

Valley Vote Meeting Report

February 17, 2014

by

David DeVoss

Jessica Levinson

Four months ago, Loyola Law School professor Jessica Levinson was appointed to a five-year term on the Los Angeles Ethics Commission. An expert on laws relating to campaign finance, ballot initiatives and redistricting, she was named the commission's vice president almost immediately. Today she views her task as going after major ethical lapses that affect public confidence in the political system, not inadvertent technical violations. "Enforcement of our ethics laws is important, but we shouldn't make politicians live in fear of being slapped with an ethics violation," she says.

"If you're elected to office you shouldn't have to hire a law firm and keep them on retainer," she insists. "You shouldn't have to worry about accepting parking violation or whether you can eat the donuts in the back of the room. We need to take a step back to streamline what we're doing."

One immediate challenge is what to do about matching funds. They are supposed to equalize the political playing field, but a well-funded candidate always will have the louder voice. Since the Supreme Court has ruled that money can't be limited in politics, Levinson believes that, at minimum, the source of the money should be recorded. "When it comes to campaign finance the important thing is disclosure," she says. "If money really is speech then we have an interest in knowing who is speaking to us."

Voter apathy may be a more immediate problem than political ethics, says Levinson. Only 22% of registered voters went to the polls in the last election for mayor. In a close race, just 11% of the registered voters could elect the next mayor.

Joel Fox

As a former president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and current professor of public policy at Pepperdine University, Joel Fox knows a thing or two about taxes. One tax he was questioned about by Valley Vote this month is the "Split Roll."

When Prop 13 was approved back in the 1970s, corporations paid two-thirds of the property taxes and individuals paid one third. Now the balance is 50/50. Recent polls indicate that 60% of Californians support a Split Roll property tax.

Prop 13 did not distinguish between residential and commercial property. Property taxes were frozen at the 1977 level and allowed to rise modestly thereafter. The property's value on which tax is assessed is recalibrated only when the property was sold. The measure was designed to keep retirees in their homes, which it did. But what about a corporate holding company that owns an office tower? Should it be taxed at the same rate as your grand parents? Some civic groups would like the benefits of Prop 13 split so that corporations are forced to pay a bigger share. But Gov. Jerry Brown refuses to touch the issue (calling it the "third rail" of California politics) and Fox thinks it's too late in the year to organize an initiative to address the situation.

"2016 is a more realistic date for an adjustment," says Fox. "Split Roll has the endorsement of 51 organizations, most of them in Northern California, plus the city of Santa Monica. In a Presidential election turnout goes up. This favors Democrats, who tend to support Split Roll.

Fox observed that California supported Gov. Jerry Brown's Prop 30, which increased tax rates on higher income earners. Split Roll draws on the same logic. But it is different in that it also affects small businesses. "Small businesses in an office tower often are responsible for property tax increases," says Fox, who notes that Occidental Petroleum and Charles Schwab both recently announced plans to move a large percentage of their workforce out of state

The problem, says Fox, is that Californians want increased services from a limited budget. "California's four largest areas of spending are K-12, higher education, health and welfare and prisons. Prisons ranks fourth. PK-12 gets 40% of the budget. Do Californians want to raise more money for K-12? 80% say yes. Sixty-six percent want increased spending for health and welfare. Seventy-five percent want to send more on higher education. Twenty-three percent want more resources devoted to prisons. But 60% of Californians want a spending limit, too. How can you spend more on everything and then have a spending limit?

Unedited Executive Board Reports

Regional Airport Report – Denny Schneider

Burbank Bob Hope Airport hasn't increased passenger numbers lately, but it is introducing several improvements, which will put it in a good future position. Not only are they increasing and building new, improved terminal flow, but they are also improving transportation access with a metro link stop adjacent to the airport along with improved parking and van/bus/taxi access. Los Angeles World Airport, LAWA, can't be accused of the same. There has been NO movement to resolve getting a train into LAX, nor anything to get the people mover system designed nor planning the Consolidated Rental Car System. Local vehicle traffic flow is equally stagnant.

LAWA reported another month of increased concentration of passenger traffic at LAX with a corresponding reduction at the other LAWA owned commercial airport, Ontario. LAWA is no longer even pretending they have a plan for commercial air service in Palmdale.

LAWA continues to be an employment program for lawyers. If you enjoy legal drama, watch the lawsuits against L.A. City and LAWA by the Inland Empire in an attempt to regain control over their local airport. Ontario airport has LOST passenger traffic over the past thirty years since LA took it over. Inland Empire officials are blaming LAWA for severely hurting their local economics. There was a several month hiatus in hostilities agreed to Ontario and approved by the presiding judge so that an agreement could be hammered out. But LA didn't even bother to call a meeting as promised. That case is now going "full speed ahead." I fear that this suit could cost LA pallets of money when it loses in court.

Several suits related to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) lawsuits are on-going to address the ill advised, poorly planned and inadequately analyzed LAX runway expansions. This case is now scheduled to be heard in September. Talk about yet another big waste of money! When this suit is lost LAX will be unable to finish the appropriate fixes in a timely manor because it will have to redo all of the environmental reviews it was supposed to have done over the past eight years.

