

Ceremony on Sixth Street: Baldwin Hotel is back

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL

by Phil Tracy

The ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the reopening of the Baldwin House Hotel on Aug. 16 was a special occasion for a couple of reasons. It offered the specter of two dozen hotel tenants cheering their landlord, and it marked the quickest turnaround between an SRO hotel fire and its return to occupancy – 10 weeks.

The history of SRO hotels that catch fire is not a happy one. Six hotels located on Sixth Street have succumbed to fire in the last 15 years. Only the Baldwin reopened. In the same 15 years, the city has lost a total of 1,463 low-cost rooms as a result of fire.

While conspiracists nudge one another and insinuate that landlords had the hotels torched for the insurance, the usual culprit is a hot plate. They are illegal to use in hotel rooms, and all but impossible for people on low, fixed incomes to resist. They short out the hotel's old, substandard wiring and light up items that accidentally touch them. Another culprit is people who smoke in bed.

Once an SRO goes up in flames, all the incentives run

opposite restoring it. It's off the tax rolls since it's worthless. It can be torn down and replaced with an office building. And there's not much money to be made in providing housing to low-income people in the first place.

Which is what made the Baldwin's reopening all the more unique.

The ceremony itself was a modest affair. Sam Dodge, the Central City SRO Collaborative program director, acted as master of ceremonies. The year-old collaborative works to increase safety and improve living conditions in the central city's SROs. Ironically, it had held a fire prevention and survival workshop in the Baldwin the month before the June blaze. It had also helped to secure the city's extensions of rent vouchers for the Baldwin residents, allowing them to remain in the city and get back their old rooms once the hotel reopened.

Dodge said a few opening words, then began introducing the other people standing beside the ribbon: George Smith from the mayor's office and Supervisor Chris Daly. Antoinetta Stadlman, the collaborative's tenant representa-



Landlord Mike Amin, left, prepares to cut the ribbon at the reopening of the Baldwin House Hotel.

tive for the Baldwin, was also introduced and praised for her tireless efforts on behalf of the tenants. Stadlman was the only tenant to remain in the hotel and acted as go-between for the tenants and the landlord.

The landlord, Mike Amin, was the guest of honor and got to cut the ribbon. A native of India, Amin came to the United States and worked in the hotel trade for 25 years. He purchased the Baldwin five years ago. After the ribbon cutting, Amin was asked why he worked so hard to reopen his hotel when so many other land-

lords had not bothered. "They were homeless," he said, referring to the Baldwin's residents. "They are my tenants."

During his remarks, Chris Daly suggested the Baldwin Hotel fire could serve as an example for how any future SRO Hotel fires could be handled. "This is now a model, if there ever is another fire again," he said.

But reality contradicts him. First, the fire was small. In fact there was fire damage in only two rooms. All the other rooms suffered water damage, much easier to repair. Secondly, the Baldwin had a strong tenant

leadership, which helped to keep the residents banded together during the 10 weeks they were living in scattered hotels. Finally, the Baldwin had Mike Amin, who cared about his tenants, and what happened to them. The chances of all those considerations coming together again at the next SRO hotel fire, and there surely will be a next one, is remote.

Still, it was a success this time and watching the tenants toasting each other with champagne was a genuine pleasure. There aren't many happy endings on Sixth Street. ■

City Hall segue – mean motor scooter of a protest

by Phil Tracy

San Francisco prides itself on being a city where things get started first, particularly things contentious. So it comes as no surprise that the steps of City Hall saw the first-ever protest of the Segway motorized scooter on Monday, Aug. 26. It almost seemed our civic duty.

Motorized scooters have been around for about 10 years now, offering their own distinctive contribution to noise pollution. The Segway scooter differs from all the others in two ways. The wheels are aligned in the manner of a chariot rather than a skateboard. And it's the only scooter with a bill set to pass the Legislature that would legalize its use on sidewalks.

As protests go, this one was pretty perfunctory. It being the last week in August, the press coverage was predictably heavy. You could call a press conference the last week of August to announce you hate your mother-in-law and at least two TV stations would send camera crews. This protest netted three, plus reporters for both dailies, a couple of radio people and me. All told, there were 20 protesters on the steps addressing 10 media people and some guy in weird sunglasses who theoretically was the audience.

The first to speak was Bill Price, president of the Senior Action Network, which claims to

represent 150 organizations that collectively have a membership of 30,000 seniors. After intoning a lament for the sanctity of city streets, Bill reached for his own personal best in the field of public inanity by leading the assembled in a rousing chorus of "Stop the Segway slaughter."

Next up was Jeanne Lynch, who hadn't been slaughtered by a Segway, as it happened, but had been hit by a bike awhile back. She testified to the long-lasting effect of encounters with machines on city streets. "I'm still recovering from my injuries," she told the man in the weird sunglasses.

After that, Supervisor Chris Daly stood up and characterized the Segway legislation as "dangerous" to seniors, children, the disabled and the blind, although something that can attain a speed of up to 12 mph and weighs up to 300 pounds, depending on the weight of its operator, could theoretically be dangerous to anyone. As it happened, the supervisor had a resolution opposing the Segway legislation ready for the Board of Supes. He confidently predicted the resolution would pass that day. In



Supervisor Chris Daly joins the Senior Action Network protest.

fact, it was sent to committee.

After that they shuffled up a blind person and someone in a motorized wheelchair (don't get me started) and then called it a day. An article made the bottom of the front page of the Chronicle's Bay Area section, which pretty much counts for a home run publicity-wise.

Just how much good it all did was another matter. The Senior Action Network took exception to the Segway scooter after a demonstration of the device by the Segway people went awry. The group's executive director, Bob Livingston, plowed into a bunch of furniture while trying to operate it at an early August meeting of the SAN board. The board later voted to oppose the Segway bill, which ingeniously defines anyone operating one of these things as a pedestrian. A spokesman for Segway explained this reinterpretation of the word for a

walking human being was justified because the Segway, along with human beings, was dynamically stable. I did not make that last statement up.

Just how dangerous the Segway scooter is remains a matter of conjecture. A San Francisco

Post Office spokesman claims his agency is currently testing the device on the streets of San Francisco, although no one I know has seen one in action. He says, no problems — to date. The only reported accident so far involved an Atlanta, Ga., "Progress Ambassador" (apparently what they're calling cops in Atlanta these days) who injured his knee while going

up a driveway. The city of Atlanta is reported to have shelled out \$9,000 apiece for 10 of these things, which may signal Atlanta's determination to contest our city's vaunted title as kook capital of America.

So far, about half the states have legalized these new machines, which is a tribute to Segway LLC's lobbying prowess if nothing else. The battle is being carried forward here in California by state Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Martinez, who sits on the state Senate Transportation Committee and presumably knows a reliable campaign contributor when he sees one. A version of the bill has passed the Assembly and needs to clear the Senate again before going to our governor, whose willingness to stand up to lobbyists who have nothing to offer but a campaign contribution is legendary. We'll provide updates as they become available. ■

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