

Bakersfield Californian Commentary, Wednesday, July 8, 2015:

Councilman Harold Hanson calls for ban on personal fireworks

It had nothing to do with me. I swear.

In the end, it was the irresponsible 4th of July revelers themselves who convinced Bakersfield City Councilman Harold Hanson that enough is enough.

Hanson told me he will call for a full-on ban of all personal fireworks at the council's July 22 meeting and refer the issue to the Legislation and Litigation Committee.

Professional shows are fine, he said.

"But unfortunately, it's time for the rest of it to go."

The two biggest deciding factors for him were the city's inability to police illegal fireworks because of all the legal stuff providing cover and the cost to the public.

"I've always said government intrusion on people's lives drives me crazy and this is just one more takeaway," he said. "But it comes down to public safety and it's very expensive as well."

He was particularly concerned with the fact that a house burned down in his ward for the second year in a row because of illegal fireworks.

Last year, Beth Kurtz lost her home and this year it happened to Sandra Cardenas.

The Bakersfield Fire Department estimated the loss of the Kurtz home at about \$250,000 last year. The Cardenas' home and its contents were estimated as a \$500,000 loss.

"I just couldn't believe that," Hanson said of the destroyed homes. "Good lord, illegal fireworks are out of control."

I was only able to get phone calls back from two other council members, Terry Maxwell and Bob Smith.

If they're any indication, Hanson can't expect much support.

Smith told me regulation rarely solves a problem. When I pointed out little things like stop signs and food safety regulations (not to mention bike lanes, ahem) seem to have saved an awful lot of lives, he added, "Without the support of the populace. People have to be behind it."

He wasn't even in favor of tightening existing regulations such as shortening the time fireworks can be set off because he didn't believe the public was in favor of it.

He mentioned traffic speeds and how they're set using studies on how fast a majority of people are driving. Except, I pointed out, when fatalities are a regular occurrence, then speeds can be changed regardless.

"Yes," he acknowledged. "There are extreme circumstances where you could change things."

I waited. One, two, three...

"I suppose your argument is fireworks are presenting an extreme circumstance?" he asked.

Well, considering two families have lost homes in just the last two years, the public regularly spends hundreds of thousands of dollars fighting fires and caring for runaway animals terrified by fireworks — oh and one man was killed by fireworks in 2004 — yes, I would say my argument is that fireworks present an "extreme circumstance" that our leaders should address.

Maxwell, meanwhile, did agree with the idea of limiting when fireworks can be set off to just the night of July 4 rather than the four nights currently allowed under Bakersfield and Kern County ordinances.

"That's the holiday we're celebrating, after all," he said

Otherwise, no, he would not support a ban on personal fireworks. And he was mad that I called politicians "chickens" in my last column for refusing to consider a ban. Oh well.

Both he and Smith advocated for greater personal responsibility rather than a ban. Hmm. Yet they didn't feel having greater personal responsibility was the answer when they voted for a completely useless ordinance barring "aggressive" panhandling at the behest of downtown business owners.

Council members Chris Parlier, Ken Weir, Willie Rivera and Jacquie Sullivan did not return my calls so it remains to be seen how they will respond to Hanson's call for a ban.

I, for one, applaud Hanson's stance and his courage.

It takes a lot of grit for someone to change their mind. Especially publicly.

I've taken the pulse of city and county leaders just about every year after the 4th of July for the past eight years on banning personal fireworks. Hanson has always said he didn't want to punish the many law-abiding citizens using fireworks safely in order to rein in a few bad apples.

After talking with law enforcement, however, he realized the bad apples have taken over the barrel.

That's not the half of it, according to Bakersfield Fire Chief Doug Greener, who went out with the enforcement teams on Saturday night. (By the way, no politicians I spoke with have been on a ride-along with fireworks teams. Which means they have no idea what an impossible task enforcement really is.)

Aside from legal fireworks creating an inadvertent mask for illegal stuff, Greener said, "safe and sane" are now being used purposely as cover.

"The ploy is to purchase a good number of legal, "safe and sane" fireworks, set out 100 or so cardboard cones, then blend the illegals in with the legals," he wrote in an email. "Light five legals and shoot off a roman candle. Light five more legals, then discharge a mortar."

"BFD units round the corner and it appears as though everyone is having a quaint, old-timey Fourth of July, complete with little showers of harmless sparks."

Even the drunken mobs who are less sophisticated intentionally fire illegal stuff off randomly to try and confuse enforcement teams.

"And when we do roll up in time to catch someone, it's very obvious that people think they know how to work the system," he wrote.

His team approached a home in Campus Park where roman candles had been discharged. The mother at the house spouted off: "You have no way to know for sure it came from here. Everyone is shooting illegal fireworks off in this neighborhood," according to Chief Greener.

What a wonderful example she set for her children. But that's the kind of mentality Greener said the firefighter/law enforcement teams regularly face out there.

So, Councilmen Maxwell and Smith, how do you instill greater personal responsibility in someone like that?

For Greener, it was handing her a \$1,500 ticket.

Anyhow, I wish Hanson all the luck in the world and hope members of the public fed up with fireworks and all their attendant ills will show their support.

Then, of course, we need to tackle the county. But that's another story.

Biomass incentives offered

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Federal financial incentives now are being offered to farmers and forest owners interested in providing biomass — such as dead or diseased trees or orchard wastes — to approved biomass energy plants.

Applications for the Biomass Crop Assistance Program are being accepted by the U.S. Farm Service Agency, including through the agency's office in Stockton.

Incentives of up to \$11.5 million are available. Most funds are expected to support removal of dead or diseased trees from National Forest and Bureau of Land Management public lands. Orchard wastes and other farm residues also qualify.

Biomass must be delivered to an FSA-approved facility, which includes the DTE Stockton LLC plant at the Port of Stockton.

The agency also is planning a series of public meetings about the program, proposed improvements and an environmental review. One of those meetings is July 14 in Sacramento.

For more information, go online to bcappeis.com or fsa.usda.gov/bcap, or contact the Stockton FSA office at 3422 W. Hammer Lane, Suite A, or call (209) 472-7127.