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FYI
LA Times: In post-bankruptcy Stockton, a mayor and Erin Brockovich team up to scare people about water

California Journal: In post-bankruptcy Stockton, a mayor and Erin Brockovich team up to scare people about water

Environmental and social activist Erin Brockovich speaks to a group of students in Los Angeles in 2014. (Los Angeles Times)

Sadly, I missed the community meeting starring Erin Brockovich, who blew into town this month to inform the citizenry that its officials are too cheap and lazy to provide safe drinking water.

I watched a video of the gathering instead — and came away marveling at both the opportunism of the traveling eco-circus that is the Brockovich Show and the chutzpah of the city's mayor, who approved the current water-treatment scheme but is now posing as a hero for raising questions about its safety.

Stockton is perhaps the most misunderstood big city in California. It sits on the delta, an hour south of Sacramento, home to about 300,000. Its deep-water port, well inland, is the third-largest in the state, after Los Angeles and Long Beach.

In June 2012, Stockton became the largest American city to declare bankruptcy. The

city slashed its police, fire and city workforce. Retirees lost their health insurance. The crime rate soared.

“There was a feeling the lid's come off,” Stockton Record columnist Michael Fitzgerald said. “Anarchy, really, running like quicksilver through the streets.”

“The depths of hell,” said Kurt Wilson, the city manager.

Today, the city is climbing out. Crime is down. The budget has a 20% surplus.

The last thing Stockton needs is a ginned-up controversy about the safety of its water supply.

For me, the low point of the town hall meeting came during a long presentation by Brockovich associate Bob Bowcock, a water treatment engineer. Others onstage got 10 minutes to talk about the water supply, including a vice mayor who defended the city's system.

Bowcock took 45 minutes to lay out his alarmist case. He told the 1,200 or so concerned citizens that a common disinfectant the city recently began using in its water supply, chloramine, causes a terrifying list of human ailments: skin rashes; dry, scaly skin; erupting, oozing skin; swollen ears; extreme fatigue; hacking coughs; sneezing; nasal congestion; itchy, burning and swollen eyes; peeling fingernails; stomachaches.

I started to get a little itchy, a little oozy. You see, the L.A. water supply is disinfected with chloramine. How relieved I felt when Bowcock admitted his list was anecdotal.

“There are no scientific studies that prove any of this,” he said. “There just aren't. But you know what causes you harm.”

Please. I give you the ludicrous debate over childhood vaccines to prove how wrong he is.

Chloramine is a common disinfectant, often replacing chlorine, which is less effective and tastes like swimming pool.

According to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, more than 50 million Americans have drunk water with chloramine for decades. The creatures who have the most to fear from it are not Stocktonians, but goldfish. ("Contact your aquarium or pond supply professional for the best methods to remove chloramine," advises the DWP website.)

So why did Stockton Mayor Anthony Silva invite the most famous, and famously alarmist, eco-warrior to town to whip up fears about the drinking supply at a moment when the Flint water crisis has raised the public temperature about public officials and water safety?

There are theories. And they are not flattering to Silva, a former Boys & Girls Club of Stockton CEO who is up for reelection this year.

"This was a political event," said Wilson, the city manager.

"Brockovich didn't bring any scientific information," said City Councilman Elbert Holman, who attended. "She just stirred up anti-government sentiment."

Not so, says Brockovich. "I came ... not because I am some troublemaker," she told the crowd. "I have heard from the people of Stockton and their great concern for what is happening to their water." (I give her credit for urging citizens to get more involved. But that's about it.)

Silva's campaign manager and spokesman, Allen Sawyer, told me he organized the meeting and dismissed the idea that it was politically motivated.

The mayor's most relentless antagonist, Fitzgerald, of the Record, was dismissive. "It was all about politics," said Fitzgerald, who toyed with the idea of leading a recall effort against Silva shortly after he took office in 2013.

"The mayor is a completely empty suit," he said. "A knucklehead."

Silva said in an email that he was unavailable to talk because he's in the Philippines on a Sister City trip.

But Sawyer was game. "Two days before the mayor was elected, that columnist said

Anthony Silva will be elected when pigs fly," he said. "Silva got 60% of the vote."

Well. As we have seen in our presidential nominating contest, you can be a knucklehead and still win elections.

Since he assumed office, Silva has been agitating against Stockton's form of government, where the city manager, guided by the wisdom of the elected officials, runs the place.

The city manager meets each week, individually, with council members to keep them abreast of city business. This really annoys the mayor, who is forbidden by state sunshine laws from meeting privately with council members.

The city manager, Sawyer said, "has complete control over the direction of our city. He is unelected."

I noted that the city's elected officials hired the manager.

"It's very frustrating," Sawyer said. "The mayor is attacked that he isn't doing anything, and then he is not empowered to do anything."

Silva, who has a history of minor legal scrapes, has talked about introducing a ballot measure to give the mayor more power and weaken the city manager. A similar measure, introduced by the last mayor of Sacramento, went nowhere amid accusations it would make him "the Emperor of Sacramento."

The Sultan of Stockton? Has a nice ring to it.

But it's not exactly in tune with Brockovich's "Power to the people" refrain.

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