

Gateway Project Suffers Setback, Calls for City Support

by Vincent Brook

As you've probably heard or read by now, the Gateway to Silver Lake beautification project (GSL 2000) has run into some hard times of late. The family of a driver involved more than two years ago in a fatal traffic accident at the GSL site (Silver Lake Blvd. and the Hollywood Freeway) has filed suit against GSL, the City, the Silver Lake Chamber of Commerce, and individuals on the GSL board, including myself, alleging that debris placed on one of the site's center dividers contributed to the accident.

Since the case is still pending, I am not at liberty to discuss the details surrounding GSL's involvement or lack thereof in the alleged contributing cause of the crash. It should be noted, however, that police and coroner's reports clearly establish that the deceased driver was drunk and speeding at the time of the incident, and an accident reconstruction indicates that the debris was not a factor.

Be that as it may, all those named in the suit are greatly saddened by the accident--not only for the tragic loss of life but for the pall it casts over a much-acclaimed beautification project. The project itself, of course, has been put on hold as a result of the suit and will remain so until the suit and the issues surrounding it are resolved.

The ramifications of the suit go far beyond its immediate effect on the GSL project. The community has already begun to feel a "chilling effect" in relation to ongoing and future volunteer activity. It's hard enough finding the time and energy to devote to community work without the added threat of a potential lawsuit hanging over one's head! Additionally, while the individuals named in the suit fortunately are covered by their homeowner's insurance and are being defended by insurance company lawyers, the Chamber of Commerce is not insured and thus must foot all legal fees.

This is where the City could--indeed, should!--come to the rescue. Those involved in GSL and other community improvements are, in effect, unpaid City workers. When we take time from our busy lives to plant trees, pick up trash, paint-out graffiti and help combat crime, we are making up the slack for a city government hard-pressed to meet its basic obligations. We do this partly from a sense of civic duty, partly at the City's urging. Isn't it only fair that the City support and protect us in our efforts?

Unfortunately, the City has thus far done just the opposite. Literally adding insult to injury, the City Attorney's office, rather than indemnifying its quasi-employees, initially filed a cross-complaint (counter-suit) against us. A strongly worded LA Times editorial apparently moved the office to reconsider, and the cross-complaint has since been dropped.

But the larger issue remains. Community groups need some kind of assurance that they will be protected against future liability arising inadvertently from their efforts to improve the quality of life in their communities and the city as a whole.

If the City wants us to help it, the least it can do is meet us half way!

Vincent Brook is co-chair of GSL 2000. He can be reached at 323-666-6715