Then there's dozens of suits over the new Tom Bradley International Terminal by subcontractors who have not been paid for work and/or upgrade work. There are also suits over the defective runway of the South Airfield Improvement from about six years ago, which already needs major repairs. If that isn't enough work for the lawyers, there's been a parade of lawsuits over airline leases, disputed concession contracts, and labor contracts not enforced.

Consequences of Correcting Loopholes – Vic Viereck

In order to generate more tax revenue, some people are trying to weaken Proposition 13. They claim that some abuse results from loopholes in the proposition. The number of loopholes appears to be nominal and difficult to take advantage of. The primary attack has been to achieve split role property taxation, increasing the assessed value of commercial property. Although over time trading of stock on the stock market can result in the change of corporate ownership of over 50% of a company, keeping track of corporate ownership, and reacting to it would be extremely difficult.

But through whatever means split roll would be achieved, the consequences would be damaging to the economy. Businesses would have to increase prices of products and services, reduce employment, go into new locations, or close their business. Customers stuck paying higher prices would have less in funds to pay for other needs. Since the state does not benefit from property tax, the state budget would suffer from less revenue from income tax and sales tax.

Pandora's Promise, Joe Vitti

Pandora's Promise was a two-hour CNN report by filmmaker Robert Stone. He profiles energy experts and leading environmentalists who opposed nuclear energy but today embrace it. The last speaker introduced on Pandora's Promise was Charles Till from Argonne National Laboratory. He, along with hundreds of scientists and engineers, developed the *Integral Fast Reactor* (IFR). This is the primary subject of this report.

Argonne National Laboratory is located in a southwest suburb of Chicago. Nuclear development for peaceful purposes began at Argonne in the mid 40's. The world's first reactor, Chicago Pile -1, went critical on Dec.2, 1942 at Stagg field located at the University of Chicago. The IFR was developed at Argonne from 1984 to 1994. Although most of the development had been completed the newly elected President Clinton canceled the IFR program in 1994. (This is a counter position to the Obama administration that has supported 5 new nuclear reactors under construction in the U.S. today at three different sites.

The IFR has many advanced features compared to the 100 reactors in operation in the U.S. today. Mr. Till focused his comments on the unique safety advantages of the IFR during the program. He pointed out the lack of ability to "*cool the reactor core*" is the cause of many serious nuclear reactor accidents. However, the inherent characteristics of the IFR are able to bring the reactor to a stop before any damage for a number of very severe accidents when the reactor shutdown systems fail to act. Mr. Till demonstrates the passive safety effectiveness of the IFR in two landmark tests conducted with the EBR II in April of 1986. The two major accidents of 1) unprotected loss of flow, and 2) unprotected loss of heat sink, were initiated for each "accident" with the reactor at full power. In each case both were handled safely as Mr. Till reports in the broadcast. Reactor coolant temperatures did rise initially but within a few minutes the power was reduced to normal mode in both of the imposed accident conditions.

The Doppler effect on reactivity, the choice of sodium as the reactor coolant and the characteristics of metal fuel all contribute to the safe behavior of the reactor. Sodium has a very high boiling temperature (881-C) and excellent thermal conductivity so heat flows into it away from the fuel. Metal fuel also has high thermal conductivity and melting point.

Till concluded his remarks with a brief reference to other reactor designs, including smaller modular reactors, under study by the Department of Energy

Bart Reed, Executive Director of The Transit Coalition

Reed argues for the addition of a Saticoy stop on the Orange Line. Below is a letter sent this month to Councilman Robert Blumenfield:

“The Transit Coalition, along with the student interns of the California State University Northridge Transportation Tiger Team recommend the following solution to address an important gap in existing bus service connectivity to key residential, job, educational and medical institutions on Saticoy Street along the Orange Line route.

We have found that the intersection of Saticoy Street and Canoga Avenue is of great importance to Orange Line patrons who need access to the Dennis Zine Community Center, the NEW Academy Canoga Park-an independent K-5 elementary charter school and the West Valley Mental Health Center. Currently, the Orange Line does not have a stop at this intersection, creating unmet needs.

The lack of an Orange Line stop at Saticoy Street makes it difficult for low-income residents to reach these facilities quickly. The only other alternative is to take Bus Line 169, which passes every 60 minutes after 8:00 a.m. Adding this stop could alleviate traffic congestion created by the community center and the charter school.

We recommend that North and South bus stop poles be placed at the intersection of Saticoy Street and Canoga Avenue along the Orange Line route. We suggest a 2-year pilot program to test ridership along this stop. Station construction will not be required during this phase of the project. If after one year the passenger ridership demand meets community needs, then we would recommend that a full station be created at Saticoy Street. A community leader has indicated that he would pay for a small parking lot at this intersection and maintain it for twenty years.

We believe that this pilot project bus stop will improve the quality of transportation in the Canoga Park community. Therefore, The Transit Coalition formally asks for your support, through a City Council resolution, of this service improvement.”