

Letter to the Editor, Ojai Valley News
From James McEachen, Ojai, CA

Golden State Water: A Flood of Empty Promises

As most Ojai residents know, last year a massive rupture in a Golden State water main on Ojai Avenue effectively destroyed the Ojai Playhouse. On July 20th we will mark the one-year anniversary of the event that we were told would only temporarily close the Ojai Playhouse. While repairs on both the main line and the theater advanced quickly for the first few months after the disaster, it has now been over six months since any significant work has been done. Responsibility for this long hiatus can be laid squarely at the feet of the Golden State Water company and is yet another example of Golden State's disregard and lack of respect for this community. This situation needs to be immediately remedied by Golden State and their parent company, American States Water.

As president of the Ojai Film Society from 2011 through 2014, I had the pleasure of working with Khaled Al Awar, owner of the Ojai Playhouse and one of the finest people I have ever known. In 2013, Khaled made a huge commitment to the Playhouse and to our community by spending more than \$100,000 to update the theater's projection equipment to the latest, state of the art, digital equipment. At a time when large multiplexes and 3D franchises dominate theatrical exhibition and distribution, this was a big deal. Not many single screen theaters are left anywhere in North America, and the fact that Ojai has one, enriches our lives immeasurably. While the Libbey Bowl may be an icon for visitors to Ojai, it is only used on rare occasions, leaving the Ojai Playhouse as the cultural epicenter of our community. I cannot tell you how many times I have been stopped in the street and asked about the status of the theater and its repairs. For the better part of this year, I expressed great confidence that Golden State would do the right thing and I shared that sentiment with everyone who approached me. At this point, I would say that my confidence has been completely eroded by Golden State's stalling, glad-handing, and an endless parade of insurance adjusters and changing stories.

At present, Golden State tells us that the primary reason we are in this dilemma is the simple fact that Golden State Water reached its "limit of damages" on its primary line of insurance. We are told that there is a secondary insurer that covers damages exceeding the rather paltry million-dollar limit of the primary policy, but to date, that group of insurers has been exceedingly hesitant to honor the policy from which they benefited in the form of premium payments. The "best news" we have to date is that "a new lawyer has been assigned to the case" for the insurer. To my way of thinking, that is as incremental and non-definitive a report of progress as I have ever heard.

All consideration of insurance policies aside, and regardless of what those policies will and will not cover, Golden State and American States Water are responsible for the destruction of the Ojai Playhouse. Their liability for damages is in no way restricted by the limits of the insurance they carry, or the caprice of the executives who administer it. American States Water is, after all, a multi-billion-dollar Wall Street-traded company, not a retired pensioner with a fixed income and limited resources. The cost of repairing the theater should not be an issue.

Sadly, Golden State is not stepping up and is telling us that if the company assumes direct responsibility for the damages in disregard of its secondary insurer's process, Golden State will never be reimbursed for what they must spend on repairs. While it may be reasonable to wait on this process for a few months, the time for patience has long since passed and it is time for Golden State and American States Water to embrace its responsibilities as a "corporate citizen" and repair the damages they have caused to the Playhouse and to this community—regardless of what the consequences may be with their secondary insurer.

In closing, I should point out that I am no longer a member of the Ojai Film Society's board of directors, nor can I speak for the owners of the Playhouse. In truth, I do not know what hope there is in waiting for Golden State Water to behave as a responsible community player, given the negligence they have demonstrated in maintaining our water system, the longstanding indifference they have shown to Ojai rate payers and their concerns, their disregard for our democratic elections, their defiance of both the California Superior and Appellate Courts, and their perpetual pursuit of endless litigation.

As a community, we have done everything we can in a legal sense to encourage Golden State to behave responsibly. Are we getting to the point where our only recourse will be to stop paying our water bills? To use a movie metaphor, is this our "Spartacus" moment where we must each individually risk something to oppose the abuse of an imperious corporate overlord with some grass-roots action? If that is the case, please sign me up. I am willing to be the first member of this community to stand up and defiantly proclaim, "I am Spartacus!" I know scores of others will follow.

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