

SEARCH Choose Category

- Friday
- »Next Story»
- News
- Local News
- Opinion
- Business
- Sports
- Currents Weekend
- Front Page (PDF)
- The Last Week
- Sunday
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Weekly Sections
- Books
- Personal Tech
- Family
- Food
- Health
- Home
- Homescape
- Insight
- InStyle
- Night & Day
- Street
- Sunday Arts
- Travel
- Quest
- Wheels

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UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL

A corrupt mayor?

Aguirre crosses line in assault on Sanders

June 15, 2007

After 26 years on the San Diego police force and five more running the United Way and the American Red Cross, is Mayor Jerry Sanders "corrupt"? Did he grant improper "favors" to a campaign contributor and misuse public funds "for the private benefit" of the contributor?

These incendiary charges, and many others, are leveled against Sanders on the opposite page in a letter from City Attorney Mike Aguirre. The accusations are indeed serious – too serious to allow them to pass unchallenged.

Aguirre's record of conjuring up conspiracies and corrupt dealings among anyone who dares to oppose him tempts us to dismiss his latest assault as just more palaver. But if, in fact, Aguirre's charges were substantiated, Mayor Sanders could land behind bars. This is why the city attorney's reckless and unfounded assertions must be addressed.

We stipulate from the outset that Sanders has grossly mishandled the Sunroad Enterprises fiasco. As San Diego's first "strong mayor" in modern times, he must take responsibility for the city's having issued a building permit for a structure near Montgomery Field that exceeded the Federal Aviation Administration's height limit by 20 feet. To his credit, Sanders has done that, although belatedly, and vowed that the top 20 feet of the building will be removed.

The mayor's position is not exactly welcome news to Sunroad owner Aaron Feldman, who stands to lose millions of dollars if his office tower is reduced in height. Yet Aguirre twists this situation in a bid to portray Sanders as secretly doing Feldman's bidding at taxpayers' expense and then engaging in "a campaign of delay, deny and deceive."

As is typical, the city attorney offers no corroboration for his wild claims. But the fact that Feldman hosted a 2005 campaign fundraiser for Sanders is proof enough for Aguirre that the mayor is engaged in a "corrupt course of action" on Feldman's behalf.

Such groundless character assassination is Aguirre's stock in trade. Among the many other opponents whom he has similarly branded are Sheriff Bill Kolender, District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis, Police Chief William Lansdowne and Attorney General Jerry Brown. After a series of losses in San Diego Superior Court, Aguirre even has suggested the judiciary is part of the conspiracy against him.

The serious mistakes that have occurred on Sanders' watch do not make him "corrupt." Accepting legal campaign contributions – with a very low limit of \$300 per contributor – does not make Sanders "corrupt." Indeed, nothing in Sanders' long record of public service suggests he is anything other than a man of integrity.

Aguirre's feverish attempt to portray Sanders as "corrupt" serves to poison San Diego's civic discourse. But his irresponsible campaign is a reflection of the city attorney's character, not that of the mayor.

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