

# Prop. L – dubious campaign for old theaters

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Francisco attorney James Sutton to incorporate Save Our Theaters last November and act as its treasurer. Sutton has since left Stephens' employ. According to campaign records, he was owed \$16,256, which may have hastened his departure.

However, Stephens did pay Tim Smith of Rohnert Park \$20,000, as of June 30, to hire petition-gatherers to collect 17,000 signatures in less than two weeks, according to the Save Our Theater Web site. They went to movie theaters and told people in line that their favorite theater would close if they didn't sign the petition. This happened in front of the Balboa Theater on 38th Avenue, according to Gary Meyer, the Balboa's owner, whose theater manager saw the spiel written down on a petition-gatherer's clipboard.

The resulting initiative, Proposition L, not only gives Stephens' group an estimated \$10 million but, according to the ballot argument against it, signed by Mayor Newsom and all 11 supervisors (a first, that): "No government entity or agency can audit or review how 'Save Our Theaters' will use our funds." The initiative also requires a two-thirds vote of the electorate to change or overturn it.

The signatures were turned in and duly approved on July 7. Stephens must have been feeling pretty pleased. So much so that he started talking to the press. He told the SF Weekly that Prop. L could help young gang-bangers out at Hunters Point. "Maybe somebody can play a gang member in a movie. They can say, 'I have a job now. I have a dream. I don't have to deal drugs. I have a career as a filmmaker.' This is about helping the little guy."

Stephens told the Chronicle: "The hotel tax should be used for what is going to increase the occupancy of hotels." How does giving Greg Stephens \$10 million achieve that goal? "People working on movies stay in hotels and their movies become commercials advertising San Francisco. That helps the general fund."

Not surprisingly, it was gently suggested that Stephens stop talking to the press. After a week of trying to get ahold of him, I can say he has carried out his orders faithfully.

A new front man, Jeff Hardy, who is located in San Francisco, was brought in as SOT president. Hardy has a firm that helps filmmakers find financing. He speculated it might take \$70 million to \$90 million and quite some time to restore the 13 movie houses listed on Save Our Theaters' Web site as nonoperational or endangered.

According to the SOT Web site, the city has not hosted a single major motion picture in two years and "hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue" are being lost. To correct this oversight, while waiting for the theaters to be restored, President Hardy would use the \$10 million yearly stipend to create a \$15 million to \$25 million slush fund to finance new productions "that meet stringent business standards."

To help him choose the lucky filmmakers who would be funded, Hardy has brought in Mike Doban of ArcAngelo Entertainment, of North Hollywood. Doban and Hardy have worked together to secure funding, most recently on "Spin," James Redford's directorial debut due for release Oct. 15. Despite director Redford's father, Robert, it is not expected to set any box office records.

Doban also does the booking for Metropolitan Theaters of Los Angeles, which has 21 screens, mostly in Santa Barbara County, and is owned by the Crownin family of Los Angeles. Starting to get the picture?

Just for the record, Greg Stephens, Jim Hardy and Mike Doban have nothing to do with major motion pictures. When asked what other films he had help secure funding for, Hardy mentioned "Dream with the Fishes," an indie shot in 26 days in San Francisco and released back in '97 by Sony Classics and 3 Ring Circus. It was reviewed somewhat favorably by the local press and personally I liked it, but calculators have a hard time dealing with numbers as low as this film took in.

But come Nov. 2, these three could be San Francisco's film czars.

Four, actually. Let's not forget Paul Grisez, the moneyman. Grisez has contributed the only

serious money to the campaign, \$4,000, according to records filed with the secretary of state. He has also loaned the campaign \$15,000. Stephens had loaned the campaign \$12,723 as of June 30. (The next filing deadline is Oct. 5.)

When reached at his office, Charles Grisez – Paul's father, who has an office on Chestnut just down from Greg Stephens' mailbox – exploded upon hearing that his son was listed as having given or loaned \$19,000 to the Prop. L campaign.

