

Public Editor

May 15, 2005

In your column in today's *Bee*, "The *Bee* deserves answers to ensure its credibility," I was struck by the reproofing tone of your moral outrage – and the personal taunts – against your former colleague, Diana Griego Erwin. "Show us the goods. Think about the newspaper and your colleagues," you shout to her from the rooftop.

Aside from the highly personal remarks contained in your column, your position seems to be that a three-day-a-week columnist undermined the credibility and besmirched the reputation of a regional newspaper, the *Sacramento Bee*, because she fictionalized some of her sources in an April 23 column – and perhaps other columns as well. But of course, neither you, nor the newspaper itself, provide the reader with enough information to make an independent and informed judgment about whether she did or not. (For the sake of full disclosure, I know Diana in a passing sort of way, and some years back, I was the catalyst and provided the sources for several of her columns.)

During my three-mile walk this morning in the urban forest and open space of William Land Park, I thought about your conclusion: the *Bee* has been undermined because a writer fictionalized a source in at least one column.

I respectfully disagree. The *Bee* has been undermined – and in my opinion, besmirched – by the ongoing reality that the newspaper does NOT write about what is real in our community, and by NOT writing about what it is real, the newspaper creates a fiction of its own.

Let me give you some examples:

1. I have read not one word in the *Bee* about the ongoing building costs associated with the many attempts to remodel and make habitable the office complex for the police and fire administrations located on Freeport Boulevard. Some years ago, long before your arrival, there was a spate of articles in the *Bee* about cost overruns, cutting bureaucratic corners, and general city administration ineptness in purchasing the rundown and failed shopping center to convert it – a great savings to the taxpayers of

Sacramento, we were told – into a fire and police administration complex. Good for the *Bee*. Now, many years later, after many millions of dollars in previous cost overruns, the center, while open, was again under an eight-month siege undergoing yet another remodel because of poor and defective construction. Where is this inexhaustible well located that creates and appropriates such vast sums of money for this public scandal? And where is the public oversight? Does anyone care? Does the *Bee*?

2. The largest non-profit agency in the Sacramento region, United Way, requires each of its several hundred affiliate agencies to produce an annual independent audit of its finances before inclusion in the annual United Way fundraising campaign that involves tens of thousands of private and public sector employees. And yet, United Way itself will not produce an independent audit of its own finances so that affiliates – to say nothing of private and public sector employers – can make any assessment about the veracity of the representations of United Way officials about how much money was raised, how much was spent on salaries and overhead, and how much was distributed to the affiliate agencies as a result of the annual employee-designated contributions. How much money are we talking about? More than ten million dollars every year for the last 15 years at least. Where is the public oversight? Does anyone care? Does the *Bee*?
3. A citizen of Sacramento could not be faulted if he/she thought that matters coming before the city council are debated and voted upon in public session. Why, there is even a public TV station devoted to the meetings where this public democracy is played out for everyone to see. Yet those of us who have dealt with local government know the Tuesday public sessions are little more than a form of public theatre – and boring, too, just as planned. The insiders know that all decisions are made long before any public session, and any unforeseen last-minute adjustments are made in the private anteroom, adjacent to the public meeting room. Does this make any difference to the public? Where is the public oversight? Does anyone care? Does the *Bee*? Its reportage helps to create a fiction, not explain the reality.
4. The *Bee*'s editorial pages have recently come unglued about the alleged violations of the Brown Act with respect to the development of the K Street corridor. I applaud the outrage expressed, though I continue to

object to their use of hillbilly slang in doing so. But for all their fulmination, they miss the point: THE FIX IS IN. As one who has some familiarity with the players – developers, lobbyists, council members, insiders, etc. – I can assure you the city knows the outcome; it is simply arranging the process to lead to the predetermined result. BUT this is old news – all the developments downtown: subsidized shopping center, parking garages, theatres, high-rises, hotels, etc. – have been the result of insider trading. Does this make any difference to the public? Does anyone care? Does the *Bee*?

5. And here is an issue that gores my own ox: converting William Land Park – or 2/3 of it – into a city college parking lot for 1,000+ cars. Imagine. Mayor William Land leaves the city a fortune to pay for a park for the use of the residents of Sacramento. Seventy years later, with a wink and a nod from the mayor and the council – all trustees of Mayor Land’s park bequest – the park is transformed into a college parking lot. No public hearing, no vote, no public oversight of any kind, just the result of closed, private meetings between the college and the mayor. And yet these publicly elected local government representatives preach constantly about the need to preserve and expand open space, the urban forest, and park usage – all critical, they claim, to cope with the ever-increasing encroachment of urban life on the residents of the city. In fact, they have city codes in place to ensure the quality of life for citizens by protecting open space, urban forest, and park usage, but none of this applies to William Land Park. Or does it? Does this make any difference to the public? Does anyone care? Does the *Bee*?

My point is simple enough: the *Bee* creates its own fiction by the decisions made in its own boardroom about the nature of coverage regarding matters that affect tens of thousands of citizens each and every day of the year. To be sure, if I had my way, I would prefer that a *Bee* columnist not fictionalize a source in one column (or two?), but you know, if I had to make a choice between that kind of pissant fiction or the kind of fiction created by the *Bee* in its daily reportage about matters that affect our daily lives, I would choose Diana’s fiction every time. It does less damage to the commonweal.