

# Write and wronged: Are leaders listening?



## OUR TOWN BY TED WINTERER

It will surprise no one who has read any of my columns that I'm one of those know-it-all gadflies who frequently sends e-mail to my elected officials on topics which stick in my craw.

I e-mail the president. I don't expect him to actually read my e-mails, as I imagine he only reads "Sports Illustrated" or the latest Harry Potter book. But I always get a pleasant form letter acknowledging my missive and in my sunnier moments, I pretend the White House is paying heed to me, even though GW's policies clearly indicate I'm being roundly ignored.

I also send e-mails to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and likewise get a prefab reply. I always know the Governor hasn't personally penned the response as the syntax and grammar are too refined. But once again it's nice to be heard by someone in Sacramento.

When I write to Sens. Boxer and Feinstein and Congressman Waxman, I elicit even better responses. I might opine about drilling for oil in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge or restoring the Hetchy Hetchy Valley. All three elected officials will reply with a personally-addressed e-mail explaining their position on the issue. Sure, some staffer at the Capitol has cut and pasted a standardized response, but at least my federal representatives are tallying public sentiment and encouraging participatory democracy.

And I send e-mails to our City Council. Lots of them, in fact. You can too, as the city makes it easy by providing a single e-mail address which is forwarded to all seven of our elected leaders: council@smgov.net. Wouldn't it great if our various boards and commissions could be contacted with similar ease? Instead one has to cut and paste individual e-mail addresses from the city Web site.

I regularly get replies to my ramblings from three council members. And in the last two weeks, a fourth crossed a personal Rubicon and engaged me in a cyber dialogue about a particular topic. But I've never heard back from the three remaining people on the council, not even a quick "Thanks for your thoughts" or "Go away, you rabid crackpot."

And I suspect I may get a better response rate than most Santa Monicans. I've been persistently spamming the council for years — eventually wearing some of them down. Who among us hasn't succumbed to the temptation to every so often opening an e-mail touting low rate mortgages or cheap Viagra?

Sadly, we cling to an antiquated form of public participation in our town: If you want to make sure the City Council

acknowledges your input, you have to schlep over to City Hall for a council meeting, endure hours of tedium as the controversial topics seem to be placed towards the end of the agenda and then speak for no more than two minutes — lest a loud clanging rudely interrupts you. Consequently, large portions of the electorate, including those with night jobs, child care responsibilities, narcolepsy, early wake-up calls and social lives, are effectively disenfranchised. Instead, the same hardy souls who can find the time and inclination to speak at council meetings have a disproportionate influence on what is gleaned to be public opinion.

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It seems to me that in a city which ostensibly cherishes public input there ought to be a better way, that we should be able to communicate with our council and know our opinions are heard. Now, I don't expect individual council members to reply to every e-mail and letter they receive, as their positions are underpaid part-time gigs. But couldn't the council have its own staff to answer calls and read e-mails and letters, reply to each one personally, gauge public sentiment accordingly and then report, for instance, the percentage of folks favoring and opposing allowing dogs at the beach?

In fact, an autonomous staff for the council could do much more: by providing independent research and analysis, a council staff could provide checks and balances to the influence over civic policy currently vested in those hired by the city manager. For instance, if city staff recommends pay raises or advises against privatizing trash hauling, wouldn't you like your City Council to hear a second opinion on these matters?

Sure, a staff for the council would cost money, although much could be accomplished with interns and volunteers. But perhaps when we can't get our street trees trimmed or sidewalks fixed but planning for new municipal offices in the Civic Center at a cost of \$20 million is a priority, it's time to direct more of the city budget towards serving the public.

*(Ted Winterer is a writer who lives in Ocean Park. He can be reached at ourtownsmdp@aol.com.)*