"That's way, way off base. My son never gave anywhere near that kind of money to something like that. Whoever is telling you that is wrong," he said. Told it was listed in a disclosure statement filed with the city's Ethics Commission, Grisez said, "Somebody's pulling a fraud on us. What you're telling me is fraudulent stuff."

Later the same day, while visiting the realtor's office, I spoke with Charles Grisez's wife ("one of them," she said) who is Paul's mother. "That doesn't sound like something my son would get involved with," she said, writing down the information I gave her on my business card. "Not those numbers. I'll ask him the next time I see him," she assured me.

Whether Paul Grisez has put up \$19,000 as of June 30 or not, one thing is for sure. If few people in the film community have every head of Greg Stephens, nobody has ever heard of Paul Grisez, who listed himself as a self-employed real estate appraiser, and may work for his father.

You want to talk obscure: Google Paul Grisez and the Toledo (Ohio) Blade's report that he caught 27 fish weighing 49.81 pounds to win second place in a fishing contest. Grisez has been out of town recently so we couldn't ask him who came in first.

The controller's office estimates that Prop. L would take from the general fund the equivalent of annual salaries and benefits for 105 firefighters or police officers; or 50% of all general fund support to the district attorney office; or all city funding for HIV/AIDS in the Department of Public Health.

The combined city contribution to the San Francisco Opera, Symphony and Ballet last year was just a little over \$2.2 million. As Todd Rydstrom of the Controller's Office exclaimed, "We're talking serious money."

Yet Prop. L asks voters to put \$10 million in the hands of two guys from L.A., one local small-time film financier and someone who came in second in a fishing contest?

Motive is a difficult thing to assess in politics. Stephens and Paul Grisez, the ones reportedly putting up the money for the Prop. L campaign, may be two guys a bit myopic on the subject of single-screen neighborhood theaters. Or they might have a plan to reap many times the thousands of dollars they've invested in Prop. L. Only they know for sure.

This being politics, with \$10 million a year at stake, their word is the last thing you would want to take by way of assurance. And that's all Prop. L offers.

Their timing would do Alfred Hitchcock



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

proud. As Alfonso Felder of the Neighborhood Theaters points out, "It's a good bet the only thing half the people voting Nov. 2 will know about Prop. L is what they read on the ballot."

There has already been one meeting of the film community opposed to Prop. L, at Tosca's on Sept. 28. Plans to shoot a trailer opposing Prop. L the first week in October have been set and Gary Meyer of the Balboa, Anita Monga of the Castro and Bill Banning of the Roxie had agreed to show it in their theaters. The head of the Landmark Theater chain is waiting to see the finished product before deciding. None of the 100 or so people at the meeting had ever been approached by Stephens with his scheme prior to it going on the ballot. As Jennifer Matz, legislative aide to Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier and point person for the opposition, said: "I'm offended by the lack of respect Greg Stephens showed to the film community by utterly ignoring them in putting this initiative together."

Said Matz, "We have a campaign that has been organized but we don't have a Web site, a single check or much time before the election. God help us."

Let's hope he does. ■

**The realty office** of Charles Grisez, on Chestnut Street, not far from Greg Stephens' mailbox office; "My son never gave anywhere near that kind of money."

## Vote Yes On A

- Builds supportive housing for the homeless
- Builds affordable housing for San Franciscans in poverty
- Helps working San Franciscans buy their first home
- Creates up to 9,000 new jobs
- Provides important safeguards for San Francisco taxpayers and neighborhoods

### SAN FRANCISCANS FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE CITY ARE UNITED FOR PROPOSITION A

Prop A is endorsed by a coalition representing every corner of our city, including the Mayor, a unanimous Board of Supervisors, business, labor, health, religious leaders, and community groups from every neighborhood in the city. Your role is crucial. Please vote Yes on A.

Paid for by Homes for the City, Committee for Proposition A