

Alameda Merry-Go-Round

Give thanks, Ms. Spencer

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The Merry-Go-Round hopes that Mayor-elect Trish Spencer saved something – say, a turkey gizzard – for Ron Cowan from her Thanksgiving dinner. And maybe a soupçon of cranberry relish for Tim Lewis, too.

Were it not for the two developers – or, rather, for voters skeptical about the projects the pair is promoting – Ms. Spencer may not have eked out her 120-vote victory over Mayor Marie Gilmore on November 4.

At least that's one way to interpret the precinct-by-precinct results released by the Registrar of Voters last week.

Let's start with Bay Farm Island.

As the table below shows, in the eight precincts located on Bay Farm Island, Ms. Spencer tallied 257 votes more than Ms. Gilmore. All told, 52.85% of Bay Farm voters cast ballots for the challenger.

Precinct	Spencer	Gilmore	Spencer margin	Spencer share
300000	327	240	87	57.67%
300100	416	261	155	61.45%
300110	196	200	-4	49.49%
300120	387	304	83	56.01%
300140	272	256	16	51.52%
300150	210	298	-88	41.34%
300170	147	185	-38	44.28%
300180	178	153	25	53.78%
300210	247	226	21	52.22%
Totals	2380	2123	257	52.85%

In fact, Ms. Spencer's 155-vote margin of victory in one of the Bay Farm precincts – 300100, which just happens to include the Harbor Bay Club – alone was enough to put her over the top. This represented her largest vote margin in any precinct, and the 61.45% share was her second highest City-wide.

Given the closeness of the election, it might well be argued that Bay Farm carried Ms. Spencer into the Mayor's office.

What explains Ms. Spencer's decisive victory on Bay Farm Island? It's not as if Ms. Gilmore is unpopular with Bay Farm voters. In fact, in the three-way race for Mayor in 2010, she received a plurality of their votes, and her share

of the total ballots was almost exactly the same there as it was City-wide. Nor do we suppose that this year the firefighters' union decided to expend less effort, or spend less money, to promote Ms. Gilmore on Bay Farm Island than it did elsewhere in the City.

So there must be some *other* reason Ms. Spencer out-pollled the Mayor by 5.7 percentage points. To us, the most plausible explanation lies in the different positions taken (or not taken) by the two candidates on an issue unique to Bay Farm Island: whether Cowan should be allowed to bulldoze the existing Harbor Bay Club and replace it with 80 luxury homes.

No, said Ms. Spencer – unequivocally. Ms. Gilmore took the Fifth: My lips are sealed, she declared – on the advice of counsel. And Bay Farm voters went – overwhelmingly – with Ms. Spencer.

This wasn't mere happenstance. When Cowan announced his scheme last April, it enraged many Bay Farm residents, particularly those in the Centre Court neighborhood where the existing Club is located, who objected to the loss of the nearby recreational facility and to the traffic and safety impacts of a new residential development. Led by financial analyst Tim Coffey, the opponents formed a citizens' group called Harbor Bay Neighbors and quickly gained more than 1,000 members.

The group employed grass-roots political techniques to oppose Cowan, with members publishing op-eds in *The Alamedan* and the *Alameda Sun* and speaking during the open-comment period at Council meetings. For his part, Cowan resorted to tactics familiar to the wily back-room operator that he is. He brought in Democratic party major donor and political fixer Willie Brown to lobby Mayor Gilmore and City Manager John Russo. "Willie and I both expect" support from the City, Cowan declared in an email to Ms. Gilmore and Mr. Russo, adding "if we see any indication otherwise it's going to be hell to pay."

As the November election approached, the Neighbors continued to follow their grass-roots strategy, preparing a questionnaire and interviewing the candidates. The key question was phrased in terms of whether the candidate supported "preserving" the Master Plan for the Harbor Bay development and thereby retaining the Club at its current site.

During the interviews with the Neighbors, Ms. Gilmore "declined to declare" a position on this key question. When the same question was asked at a candidate forum, Ms. Gilmore again ducked. It would be "ethically wrong" for her to address the issue, she said. Not one, but two, unidentified "city attorneys" had advised her that, if she took a public stand, she would be disqualified from voting on any application later filed by Cowan. She then gratuitously recommended that the other candidates keep their mouths shut, too.

Unfortunately for Ms. Gilmore, who herself is a Boalt Hall graduate, this "advice" was [legally unsound](#), and, as it turned out, politically unwise. Ms. Spencer didn't punt on the question. Both in her response to the Neighbors' questionnaire and at the candidate forums, Ms. Spencer declared support for the Master Plan and opposition to Cowan's proposal.

The Neighbors did not endorse any candidate for Mayor or Council. But they did distribute 5,000 flyers summarizing the candidates' responses to the questionnaire and urging residents to show their opposition to Cowan through their votes.

This get-out-the-vote effort appears to have succeeded. City-wide, 50.82 per cent of registered voters cast ballots.

On Bay Farm, the turnout was 53.53 per cent. And we have to believe that the information distributed by the Neighbors about the candidates' positions (or lack thereof) on the Harbor Bay Club issue made a difference in the result.

