

## Running in circles after calls to City Hall

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[Military](#)

[Politics](#)

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[Solutions](#)

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In my lifetime, machines have taken over hundreds of jobs that once were ably performed by humans.

The argument for machines is that they're cheaper and more productive. They don't call in sick, talk back, or steal those sticky notepads from the supply room.

Call me a romantic, but I think there are tasks where no machine can match good-old human ingenuity. Jerking me around is one of them.

Case in point: Last week, I found myself trapped in two telephone loops, first with a machine and then with a human.

The machine was a San Diego City Hall voice-mail program. The human was Fred Sainz, spokesman for Mayor Jerry Sanders.

It was no contest. Sainz outperformed the machine in every way.

This all began when I telephoned a vacationing city official and was unwittingly plunged into voice-mail purgatory.

Her greeting said she would be back in a week, and instructed me to "please dial zero and someone will be able to help you." So I did. "Someone will be with you shortly," I was told.

After three rings, a pleasant female voice welcomed me to "Octel voice information processing." I was told to enter the number I was calling, or press pound for my mailbox. I did nothing. The voice returned: "If you don't have a touch-tone phone, or you require assistance, please stay on the line."

I stayed on the line.

Violins played.

I heard three rings, and then the pleasant female voice welcomed me to "Octel voice information processing."

And so it went: The three rings, the pleasant voice, the classical music. Again and again.

Figuring someone would pick up sooner or later – this was City Hall, after all – I put the call on speaker and answered some e-mail. Then I got up to use the restroom. On the way, I remembered a meeting I needed to attend, and forgetting about the call, I headed to the meeting.

When I returned to my desk 90 minutes later, I was surprised to hear classical music playing. That's odd, I thought. Then I heard three rings, and the pleasant female voice.

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Are you going to bring your dog to work on Friday, June 22? SignOnSanDiego is looking for businesses in San Diego where pets will be welcomed that day for a video feature. Call or e-mail videographer Yvette De La Garza at (619) 718-5287 or [yvette.delagarza@uniontrib.com](mailto:yvette.delagarza@uniontrib.com).

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I had been on hold for an hour and 48 minutes, more than 125 trips through the loop. I hung up after passing the two-hour mark. Seeing the string of zeroes appear on the phone display reminded me of watching the odometer turn in my father's Impala. The last words I heard: "Please stay on the line."

Not bad – for a machine.

Later I called Sainz to ask him about Ted Sexton. He's the airport official helping the city resolve the Federal Aviation Administration's objections to the too-tall Sunroad building near Montgomery Field.

I wanted to know why Sainz and Sanders had denied any connection between Sexton and the Sunroad issue just 10 days ago – before we knew that Sexton was not only chin-deep in Sunroad matters, but was pursuing solutions in conflict with Sanders's stated position that the building's height has to be reduced.

I found myself unwittingly stuck in another sound loop – "unwittingly" being a frequent *modus operandi* of mine lately.

Sainz told me that Sunroad was just one of Sexton's responsibilities, and that it was "being taken out of context."

Even if that was true, I asked Sainz, why did you produce a mayoral Fact Sheet that declared, "Mr. Sexton was not brought on board to manage the Sunroad building issue." Wasn't that flatly untrue?

"Why has the parsing of these words become such an incredibly interesting parlor game for folks? That's my question," Sainz said, cleverly reversing our roles.

I answered: Because "these words" speak to the credibility of the mayor.

Sainz was unfazed. Even if Sexton had been brought on explicitly to deal with Sunroad, he said, "there'd be nothing wrong with that."

No, there wouldn't, I agreed. Except that when the mayor was asked on the radio if Sexton was working on Sunroad, he began his answer with the word "No." There was something wrong with that.

"That first word he should not have used," Sainz conceded. "The rest of the statement is entirely accurate."

But the first word was the one that answered the question, I said. Why did you go to so much trouble to conceal what Sexton was working on?

"If the mayor said today that Ted Sexton specifically came to the city to liaison with the FAA on the Sunroad issue, would that be enough to make this issue go away?" Sainz asked. "Because if that's what it will take, fine."

It won't make my issue go away, I said. I'm concerned about the mayor's credibility and why you guys were deliberately misleading the public.

"Oh, that's a stretch," Sainz said, and I thought I heard violins again. "That's really, really a stretch. Misleading the public. That's an incendiary term that I don't believe our treatment of this issue merits."

And so it went.

I got no more satisfaction from Sainz than I got from the pleasant female voice. But I at least got in my two cents.

And, by the way, Sanders had already apologized on the radio for misleading

the public about Sexton and Sunroad. When our nice-guy mayor says it, it doesn't sound quite so incendiary.

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### Reader comments

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**By La Playa Heritage on 06/17/2007**

Our Public Records Act request to the Airport Authority for all correspondence including emails to and from Sunroad and their lawyers (Chevalier Allen & Lichman LLP, Sheppard Mullin et al, and Hecht Solberg et al) is due next week. In order to complete our request, the Airport Authority is waiting for an AA Official (aka Mr. Sexton) to return from vacation tomorrow. When we receive the documents from the Airport Authority, we will post them for public review at <http://www.laplayaheritage.com/Airport.htm>

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**By BlueIsland on 06/17/2007**

"That's an incendiary term that I don't believe our treatment of this issue merits":

Please provide the term that it does merit.

May I help? Let's see:

"deliberately misleading the public"... is "lying" less incendiary?

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**By Sky173 on 06/17/2007**

Developers have owned City Hall for the last 20 years! What else should we expect? When there is a major aviation accident caused by the Sunroad bldg. Jerry Saunders will deny any involvement, even if it is heavily documented.

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**By JWallis on 06/17/2007**

I love how Sanders lays low and lets one of his puppeteers fib and spin for him when he gets caught.

Sainz is a professional mouthpiece and spinmaster, not a city leader.

We elected Sanders because he said he wouldn't be more of the same at city hall. He would clean up government and be open and honest with the people. He lied about that too.

The only difference between Jerry Sanders and Dick Murphy is Murphy was bumbling. Sanders is manipulative, coniving and, to quote our City Attorney, corrupt.

If the citizens of San Diego are stupid enough to relect Sanders, they deserve him.

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