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LOIS HENRY: UC President's visit didn't exactly clear the air

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I feel snubbed.

I know he said it was just bad timing.

But I can't help feeling it was me. Perhaps something I said?

University of California President Mark Yudof made a quick swing through the valley and stopped at Bakersfield High School last Tuesday to, somehow with a straight face, tell students that UC is still an affordable option for them. Ha! Good one.

Behind the scenes, I'd been bugging Yudof's people to have him meet with The Californian's Editorial Board after his gig at BHS. He was meeting with the Fresno Bee's edit board, after all. What are we? Chopped liver?

OK, fine, they finally told my boss. We'd get a half hour, from 2 to 2:30 p.m.

I let Yudof's front man know that I had some specific questions about his nominations to a certain state board.

You can imagine my disappointment when I got word last Friday, May 4, that Yudof wouldn't be popping in, not even for a measly half hour. He wanted to get to LA before traffic closed in. Oh, come on.

This dude hauls down more than \$800k a year in taxpayer loot including his housing allowance and pension. Plus he's a lawyer, for cripes sake. I'm pretty sure he could handle a pipsqueak like me.

All I wanted to know was why Yudof keeps nominating the same guy -- John Froines -- to the Scientific Review Panel despite Froines' 28-year run on the panel. Not to mention that Froines and several others were booted off the panel in 2010 after a lawsuit pointed out they hadn't been properly reappointed in decades.

And why, I wanted to know, does Yudof's nomination letter this last go-round say he's putting Froines on the list at the behest of Assembly Speaker John Perez?

As background, the Scientific Review Panel is a state board that has provided the underpinning for much of California's air pollution regulation by declaring which substances are toxic air contaminants.

It consists of nine scientists who are supposed to provide a strictly scientific basis for the regulations. No politics allowed, or at least that was the intent of the original law under which it was created. Which is why nominations have to come from Yudof's office, supposedly beyond the reach of politics.

My contention, however, is that this panel has been polluted by politics for years and now it's happening with Yudof's complicity.

Although Yudof ditched me, the UC bigwigs did have Provost Larry Pitts speak to me by phone about my questions and concerns.

Though he doesn't have anything to do with the nomination process and hadn't read Yudof's letter, he assured me that "as far as I can tell, the UC's roll has not been corrupted."

Uh huh.

He initially said that the nomination process, as outlined in California Health and Safety Code 39670 and 39671, allowed for incumbent panel members to be renominated at the request of the appointing authority, such as Speaker Perez.

No, it doesn't. It also doesn't say it's cool for the appointing authorities to suggest who Yudof should put on his nomination list.

I would assert, as I did to Provost Pitts, that the spirit of the law establishing the Scientific Review Panel clearly intended to remove politics.

Since Perez, and the other appointing bodies -- the California Environmental Protection Agency Secretary and Senate Rules Committee -- are politicians (i.e. full o' politics) Yudof shouldn't be taking direction from them. Sheesh!

As for Froines, the former "Chicago Seven" member has made no bones about the fact that he believes science should be used to alter society. He's an admitted activist who has dedicated his life to coming up with the "science" to promote an agenda.

Part of that agenda, according to the mission statement of his Southern California Particle Center, is to prove that PM2.5, tiny particulate matter from dust and exhaust, is a rampant killer that must be eradicated.

That means clamping down ever harder on diesel truck exhaust and other industry emissions, regardless of the economic impacts or the diminishing, if any, benefits.

Numerous studies have surfaced in recent years showing PM2.5 isn't killing anyone in California; the California Air Resources Board has been forced to lower its death estimates several times. But with his de facto lifetime position on the Scientific Review Panel, Froines has been able to ignore those facts and pursue his agenda.

He couldn't do that without the support of Perez, a powerful member of the Democratic caucus who's reliant on liberal environmentalist support for reelection. Supporting Froines makes Perez a "green" candidate.

And, of course, Perez happens to be one of the politicians holding the purse strings to the UC budget, a fact I'm sure Yudof is keenly aware of.

Ah, the circle of life.

While Yudof wouldn't confab with me on these topics, Provost Pitts did his best.

"I would argue strongly, definitively, that we are unaware of any political pressure with regards to who goes on the nomination list," he said. "Whether there are politics once the list leaves the office of the president, I can't tell you one way or the other."

Oh, believe me, it's not the PM2.5 making it hard to breathe, it's the politics.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at <http://www.bakersfield.com>, call her at (661) 395-7373 or e-mail lhenry@bakersfield.com

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