had decided to pursue his project without acquiring the youth center site.

In the article, Morrison denounced the criticism that had come National City's way over its attempts to intimidate the youth center into selling out – and asserted yet again that the center has “never been threatened with eminent domain.”

But on Feb. 28, 2005, a city official wrote to warn Clemente Casillas, president of the youth center, that if he didn't agree to sell, the Community Development Commission “could take possession of your property after payment of fair market value.” Morrison's name was on the letterhead of the letter. Two other letters that year from the developer's lawyer to Casillas – both CC'd to National City – warned his land could be forcibly acquired by the city if he didn't sell.

That only one of these three letters mentioned “eminent domain” specifically is irrelevant to the fact that all are obvious threats to use eminent domain. For Morrison to insist otherwise is insulting.

What's additionally appalling is that the National City mayor somehow thinks he holds the moral high ground on the issue. He ripped Sports Illustrated columnist Rick Reilly for engaging in “sleazy journalism” for saying an eminent domain threat had been made.

But such a threat was made, Mr. Mayor. It's right there in the letters. The only thing sleazy here is your attempt to rewrite history.

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