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If you have a green thumb in Santa Monica, you'd better have one of these.

Hemming and hawing over hedges illustrates City Hall's misplaced priorities.

Aaron Mendelsohn tangled with City Hall and their decision to selectively enforce rules about hedge heights.

By Aaron Mendelsohn

In early 2000 I purchased the house adjacent to mine and hired a noted landscape architect with the intent of converting both the front and back areas of the houses into greenbelts that would be visually appealing and enhance the character and charm of the neighborhood.



In the space between the sidewalk and street, numerous islands of shrubs and other vegetation were planted, forming a unifying archipelago that allows the passerby to pause and soak in the beauty. Santa Monica College sends its students to the property and the prestigious Anderson Conservancy is presenting my garden on their April 2005 tour of three outstanding Southern California gardens.

Apparently my success was a failure because after completion, one SMRR-backed City Councilman labeled my property “a blight on the neighborhood.”

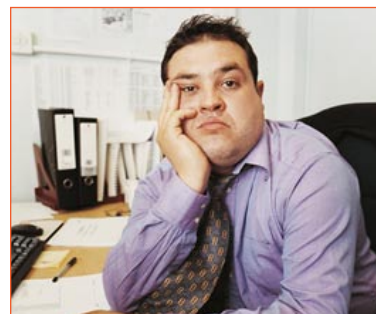
...one SMRR-backed City Councilman labeled my property “a blight on the neighborhood.”

In April 2002 the inspectors came out and they told me that the work looked beautiful and they wouldn't even be there if it weren't for a neighbor having “turned me in”. They also mentioned that over 60% of the neighborhood was non-compliant and that they “weren't even sure why we have this rule.” After the inspection, I received a letter demanding that I take down the hedge to 42 inches. My attorney responded that I was “invoking the appeal process mandated in the city's rules.” I never heard back from them for almost two years.

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I was cited again as if it were a first violation and not a response to my appeal. My attorney, who happens to be my neighbor, responded that: 1) The enforcement procedure is unconstitutional, 2) I was in double jeopardy, and 3) Since it had been 2 years, the City waived its rights. The City declined to respond to my attorney's arguments and simply stated that I must comply. Shortly after this the City announced that there would be a moratorium on enforcement because of numerous complaints by homeowners. Curiously enough, only 3 homeowners were re-cited after the moratorium supposedly went into effect. Surprise, surprise! The only 3 to be re-cited were my attorney neighbor, my mother who lives across the street, and myself. Does the word retribution come to mind?

Curiously enough, only 3 homeowners were re-cited after the moratorium supposedly went into effect. Surprise, surprise! The only 3 to be re-cited were my attorney neighbor, my mother who lives across the street, and myself.



How skewed are the priorities in this City when inspectors waste their time on harmless hedges (many of which have been in place for decades) and then intimidate residents by threatening them criminally with \$25,000 a day fines for non-compliance? Fines like these can only apply when a structure is in imminent danger of causing death. Their attempt at coercion by fraudulent fines is an example of how they enjoy being sandbox bullies.

What can we conclude from this?

- The current City Council is totally out of touch with its constituency.
- Rather than exercising leadership, Council allows staff to run amok, trampling the rights of residents.
- They are reactive, not proactive, in responding to their constituents, and they react only when their political hides are at stake.

Because of their inept leadership, this whole fiasco was able to occur while serious problems like homelessness, parking, and traffic continue to negatively affect the quality of life for all of us. And that's a shame.