

The Desert Sun

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Desert Sun letter: The case for fairness

PUBLISHED AUGUST 13, 2017

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All of us are called on to make fairly stark choices in life, and in the summer of 2015 I was faced with a whole series of them. The first was whether to do anything at all or to maintain the status quo and hope that a bad situation would correct itself. I chose to act rather than to wait, and I turned to a consultant, ZGlobal, on whom I had come to rely, to help me in making a radical change in the Energy Department of the Imperial Irrigation District.

That threshold decision and the others that flowed from it were all mine. None of them were influenced or “informed” by this consultant but were based on my considered opinion that to do nothing would be to expose the agency to the gradual loss of its autonomy and its customers to higher energy rates.

Since October 2015, when the job action I took against five employees went into effect, Vicken Kasarjian arrived to lead the Energy Department and ZGlobal assumed operational control of the transmission and planning function, IID is markedly stronger, its initiatives are better positioned and its customers in the Imperial and Coachella valleys continue to benefit from some of the lowest rates in the West.

In the course of his yearlong research into IID and ZGlobal, reporter Sammy Roth had his own choices to make, and, in my view, nearly all of them went against IID and ZGlobal. What he and his editors chose to publish was long on content and short on context, but there were other meaningful choices made along the way to this 10,000-word opus.

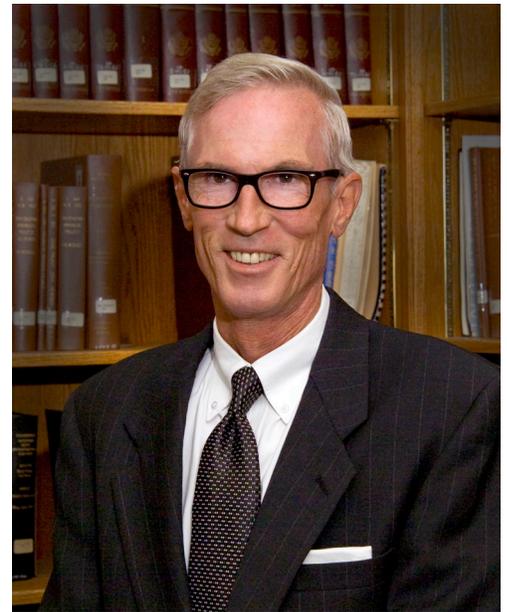
One was his willingness to suspend a journalist’s customary disbelief and accept as true the accounts of various sources with either an axe to grind or a score to settle.

Another was his flat assertion that IID’s battery energy storage project was awarded to Coachella Energy Storage Partners due to chicanery or manipulation. It wasn’t. In fact, the award was made on its merits and CESP wasn’t just the lowest responsive bidder, but represented the lowest bid, period.

As for Mike Abatti’s involvement, his status as a former IID board member had about as much to do with CESP winning the award as Frank Oswald’s previous landlord/tenant relationship with ZGlobal had to do with his becoming IID general counsel, which is to say, not at all.

The truth is, I didn’t invent IID’s close association with ZGlobal but I certainly embraced it. I knew going in that this

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consultant had outside clients and worked with the then-general counsel, Ross Simmons, to construct a firewall against conflicts. When Frank Oswalt became general counsel, he instituted further safeguards to protect both IID and ZGlobal.

But this is a small valley with admittedly overlapping relationships. It's the sort of place where people, when they get together to mark an important occasion, like a birth or a marriage or the dedication of a battery storage project, might even take part in a little prayer.

That may make them quirky – but it doesn't make them conflicted.

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