

Eye on Del Norte: A failure to communicate

January 24, 2023



What we've got here is a failure to communicate.

Those profound words were uttered by Strother Martin playing the role of Captain in the 1967 Paul Newman-starring classic movie, *Cool Hand Luke*.

That lack of communication played out in an unfortunate and ugly incident where public speaker Branden Bieber of Smith River addressed the Board of Supervisors at its January 10 meeting. Mr. Bieber expressed his concern and displeasure for a rubberstamp CONSENT Agenda item sending \$2.5 million State funding to hire more school psychologists to address mental health issues involving some of our children. Bieber questioned newly-appointed Board Chairman Darrin Short if parents would be part of the process in consulting with these professionals before any therapy is conducted. Fair question. Like an Easter Island statue, Short just stared back, said nothing, did nothing. The appearance was one of stark rudeness. Bieber continued and stated this funding was not in the best interests of Del Norte County and should be rejected. The speaker's three minutes expired and Short, at first gently, reminded the speaker his time at the dias was finished. Bieber continued with questions on some of the other 17 funded items on Consent Agenda. Then,

was reminded not so gently, his time had expired. According to the Brown Act, each agenda item permits an individual a separate three minute comment.

Short became increasingly more frustrated and then aggressively stepped up his gavel arm in an attempt to corral control and cutting the speaker's microphone. The chairman suddenly suspended the Meeting and called in Del Norte deputies to clear the Chambers and escort speaker Bieber from the dais.

This gesture was unnecessary and wholly inappropriate.

Short COULD have handled the incident professionally and productively. Short's inexperience and palpable disrespect for the speaker was unprofessional, impolite and an abject failure to effectively communicate.

What Supervisor Short SHOULD have done is consult his Board colleagues for a consensus on whether to permit Mr. Bieber additional time to speak and even refer the speaker to his own District supervisor. That prudent option did not occur. During the same meeting, Short allowed other speakers additional time, including Fire Chief Kevin Carey TWO opportunities to speak expressing his opposition to granting an Exclusive Opportunity Area for Del Norte Ambulance.

Apparently, there is a double standard firmly in place: Flexibility for public employee speakers and inflexibility for ordinary citizens like Branden Bieber. Very troubling.

Supervisor Chris Howard who represents Bieber in District 3, said and did nothing while his constituent languished at the dais. Howard should know better. His record of mistreating speakers whose opinions he does not share is well-documented. Instead sitting like that Easter Island mannequin saying and doing nothing. This speaks poorly of his lack of judgement.

Short and Howard should apologize to Mr. Bieber.

For Supervisors Starkey, Wilson and Borges, there may be an unclear misunderstanding on whether one as a supervisor can respond to a speaker at the dais.

The answer is: YES!

Supervisors answer to the Public. No one else. I often exercised that option while I served on the Board.

Upon recognition from the Chairman, a supervisor may ask a question or have a matter clarified or even better, request the chair place the item on an upcoming agenda.

Is Branden Bieber a modern-day Cool Hand Luke? I believe he is. Allow me to recognize and commend Mr. Bieber for his courage and character in addressing this moribund Board of Supervisors. Bieber would be an excellent addition to this Board which appears to ignore, marginalize and discount private citizens who play a vital role in our local government.

The Board needs to rethink its uninterested demeanor and behavior in giving proper attention, extending dignity and respect to the speaker and cease this incessant clock watching. Healthy public comments should

be a significant and important part of Board of Supervisors meetings. It takes some guts for regular folks to speak at the dais. Supervisor indifference is not helpful.

It is my intent to closely follow Public Speakers and Consent Agenda rubber stamp items.

Presently, This failure to communicate compromises those supervisors claim to serve their constituents. That snap shot must change now.

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