

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

MAKING STRIDES AS A COUNTRY TO EMBRACE DIVERSITY

Readers of a certain age might remember the “Wayback Machine.” It was invented by Mr. Peabody, a genius canine, for his boy, Sherman, in a cartoon that aired on “The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle.” At Peabody’s direction, Sherman would set the Wayback controls to a certain time and place of historical importance. The pair would then step through a door to be instantly transported there.

I just had my own “wayback” journey — to the summer of 2020. It was a time of anguish, as we witnessed the murders of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and other Black men at the hands of White police officers. Our country erupted in coast-to-coast protests, with tens of thousands of Americans turning out to express their belief that Black lives indeed matter.

It feels way back because of the progress we’ve made since then toward becoming a country that embraces diversity (and may even want to achieve racial parity). It’s

as if we took a long, hard look at ourselves and really didn’t like what we had become.

Don’t misunderstand. We still have a long way to go. But consider all that has happened since last summer:

- On Nov. 3, 2020, more than 81 million Americans elected Kamala Harris, a Black and South Asian woman, as vice president of the United States. Turnout well surpassed expectations, as our year of reckoning with policy brutality and racial injustice undoubtedly drove even more people to vote.

During her victory speech, Harris gratefully acknowledged the role played by generations of Black women in the fight for equality, liberty and justice for all. Harris said, “(These) women are too often overlooked, but so often prove that they are the backbone of our democracy. I stand on their shoulders.”

- With the recent inauguration of Harris and President Joe Biden, our country will be served by the most diverse Cabinet in history

(assuming Senate confirmation) when minority and female representation are considered. Biden pledged to create a Cabinet that looks like America. Of his 15 appointments, six are people of color, five are women. His picks include three Latinos and the first Native American, Deb Haaland, who will serve as secretary of the Interior. It’s a cause for cheer: The necessary task of rebuilding trust in government is aided when people can look to its leaders and see themselves.

- And while it was sadly overshadowed by the Capitol riots, voters in Georgia elected two new senators, the Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, in a runoff election. Warnock will represent the Peach State as its first Black senator. Ossoff will be its first Jewish senator.

Their elections were made possible by the actions of Black women, as organizers and voters. Stacey Abrams, a Black woman who lost the 2018 Georgia governor’s election to Republican Brian

Kemp, has been credited for her ground mobilization and voter registration efforts in the state. Her work paid off: It’s widely acknowledged that strong turnout among Black voters powered Warnock and Ossoff to their runoff victories. There was also a marked increase in support from Hispanic voters.

These Georgia wins were a tribute to congressman John Lewis, who passed away last July. Warnock served as Lewis’ pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Ossoff worked in Lewis’ office as a summer intern.

I had the good fortune to meet Lewis in 2014, when the National Conflict Resolution Center honored him with our National Peacemaker Award. I was touched by his humility.

When I picked up Lewis at the airport, he insisted on sitting in the back seat of my car because his chief of staff had longer legs. At a gathering of students, Lewis knelt down to answer the question of a fourth-grader so he could be eye-

to-eye with the boy. Throughout the day, and at the award dinner that night, Lewis never spoke about himself. It was always about the struggle for equality and inclusivity.

Lewis would be proud of the strides that our country has made since last summer, with the elections of Harris, Warnock and Ossoff. He would applaud Abrams for her tireless work. But he would caution us against complacency. As Lewis said, “Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.”

Just maybe, the Wayback Machine will mark 2021 as the year in which our country turned a corner on its way to becoming a more just, multiracial democracy. Let’s hope.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit ncrconline.com

MUSEUM

FROM B1
mined to keep EcoVivarium going because without its mission as a sanctuary, many of the sick, injured and starving animals that arrive on her museum’s doorstep would have nowhere else to go.

“There are a lot of concerns we have, but we refuse to give up on the animals,” Nowicke said. “If I had to find a way to move 300 animals into my home, I would do that. I will never give up on them. They don’t deserve it. They’ve been given up on enough.”

