

EDITORIAL

Loyal to the purple; Sacramento council blinded by union's colors

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The audience last Thursday night was wearing the trademark purple uniforms that draw the allegiance of the Sacramento City Council. These weren't Sacramento Kings uniforms. They were the purple T-shirts of the Service Employees International Union. The union is asking the council to walk off a political cliff, to start regulating hospitals as a way to pressure at least one set of hospitals - the Sutter chain.

What the council is up to may be just plain illegal. But an admonition to that effect didn't seem to matter. The council seemed blinded by the purple and blind to just how dangerous its behavior could be to the city's health care system and its business climate.

The council decided to bring back for consideration a hospital regulation resolution ("community benefit principles" that pertain to facility expansions). Under these "principles," the council would become arbiters of whether a hospital has fair billing and debt collection practices and appropriate nurse staffing. Most crucial for The Purple, the "principles" would in effect require that hospitals silence themselves when the SEIU or any other union seeks to represent facility employees.

Councilman Steve Cohn, he of seemingly eternal ambition to become mayor, had crafted this dangerous resolution and seemingly placed it on the agenda without full consultation with Mayor Heather Fargo. There was no staff report to accompany this resolution, as the concerned mayor noted. More important, there was no analysis by City Attorney Samuel Jackson as to whether the actions envisioned in Cohn's resolution were legal.

Jackson's admonition Thursday wasn't hard to decipher. There are recent court cases that speak to a city council's ability to interject itself into business matters such as employer-union disputes.

"Anything that speaks to staffing levels or unions issues are problematic," he said. So basically, the council can't do what The Purple wants it to do - lean on Sutter. It can't.

Fargo, in a refreshing moment of mayoral leadership, steered the council away from the edge of the cliff. Before the debate, she made clear that the council needed an actual report from staff. It needed an actual review from Jackson. Action would have to wait. Too often earlier in her tenure, Fargo chose to speak last, when it can be too late. On Thursday, it seemed she has learned that lesson. Thank goodness.

Frankly, there should be nothing left to consider. City councils shouldn't regulate hospitals any more than they should regulate doctors or HMOs. But The Purple will be back in a few weeks.

The council and The Purple should be careful. Sutter wants to expand its midtown General Hospital with a project that involves 3.2 million man-hours of union labor. (The chain has signed a project labor agreement.) But hospital executives would be fools to expand in Sacramento if it means being regulated by this council.

As for Cohn, if this was his way of announcing another run for mayor, it began Thursday night with a thud.