Simi Valley Acorn

Bad move by Veolia to ban media

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Representatives from Veolia Transportation as well as U.S. Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-Simi Valley) deserve kudos for organizing Monday's meeting with victims of the 2008 Metrolink train crash and their families.

The tragic event that took the lives of 25 people and injured more than 130 has far from faded to the recesses of anyone's consciousness. That is due mostly to its overwhelming impact on local families but also to ongoing discussions about the $200-million fund that's been set aside to compensate victims. Those victims and their families remain emotionally scarred, not to mention fearful about what the future holds now that their lives have been forever altered.

That top officials with Veolia, the company responsible for hiring the man at the center of the crash—engineer Robert Sanchez— and a high-ranking political figure would willingly put themselves before what could have been a hornet's nest of raw emotion is admirable.

What's not so admirable about the meeting inside the Simi Valley City Council chambers was the request by Veolia Transportation— conveyed at the last minute through Gallegly's staff—to shut out the local media as a ground rule for its participation. The problems behind such a decision are twofold.

First, it's simply a poor public relations move by Veolia Transportation. The requirement—which also prevented any audio or video recordings by those inside the meeting—sends the message, whether true or not, that the company is hiding something. Another ground rule established for the meeting, which Gallegly spoke out against in a written statement, was that the company would not answer any direct questions or discuss the $200-million compensation cap. So, if only the victims and their families were talking, why was the company so concerned about the media listening?

The second problem is that by creating such a limitation, Veolia Transportation stole from those who wanted to speak a valuable platform for their words. Basically, Veolia let everyone know that while it was willing to listen, it was going to do everything it could to control the message.

That forced those speakers who wanted to have a voice beyond the chamber walls to express their gut-wrenching feelings a second time once they stepped outside and were greeted by news reporters.

For some family members, the opportunity to tell their tragic tale as often as possible is cathartic. For others, it is traumatic.

Either way, Veolia Transportation made a classless decision.

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