

Mr. Smith throws a fit
Litigious city councilman undermines his own reputation

If we called Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith a whiner and a bully, would it be defamation?

Not according to anyone who knows anything about the law. But just in case, someone better tell Smith, lest he threaten to sue us.

Because the way Smith is carrying on these days, it seems he's not only thin-skinned, but also ignorant of the protections the First Amendment provides.

The councilman has threatened to whack Northridge West Neighborhood President Jim Alger and Vice President Sherry Ramstead with slander lawsuits because the two had the gall to criticize his support of a controversial proposed Wal-Mart in Northridge.

Apparently after decades of working safely behind the scenes in City Hall, Smith wasn't prepared for the criticism that comes with public life and being a public official.

Alger and Ramstead have both said that Wal-Mart's contribution of a \$166,000 gift to a community fund -- and Smith's subsequent backing of the proposed store -- amount to "nothing short of bribery." That's their opinion; they're entitled to it.

Opinions are constitutionally protected speech. Alger and Ramstead didn't say Smith committed a crime, they only said that, in their analysis, they find his conduct unethical. It's the kind of thing people say about politicians all the time.

If Smith can't handle it, he's in the wrong business.

He's also out of line with his threats to sue the two community leaders if they don't retract their statement. Such a suit would be laughed out of court, and surely Smith, or at least his lawyer, ought to know that.

Which suggests that the purpose of Smith's petty threats isn't to get an offending statement retracted, or even to go to court, but to silence would-be critics.

You could say it's nothing short of intimidation.

Ironically, Smith says he only wants to "protect my rights and reputation." But far from preserving his public image, complaining and threatening spurious lawsuits only make him look like -- in our opinion -- a whiner and a bully.

And he can sue us if he doesn't like being described that way. We'll look forward to his learning a lesson when he has to pay not only his attorney's fees, but ours as well.