

Change of Subject

OBSERVATIONS, REPORTS, TIPS, REFERRALS AND TIRADES

BY ERIC ZORN | E-mail | About | RSS



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What was Planned Parenthood afraid of in Aurora? Recent history has some answers

Oh, if only he had known, said Joe Scheidler.

If only he had known early in the construction process that a new 22,000-square-foot medical facility in Aurora was actually a Planned Parenthood clinic where abortions will be performed, Scheidler, president of the Pro-Life Action League, said he would have mobilized his forces to try to stop the project even before the foundation was poured.

"We don't play footsie," he said. "We use whatever legal means we can to stop abortion."

I asked Scheidler about specific tactics that Planned Parenthood feared he would have used in Aurora if he'd known what was coming:

Threatening contractors, sub-contractors and vendors with boycotts; picketing the homes of construction company executives; leafleting and demonstrating nearby with gory photographs to give locals a taste of the sort of protesting they could look forward to if they didn't persuade local officials to block the clinic.

"That wasn't an untoward fear," Scheidler said.

Nor was it unprecedented.

In Austin, Tex. four years ago, anti-abortion activist Chris Danze led an aggressive campaign against a proposed Planned Parenthood clinic that so intimidated the general contracting company that it resigned from the project two months after groundbreaking.

Danze's effort spidered through the building trades and it spread across the country, so that owners of small businesses – suppliers, technicians -- reportedly received hundreds of calls at work and at home warning them off the project. Some were said to have received bloody-fetus photos in the mail along with other literature.

The harassment forced Planned Parenthood to serve as its own general contractor and it delayed completion of the clinic by two months.

A similar campaign seems to be getting underway in Denver, where Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains plans to break ground in November on a \$4.2 million headquarters and clinic. Pickets are already staging protests outside the home of one of the contractors, according to Leslie Durgin, a senior vice president of the agency.

Sometimes it's hard to tell where the freedom of expression leaves off and the blackmail begins, particularly given that certain, unhinged anti-abortion activists have resorted to violent protest in the past.

But one thing's for sure -- Planned Parenthood didn't mislead and evade Aurora officials simply to avoid peaceful prayer vigils and protests against abortion.

"What happened in Austin is exactly why" the organization created and then hid behind Gemini Office Development, said Planned Parenthood Chicago Area president Steve Trombley.

The Aurora clinic was scheduled to open last week, but remains closed while city officials flail around for some way to revoke the occupancy permits they issued to Planned Parenthood in August, several weeks after news about the real identity of Gemini Office Development was on the front page of the Tribune.

"We knew from the start that we were going to be facing opponents with a long history of using harassment and intimidation to get their way," Trombley said.

He charged that protesters at the Aurora site have been portentously photographing the license plates of cars belonging employees training at the clinic.

What about *that*, Mr. Scheidler?

"We're finding out who works there," Scheidler explained without a hint of defensiveness. "And one way to discourage them from working there is to find out where they live, then go into their neighborhoods with a protest to let their neighbors know what they do for a living."

Schiedler said his forces plan to employ this tactic at first on "one or two workers who are just there because they want to make a little money, not because they necessarily want to be indiscriminately killing children."

The vivid demonstrations, he said, "are to let the neighbors know that if the abortion clinic goes in, it will be a center of attraction for protesters. They don't want to see these pictures all the time out there on the street, so we hope they'll go to the guys in charge and say 'We don't want those people here.'"

Now Joe Scheidler knows. And he's making up for lost time.