

COASTAL SAN PEDRO NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

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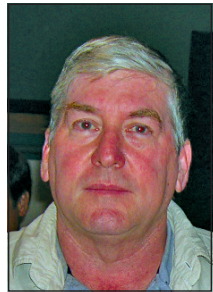
Chair, Port and Environment Committee
Representative to the Port
Community Advisory Committee

Governing Board Meetings

The Governing Board meets on the third Monday of each month (March through December) at 6:30 p.m. at the Cabrillo Marina Community Center, Berth 28, San Pedro. The Board meets on the fourth Monday during the months of January and February.

How Politicians Mislead ... Buried in the Fine Print, It's 'Then a Miracle Happens'

By Bob Gelfand, Board Member / Coastal Currents Editor



Elected officials have their own unique way of dealing with emergencies. The problem typically starts when a long-standing issue suddenly gets hot. Either the state budget threatens to run a huge deficit or graffiti is cropping up all over town.

Perhaps it's pressure from homeowners demanding relief from airport noise. What happens next is that some elected official feels the pressure and calls in his chief of staff, ordering him to find a cure. Here's what happens. Using the standard approach, our diligent staffer goes to work defining the problem, developing goals, and trying to figure out how those goals might be achieved. So far, so good. But then, the unlucky staffer discovers that he really has no idea about how to solve the problem. Stuck for an answer, he has no available approach except to complicate and mystify.

And this is where he resorts to the "and then a miracle happens" scenario. At the point in the plan where there is no realistic way to succeed, he simply pretends that there is one. Sydney Harris made a joke of this in his now famous cartoon. To the scientist, the cartoon is hugely funny because it illustrates a serious no-no: in science, you are not allowed to pretend that you have the answer if you really don't.

In the public arena, politicians offer up "and then a miracle happens" proposals regularly. These fake miracles work by creating enough smoke and mirrors to obscure the fact that the plans are bogus. Typically, the author just proposes that we create a study tasked with finding a solution, and pretends that this process will somehow solve the problem.

Or perhaps he will propose that we "open a dialog," as if airing our differences will miraculously make them go away. You know the drill — there will be lots of running in place, but the jet planes will still be taking off and the homeowners will still be frustrated.

Still, the real reason for doing this "miracle happens" project has been served, because the politician can always refer to the study as an ongoing process; the whole point of the charade was to give the politician an answer he can dust off when called upon by his increasingly deafened constituents.

It is curious how many times politicians get away with this kind of nonsense. If you can't imagine how some problem can be solved, how do you imagine that some new process will solve it? It is the ultimate in wishful thinking — "I can't solve this," our political staffer is saying in effect, "but somehow there has to be somebody out there who can."

At one level, this is just another example of passing the buck. At another level, it represents a profound form of intellectual dishonesty, because these miracle scenarios try to sell the public on the idea that there could be some sort of solution, and that someday, someone will figure out what that solution is. The prescription is almost always, "So let's fund a new study," or "Let's dialog," or "let's create a new research group, citizens' panel, funding mechanism, etc. etc."

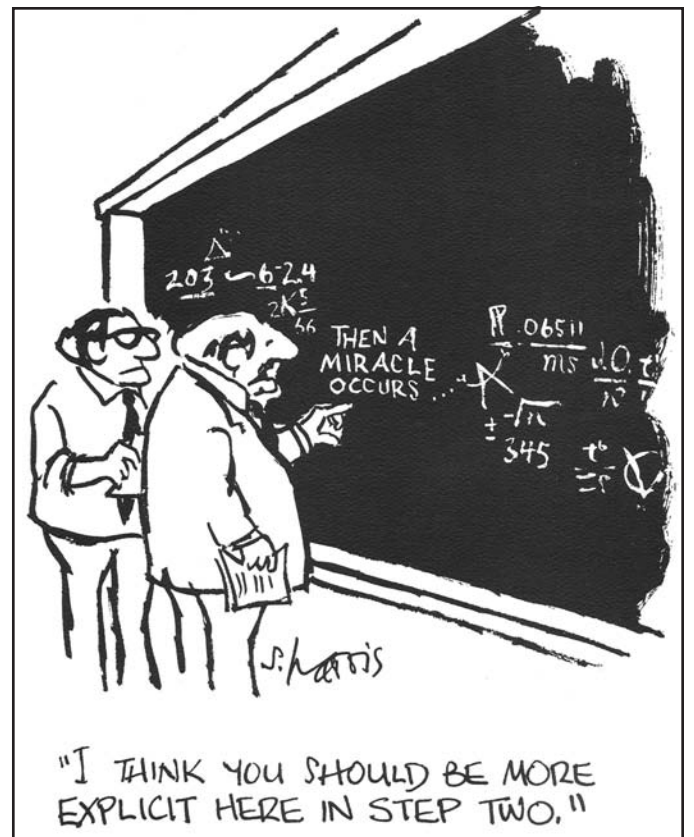
It's not hard to figure out that this is a waste of time and money.

