

Daily Review - Editorial - Saturday, November 13, 2004

Name changes usually not answer

WE'D like to take a moment to commend California State University, Hayward President Norma Rees for taking the time to appear at an Associated Students forum to answer some pointed questions about her proposal to change the school's name to give it broader appeal.

Now we'd like to challenge her even further to actually heed the nearly universal advice of the 100 or so students and others at the forum and consider dropping the proposal before California State University trustees vote on it at their January meeting.

What's in a name, anyway?

-- No less than the future of the university, if you buy the argument of Rees and her supporters, who claim the name change is needed to improve the university's image and to boost enrollment;

-- A huge portion of Hayward's prestige, if you believe the City Council and other leaders -- which, the Daily Review has made it clear, we do;

-- A considerable emotional investment and attachment, if you listen to many students, alumni and area residents.

We don't doubt Rees when she says her position is supported by careful deliberation that's based on a long investigative process; at the same time Rees herself admits that "this is a judgment call."

In the world of business and academia, name changes are nearly always judgment calls. Corporations generally are loath to change a name after spending decades of building goodwill for it. The exceptions for them tend to be made after a merger or acquisition; after a long evolution of the company's mission or customer base; or after management gets caught cooking the books, or the CEO with his hand in the cookie jar.

Professional sports franchises have a long history of name changes intended to broaden their appeal -- with mixed results, at best. The Warriors change to "Golden State" also was reflective of their move across the Bay; but considering the on-court product, readers can judge its overall effectiveness for themselves.

Then there's the case of the Los Angeles Angels, an early-60s expansion baseball franchise that eventually changed its name to the California Angels, to very little avail. Only after adopting the moniker "Anaheim" -- an even more site-specific name than its original -- did the team achieve great success on the field and in the stands.

Cal State Hayward and its home city have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship for four decades, but it doesn't necessarily follow that what's best for one is what's best for the other. Still, from what we've heard, we're convinced that the city of Hayward stands to lose a lot more from the name change than the university stands to gain from it.

The typical high school student might not have a clue how to find Purdue University on a map, but if she develops an interest in engineering, it won't take her long to put the school on her short list.

Changing the name of Cal State Hayward might be an easy way to broaden its appeal. Continuing to develop it into an educational center of excellence with an appeal so powerful that no student or patron would think of ignoring it by any name would be a lot harder -- and infinitely more effective.