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My Turn: Fireworks, the next step

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Fireworks, the next step

When Sue Pemberton was a kid, I bet she found all the candy at the Easter egg hunt. Now that she's all grown up she applies her super power to picking up litter at the beach. One of the things she has found is a lot of fireworks litter after the 4th of July celebrations, which she began to point out to anyone who would listen. Eventually the City responded and convened a fireworks task force to address the problem of fireworks litter on the beach. I was an alternate on that task force, which put together a list of recommendations that were approved by the council just in time for this year's 4th of July celebration.

The changes included reducing the beach area where fireworks are allowed, increased public awareness about fireworks litter, and increased post-celebration cleanups by the non-profit groups that sell the fireworks. I went to the beach on the 4th to see how well the changes went and can say that there is a lot of room for improvement.

The main problem is that the areas of Linda Mar beach where fireworks are no longer allowed were ablaze with fireworks (both legal and illegal) and even several large bonfires. It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that the policy was failure and the only way to really get fireworks under control is to ban them from the entire beach, but I spoke with Police Chief Jim Tasa, and he is confident that next year they can do a much better job of enforcing the new laws, so perhaps we should withhold judgment on that for another year.

In the meantime there is a lot more that we can do. The problem with the new policies is that they only address one little corner of the problem: litter from legal fireworks on 4th of July. Yes the litter from these fireworks being set off at the beach is a real problem and it's great that we are addressing it, but the greater problem is that our community is bombarded with illegal fireworks all year round. And those fireworks are traumatizing people, pets and wild animals alike, with deafening noise, blinding flashes and toxic smoke, not to mention a serious fire hazard. Our present policy isn't exactly the equivalent of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, but it's close.

So what can we do? Well, we could ban legal fireworks, which would certainly help curtail the illegal ones, but there is no alternative way to bring in the \$100,000 a year that the firework sales bring in for our non-profits. And safe and sane fireworks do have their charm, although I could do without the Piccolo Petes, which are the sonic equivalent of a screaming tea pot crossed with Yoko Ono.

Fortunately there are a few legitimate options available that we have not yet considered. In researching the topic I learned that several communities offer rewards for information that leads to an arrest for illegal fireworks. For instance, Norwich CA, a suburb of LA, offers a \$500 reward. This is a form of "crowd-sourcing," enlisting the general public to perform a task, which can be difficult to do otherwise.

In Pacifica we have a culture that has evolved over the decades of otherwise law-abiding citizens illegally purchasing and setting off illegal fireworks. It is a social activity - half the fun is impressing your guests with massive mortars that would make the pros jealous. Now imagine how it would feel if any of your guests could potentially get \$500 for turning you in. I suspect for a lot of people it just wouldn't be worth it anymore. This program would be virtually free to implement, because the city collects a \$1,000 administrative fine for each conviction.

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Another option is one that Chief Tasa suggested, and that is a Social Host Ordinance. This type of ordinance - usually used to prevent underage drinking — holds the owner or parent responsible for illegal activities in a home, as well as any subsequent harm such as drunk driving accidents that may ensue. Applying this strategy towards fireworks could provide a strong disincentive and make it easier to prosecute for illegal fireworks. Like the reward idea, the key to the Social Host Ordinance is to get the word out to the public, for maximum deterrent effect. There may be more ideas that we can come up with, and we need to seriously consider all of them. If we can't get the illegal fireworks under control it is inevitable that all fireworks will be banned. Either that or send Sue Pemberton after the illegal ones. She can find anything.

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Ian Butler is a member of the Pacifica Beach Coalition

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