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Home > Opinion > Slop

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'Corrupt' Definition

You'll remember [my problems with City Attorney Mike Aguirre's accusations](#) last week that there was corruption in the Mayor's Office.

Environmental attorney Cory Briggs said he didn't want to defend Aguirre's statements but he had a problem with me saying that you can't just call someone corrupt.

As someone who often finds himself accusing public officials of "corruption," I was troubled by your commentary last week about Mike Aguirre's use of the word...

"Corruption" has many meanings, and it does not necessarily impute criminal conduct. My computer disks become "corrupt," but they haven't broken any laws.

When I use the word, I usually mean something stronger than not working correctly (worse than malfunctioning computer disks) but short of criminal conduct; in fact, I don't even know the legal standard for criminal corruption and would not make a legal accusation without knowing the standard. I do know, however, that the problems at city hall are substantial and that the leaders frequently fail to strive to do what's in the public's best interest -- that is, when they're not affirmatively trying to subvert the public interest to the private interests of developers and other campaign contributors. Given that our leaders are charged with doing what is in the public's best interest, the "corrupt" label is perfectly appropriate when the wrongdoing is substantial.

I like Cory but I have to disagree.

The word "corrupt" in this city at this time directed at specific high-ranking city officials does not have benign implications.

Aguirre was accusing people of crimes. He said city officials had willfully disregarded federal and state laws. It's in that context that he accused them of being "corrupt." When you accuse someone of being corrupt after saying they should be investigated by the U.S. attorney, you are saying that they engaged in something along the lines of bribery, honest-services fraud or one of the other crimes commonly associated with corrupt public officials.

There's really no other way to interpret it.

And I still think it's reckless. The Sunroad project does appear to have progressed

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with disregard for warnings from the Federal Aviation Administration and CalTrans. The city may indeed have screwed up. But was it a corrupt dealing? It's hardly to a point where that's a safe allegation.

By the way, the Mayor's Office [just released a timeline](#) of what it says occurred with the Sunroad construction near Montgomery Field. According to it, the City Attorney's Office had a lawyer who, beginning in June, was elbow deep in the whole issue.

Does that mean he was corrupt too?

-- [SCOTT LEWIS](#)

Wednesday, January 31, 2007 11:19 AM PST



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