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Music perks rock Mountain View council

FREE SHORELINE TICKETS RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT CONFLICT OF INTEREST

By Julie Patel
Mercury News

Mountain View City Councilwoman Rosemary Stasek has rocked out to bands like the Beastie Boys and Rage Against the Machine at Shoreline Amphitheatre.

Councilwoman Mary Lou Zoglin has soaked up the melodies of the San Francisco Symphony concert. Mayor Matt Pear has swayed to the country tunes of Kenny Chesney.

And it's all been free, thanks to VIP passes Shoreline gives city leaders. The perks -- valued at \$8,750 apiece -- are raising questions over whether council members have a conflict of interest when it comes to the outdoor amphitheater, which brings some of music's biggest stars to town -- along with crowds and traffic snarls.

On Tuesday, most council members saw no conflict, voting unanimously to allow Shoreline to kick off several upcoming concerts earlier than the usual 7 p.m. start time.

Councilman Greg Perry, who has turned down his tickets since taking office last year, said the perks make the council look beholden to Shoreline and its corporate parent, Clear Channel.

“If we all take free tickets, we're not in a great place to do as good a job defending residents,” said Perry, who voted for the earlier start time. “There shouldn't be any doubt about the city council's motivation for decisions, and people shouldn't have to wonder if we're getting special perks.”

Perry pointed out at the council meeting Tuesday that early shows cause traffic problems.

“Traffic on Shoreline does back up to the freeway and further,” said Perry, who voted for the change but wants to see Shoreline come up with ideas to help ease traffic before it makes a similar request next year.

See no conflict

Other city council members don't think the box seat tickets -- or the VIP parking -- present a conflict

because, among other things, they say they remain critical of Shoreline. The city and Clear Channel are suing each other over claims of breach of contract and dishonest accounting.

In fact, Stasek and Pear say the free passes help them make better decisions about Shoreline because they have firsthand experience going to concerts.

Since Shoreline opened 18 years ago, the city has received 300 general admission tickets and 20 box seat tickets for each event. Council members get two box seat tickets each -- valued at \$8,750 -- and the rest are given to city employees and community groups.

State law forbids any official who receives a gift valued at \$340 or more from voting on issues related to the giver. The city's code of conduct also prohibits gifts of that amount from any one source -- though there are some loopholes for tickets.

Perry said the city attorney has told him the Shoreline passes technically have no value, since they are not bought and sold. But Perry doesn't buy that argument, so he donates his tickets to the Mountain View Educational Foundation, which auctions them to raise money for schools.

Zoglin, ironically, sees that as a conflict of interest.

"I considered doing something like that, but decided against it because it would bring me personal publicity and gratitude from whatever agency I gave it to," said Zoglin, who said she shares some of her tickets with friends and family and gives about half to city employees.

Pear gives most of his away to non-profits and people who help the city. He said he doesn't see it as a conflict because the free tickets were stipulated in Shoreline's original contract, and they allow council members to keep a finger on the town's pulse.

Aaron Siuda, spokesman for Bill Graham Presents, the Clear Channel concert promoter that operates Shoreline, said the company does not expect favors from council members in exchange for the free passes.

Stasek doesn't have any guilt trips about the perk.

"I'm a huge music fan," she said. "It's a very nice benefit for people who put in all of their time and don't get paid very much."

City council members make \$500 a month for the part-time position, according to Pear.

Traffic flow data

Stasek says going to the concerts lets her check out how traffic is flowing, how alcohol is being distributed and how security is being handled.

"I'm not going to say it's a burden on me. I enjoy the concerts, but it also completely informs my ability to deal with them," she said.

"When Shoreline comes and paints too rosy of a picture I can say, 'No. This is what I've seen,'" Stasek added. "I'm probably the council member who goes to the most shows. It's just my thing. But I'm probably the most vocally critical member about Shoreline."

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