Miracle scenarios should not be confused with what happens usefully in business all the time. There are real life challenges that can be solved with talent, time, money, and commitment. Building a second bridge over the main shipping channel in L.A. Harbor wouldn't be a miracle scenario, it's just a very expensive project.

Political "miracle happens" proposals are different because they are attempts to resolve self-contradictory goals. Most typically, they are in violation of the simple truth that money is not created out of thin air or that opposing sides will not stop fighting and settle their differences just because we ask them to.

An English software engineer, Katie Lucas (www.fysh.org/~katie/), provides us with an example of unworkable magic in the form of a plan for winning a foot race. You can see in the following the athletic equivalent of the "miracle happens" plan: "Step 1: write about running really fast. Step 2: Go and draw a plan of the racetrack. Step 3: go and buy really tight lycra shorts. Step 4: run really, really, really fast. Step 5: cross line first."

Stated in this way, it seems silly, but politicians do this sort of thing every day (at least they do on this side of the Atlantic). They toss out some inch-thick document that details the goal (write about running really fast), describes the preliminary studies to be done (draw a plan of the racetrack), reveals preliminary goals and mileposts (buy really tight lycra shorts), describes the miracle that is to happen (run really, really, really fast), and annotates how we will measure our progress (cross



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the line first).

When you think about things in these terms, it is amazing how often this scenario occurs: The incoming speaker of the State Assembly wants to revamp California's system of taxation but, as the L.A. Times reports, the likely approach is to appoint a "blue ribbon" commission. Or, as was recently suggested (and then discarded almost as fast), a baseball field will be constructed at 22nd Street and Miner, and then it will miraculously disappear in 36 months; or the City of Los Angeles will cut department funding by 10 percent, laying off workers according to seniority, maintain salary raises that were just instituted, and somehow preserve the level of government services.

And finally our neighborhood council Miracle Scenario: The problem of people from outside the district crashing our council elections — people from other cities, and even other counties — will be handled by turning the elections over to a city agency — the city clerk's office, which will study our bylaws and find a way. So far, the clerk's office hasn't found it.

In the political realm, miracle scenarios are created intentionally. When elected officials are put between that proverbial devil and the deep blue sea — or between the airport and the homeowners — they pretty much have to resort to the miracle scenario. They will appoint a panel, or fund a study, and pretend that they are trying to do something about the problem. There may be no realistic solution to the noise problem in the short run, but there is a solution to the political problem, which is to create that phony study.

Notice that there actually is a solution to the jet noise problem, which is for engine manufacturers to build quieter engines and for aircraft builders to use them. It's not the sort of thing that happens at the local level, and it takes years of design and billions of dollars of investment. This is an important point to notice, that there may actually be some available solution, even if it is an expensive one.

The realistic approach is the direct opposite of the miracle scenario, because the essence of the miracle scenario is to do nothing, and spend nothing, while trying to look busy. State budgets can be fixed by mixing spending cuts with tax increases, as several governors of both parties have done in recent years. Graffiti can be fought effectively by spending more money on painting crews and assigning more police to the problem.

In the case of our neighborhood councils, there is a workable fix to the problem of outside interests trying to take over our elections: It's to make eligibility for voting in a neighborhood council election dependent on actually living in the district. It doesn't have to be limited to registered voters or even to citizens, it just needs to be limited to residents. This is so obvious that most people just shake their heads when they hear that it has not happened.

When it comes to pressing public issues, we need to learn to be wary of the miracle scenario. Elected officials have gotten really good at creating them because we, the public, have been slow in recognizing them for what they are and in calling them out when we do.

One of the things we have noticed over the years is that the public, when faced with miracle scenarios, generally find them unconvincing, but lack the proper words to confront those who try to foist them upon us.

The solution is simple: First, when you take a look at some government proposal, look to see whether it has that buried "miracle." Once you've found it, point out that this is a "miracle happens" scenario. With a little luck, even politicians will figure this out after a while.



One Call to City Hall!