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Deluged

The larger lessons of the DWP's bad day at City Hall
by Robert Greene

It was a bucket of cold, chlorinated and slightly off-tasting water right in the faces of three honchos from L.A.'s most arrogant institution, the Department of Water and Power. City Council President Alex Padilla called forward the business-suited men at Tuesday's council meeting and proceeded to make them just sit there, closed-mouthed, and listen while he and his colleagues put on a display of shock and outrage at the executives' plan to jack up water rates by 18 percent.

"The Department of Water and Power has existed in its own world for a very long time," Councilman Greig Smith intoned, before his colleagues approved his motion to delay any increase pending an outside agency's look at the books.

That may have been okay, once upon a time, Smith and the other suddenly offended council members said. But this is a new day. Neighborhood councils, public participation and all that.

It was, in fact, the local councils that sounded the alarm on the rate increase, which the City Council appeared ready to pass into law earlier this year to allow the DWP to begin collecting the higher fees last month. Valley resident Jim Alger of the Northridge West Neighborhood Council took the lead and found himself pitted against the DWP's water chief, Gerald Gewe, in a series of debates that resulted in 37 councils voting to reject the increases absent further consultation (one council went the other way). Alger held his own, and then some, reminding neighborhood leaders how the DWP had developed a reputation for spending lavishly on parties, public relations and some failed initiatives like the environmentally friendly Green Power program.

Time and again the neighborhood groups insisted that it wasn't the rate increases they were so steamed about, but the fact that the DWP disrespected them by failing to check with them first.

Of course, the City Council hardly checked with them either. Inside City Hall, a couple of council committees had waived hearings to move things along. Oh, a few members, like Smith and Wendy Greuel, raised an eyebrow or two when the Water and Power executives began switching their stated justifications for the increases — security needs after 9/11, then (when it became clear the rate hikes were planned before then) keeping the city's own budget together. Most recently it has been protecting the department's bond rating.

But the council as a whole didn't seem to get religion on this issue until last month, after the anger from the neighborhood groups had percolated up. On March 1, the City Hall

vote counters said, there were enough votes to get the increase on the books, no matter how belatedly. On Tuesday, not a single City Council member voted to proceed without a financial review.

It was a smart move on the City Council's part, and more power to them; they should go ahead and make the whole outrage thing work for them just as long as they can. Like last week, when they "suddenly" discovered that money for sidewalk repairs had been set aside because of the budget mess, and they heroically rode to the rescue of their constituents by redefining sidewalks as a public-safety mandate. There was a move brewing, too, for them to step in on behalf of the threatened Cultural Affairs Department, but Mayor Jim Hahn beat them to the punch by backtracking on his plan to dismantle the agency — after angry arts activists rallied.

The council's time is coming. Hahn will release his budget proposal later this month, and he will have to chop \$250 million (or more) by either raising fees, reducing services or both. Everyone will be angry with him, including the council. But what are they going to do about it? They can substitute one cut for another, or one fee hike for another, but the budget they pass will have to be as lean as the one Hahn sends their way. Between the budget-release date on April 20 and the final day of deliberations, just after Memorial Day, the council will have to put itself in the same seats Padilla forced on those three bigwigs from the DWP.

Until now, Hahn has taken the heat alone for the insider City Hall intrigue that had tongues wagging all through March. As well he should. How could he put Deputy Mayor Troy Edwards, a young fund-raiser with some background in politics but otherwise inexperienced in governing, in charge of the DWP, the Airports Department and the Harbor Department? Why didn't he cut Edwards loose earlier, when it became clear that the District Attorney's Office and federal officials were questioning him for contracting problems? How long is he going to hang on to Ted Stein, the Airport Commission president who also has come under fire?

The contracting scandal-(maybe)-in-the-making is great theater, but it does nothing to answer the tough questions about how to manage the city's growing populace, its shrinking resources, its competing needs. The council so far has fallen short in dealing with those questions as well. They are good at making speeches lauding neighborhood councils. They have yet to show leadership.

The neighborhood councils, meanwhile, have become empowered enough to force the City Council's hand, but not yet wise enough to help it make choices. Marchers were planning to go to City Hall this week to protest the DWP rate hikes, and they just might run into another group of marchers, those protesting the Cultural Affairs cuts. Both cuts may have been turned away for now, and Alger said he might try to call people to get them to stay home.

"But I don't know if I can put the pin back in the grenade," he said.