The Neighbors themselves are convinced that they had an impact on the outcome. “[T]he credit for the end result of this election goes to everyone that passed out an HBN flyer and/or talked to their neighbors about the issues,” Mr. Coffey stated in an email after the election. “Bay Farm clearly had a big impact and we had a lot to do with that.”

When we asked him to elaborate, Mr. Coffey took a larger view. “Maybe part of the reason is the 5,000 flyers HBN put into the community,” he told us, “but there were a lot of voters in Bay Farm – and Alameda – ready for change.” He went on:

Consider the number of residents opposed to the Mif Albright land swap who showed up at City Council (who unanimously rejected the swap) or the 80% of voters who amended the city charter to block disposal of public property without the approval of constituents or the 6,000 signatures collected by the Friends of Crown Beach. Those are compelling numbers and the incumbents never seemed to embrace their reality.

Bay Farm Island wasn't the only part of Alameda in which development was an issue in this election, and it wasn't the only such area in which Ms. Spencer rang up a significant victory over Ms. Gilmore.

There was also the northern waterfront, where developer Tim Lewis Communities has proposed to build 414 housing units and 30,000 square feet of commercial space on the site of the old Del Monte warehouse and two adjoining lots.

The neighborhood around the Del Monte project encompasses two voting precincts. Ms. Spencer got 58.41 per cent of the ballots cast for Mayor in these two precincts, winning 455 votes to 324 votes for Ms. Gilmore. Had the northern waterfront gone the other way, Ms. Gilmore would still be Mayor.

It probably would be a mistake to characterize the northern waterfront vote as a referendum on the Del Monte project or to attribute Ms. Spencer's superior performance solely to differences between the candidates about that particular project or the development issue generally.

True, Ms. Spencer once again made it quite clear during the campaign where she stood: She repeatedly invoked neighbors' concerns about traffic congestion and other impacts associated with development, and she specifically criticized the draft transportation demand management plan for the Del Monte project. Ms. Gilmore was far more enigmatic – and epigrammatic. To her, traffic was a “regional problem,” and “slowing down development is not a solution.” As far as we know, she never took a public stand on the Del Monte proposal. (Maybe she was following that same bad advice about candidates never expressing opinions about any matter voters cared about).

Nevertheless, we suspect that Del Monte in particular and development in general were on the minds of many northern waterfront voters when they went to the polls. Indeed, those voters undoubtedly included members of the PLAN! Alameda group who had devoted the last five months to evaluating, and responding to, the various iterations of Tim Lewis's plan for the former warehouse.

Like the Harbor Bay Neighbors, PLAN Alameda! sprung up as a result of citizens' alarm that a developer was pushing a proposal through the City's planning process without adequate consideration being given to its impact on the surrounding neighborhood. For the Harbor Bay Neighbors, the issue was how a residential development replacing the Harbor Bay Club would affect traffic and safety. For PLAN! Alameda, the issue was how a residential/retail development erected on the Del Monte warehouse site would affect traffic and street parking.

And like the Harbor Bay Neighbors, PLAN! Alameda took a grass-roots approach. Using Facebook, the group encouraged residents to attend, and speak at, public meetings. And so they did. Beginning in June, whenever the Del Monte project was on the Planning Board agenda, PLAN! Alameda members and other northern waterfront residents were there. This wasn't the much-maligned "Measure A" crowd, either. They didn't demand that *no* development take place; they just wanted to make sure that those calling the shots took account of neighborhood needs, not just the developer's desires or the planners' predilections.

To that end, PLAN! Alameda's leaders met with City staff and Tim Lewis representatives to try to work out a TDM plan that would alleviate the potential traffic and street parking problems. Ultimately, the residents convinced the majority of the Planning Board to reject the predictably dogmatic position taken by Board member John Knox White – who insisted that "unbundled" on-site parking was essential to make the TDM plan robust enough to suit him – and to recommend a plan calling for assigned parking spaces for new Del Monte warehouse residents.

Unlike Harbor Bay Neighbors, PLAN! Alameda did not get involved in the Mayoral or Council campaigns. In an Election Eve Facebook post, PLAN! Alameda leader Alison Greene stated that the group "had made a conscious decision" not to endorse any candidates. Given this position, we were not surprised when, in response to our request, Ms. Greene demurred from accepting credit – or blame – on behalf of PLAN! Alameda for Ms. Spencer's success with northern waterfront voters. "We know that people across Alameda think there is too much development, coming too fast," she told us, "but the emphasis in the neighborhood has been the parking."

Absent any evidence from exit polls, we're reluctant to attribute Ms. Spencer's victory on Bay Farm Island or along the northern waterfront entirely to her stance on development issues. But it's impossible to dismiss any connection between the two. Concerns about the plans for the Harbor Bay Club and the Del Monte warehouse surely motivated at least some of the voters in those two areas. In all likelihood those voters cast their ballots for Ms. Spencer. In a low turnout election like this one, they might indeed have determined the outcome.

If we're right, Ron and Tim should enjoy their leftovers from Ms. Spencer's Thanksgiving table. Otherwise, once the new Council is sworn in, crow may be the only item on the menu for them.

Sources: [2014 Certified Election Results](#)

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