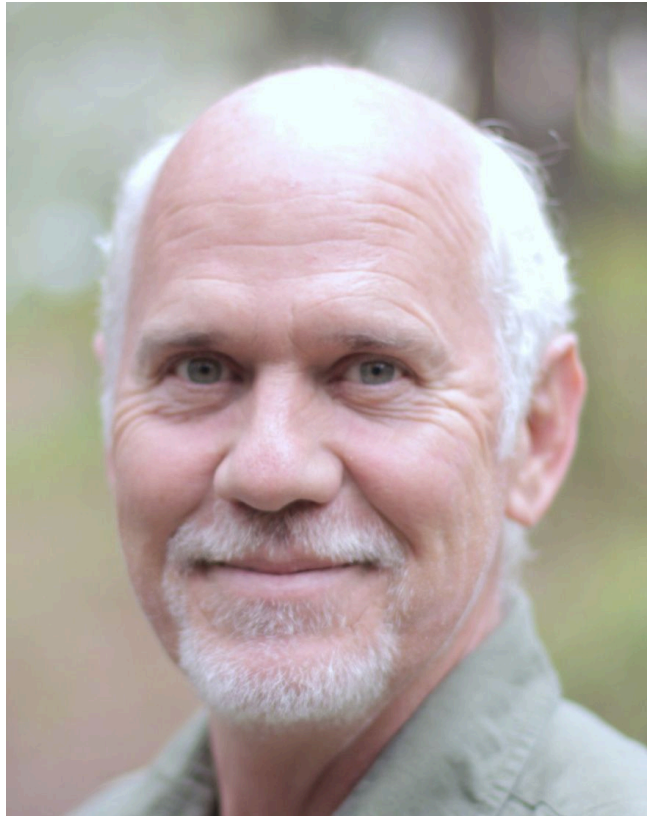

In My View: Civil discourse and civic engagement

March 23, 2024



This is my 104th column which means that I have been sharing my opinions with you for two years. I laugh when anyone calls me a journalist. I am not a journalist. I am an opportunist. The Del Norte Triplicate has provided me with an opportunity to express my views without censorship. For this I am grateful.

Looking back at the wide array of subjects that I have written about, there is a common thread throughout. My columns aim to inform people and guide them to get involved with local government. Government works best when the public participates in the decision making. I have advocated for civil discourse and civic engagement.

Public Comments

Every government agency must allow public comments on every issue on their agenda. They must let people speak before the elected officials take a vote. Agencies can adopt rules on how this will occur. It is standard for each person to have three minutes and they are expected to stay on topic.

As an adaptation to COVID most government meetings started streaming online and public testimony was allowed remotely via zoom. This accommodation may end soon in response to abuse of this privilege.

Last September, a San Francisco Chronicle story reported, “After several people made explicit, racist and antisemitic remarks during remote public comment at the San Francisco Board of Supervisors session, the Board President is pledging to put an end to call ins altogether.”

Nazi Zoom Bombs

More recently the SF Chronicle (3/4/24) reported that neo-Nazis are using video conferencing platforms to ambush public meetings with hate speech. “There have been more than 140 antisemitic disruptions of public forums nationally since August, most caused or inspired by a group called the “City Council Death Squad.”

It is not possible to weed out the hate speech from the regular speakers. California Law requires that if elected bodies elect to “teleconference” they must let the public know when and how to access it. Furthermore, the constitution broadly protects free speech including hate speech.

Many government agencies are choosing to curtail remote testimony from everybody. At least two dozen California Cities have suspended virtual meeting participation for the public. The city attorney for Walnut Creek explained, “We pretty much have to allow everything unless we cut back to the way it was pre-COVID.”

Racism Hits Home

It seems far away to read about these incidents in other parts of California, but it is more real when it hits closer to home. At the March 4th Crescent City Council meeting, eight hatemongers logged in to spew racist and antisemitic bile during the public comment period. There was little the City Council could do to stop it.

The City Attorney advised that they could try to redirect if the speakers go off topic and can cut them off if they veer back off course. This was a well-organized attack. Every speaker started out politely on a relevant issue and then careened into an obnoxious rant. You can listen to the recording from minute 13 to 33.

The first speaker started talking about sewers and then went on to describe how the Jews are digging tunnels under their temple to perform ritualistic sacrifices. After he was interrupted, he asserted that he was exercising his “constitutionally protected speech in a public forum” and threatened legal action if they stopped him.

Another racist started talking about Black History month then pivoted to say that “Blacks are a cancer on the world.” The last speaker claimed he has been a resident of Crescent City for 14 years (likely a lie) then claimed that he hears digging under his home and people saying, “oy vey.” This neo-Nazi closed with, “Heil Hitler.”

What To Do?

The Chair of the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors decided to stop taking public comments via zoom, after a disturbing disruption of the City Planning Commission a few months ago. Will other local agencies follow? I do not condone hate speech but hope there is another way other than shutting down remote testimony.

The strategy of requiring in person testimony is that people may not be as radical if they must appear in person. This would also reduce the number of outsiders crashing the party. The downside is that it can restrict local people from participating. It is hard for people who are disabled, elderly or just busy to attend meetings.

However, I know that people are also willing to show up live and spew hate. At a recent Harbor Commission meeting, a man played a prerecorded statement through a portable speaker making personal attacks on the Harbor Master. The President tried to cut him off, but he just turned up the volume and continued unabated.

Ad Hoc Reactivism

It is important for people to participate in government decision making, but it is imperative that we remain civil. It is always impressive to see the impact that citizens have when they speak up at meetings. Often this is motivated by a specific issue. I call this ad hoc reactivism because we are reacting to a proposed decision.

There is also a need for persistent advocacy, when an individual or group stays focused on the long view. One such group is Friends of Del Norte which celebrates their 50th anniversary this year. They are committed stewards of our rivers, forests, and public lands so we may continue to enjoy the natural beauty of our County.

On Friday, March 22, Friends of Del Norte is hosting award-winning journalist Greg King for a presentation of his new book, *The Ghost Forest*, which covers the history of redwood logging and protection efforts, from the mid-nineteenth century to 1999. This starts at 7 p.m., at College of the Redwoods, 883 West Washington Blvd.

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