EcoVivarium takes in, rehabilitates and re-homes donated reptiles and spiders. It keeps those creatures that would either be good animal ambassadors for its education programs or are too medically needy or too dangerous to be considered adoptable. Because of the pandemic, 2020 was a banner year for rescues, with more than 200 animals cycling through to new homes last year, Nowicke said.

Many of the animals that

arrived at EcoVivarium last year were surrendered by owners who lost their jobs or homes, or who couldn’t afford their pets’ veterinary and food bills. Some owners released their reptiles into the wild when the animals grew too large or too expensive to manage, like two crocodile monitor lizards that museum staff recovered in Fallbrook. The museum also took in 72 reptiles and baby tarantulas abandoned when a local pet store abruptly shut down.

Some animals, like gentle bearded dragons, are easy to place in new homes. But Nowicke said nobody wants the massive monitor lizards, which have razor-sharp teeth, nervous dispositions and can grow up to 7 feet in length. To ensure a permanent placement, the museum now hosts classes for prospective adoptive families to make people understand the animals’ physical needs, temperament and how big they can grow.

With limited staff resources last year, Nowicke said the museum was able to expand its corps of teen and adult volunteers, who come



PAM KRAGEN U-T

Susan Nowicke gives a cuddle to Mac, a gentle monitor lizard on his daily walk at EcoVivarium.

in daily or weekly to chop up vegetables, help with care and cleaning and even to cuddle the socially friendly animals, like iguanas.

“Many of our animals are connected with people, and not having that attention from people has created all sorts of challenges, like animals reverting to a more wild nature because they’re not getting that constant socialization to straighten out their depression,” Nowicke said.

Last summer, EcoVivarium moved to its current location — a 50-year-old medical office building in the shadow of the old Palomar hospital — after losing the lease on its downtown retail space on Grand Avenue.

Most of the office building’s 52 patient waiting rooms have been converted into room-size enclosures for the larger animals in EcoVivarium’s collection, like Ed, a 350-pound Galapagos tortoise that arrived last

summer after the death of its owner, local tortoise expert and rescuer Kim Thomas. But with negligible income, the museum hasn’t been able to afford needed building improvements, like replacing the inoperable heating and air-conditioning system or fixing the leaky faucets and broken water pipes on one side of the building.

When donations, grants, loans and tour fees do come in, Nowicke said they’re spent first on animal care. As the weather has cooled this winter, the monthly electric bill to heat the animal enclosures has climbed to \$2,600. Food bills average \$2,000 a month. The veterinary bills for 2020 totaled \$6,000. Money is so tight right now that Nowicke said they’re replacing the UVA lights on the reptile aquariums on a case-by-case basis, and large carnivorous reptiles that were once fed every two weeks are now waiting a couple extra days for their midwinter meals.

Despite the challenges EcoVivarium has faced in the past year, Nowicke said she’s been inspired by the

pouring of support from the community. Two Vons supermarkets donate their excess produce every week. Employees come in on their days off to volunteer. And many new donors, large and small, have stepped forward to help, including one teen volunteer who donated her collection of more than \$200 in spare change.

“It’s just been amazing,” Nowicke said. “It’s been nothing short of miraculous that we’re able to still continue and still be able to do what we do.”

Until the county allows the museum to reopen, Nowicke said the public can help EcoVivarium by volunteering at the museum, booking drive-thru birthday parties or private tours, and purchasing items on the museum’s “wish list,” like scrub brushes for turtles, UVA light tubes, frozen feeder rats, reptile bedding and jarred baby food. For ways to help, visit ecovivarium.org.

“We’re chugging along, we’re hopeful, and we’re committed to making our way through this,” she said.

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LA MESA

FROM B1
slammed to the ground by a White police resource officer.

Hillard Heintze spent several months in La Mesa over the summer and fall interviewing city workers, elected officials, public safety employees, business owners, members of the La Mesa Citizens Public Safety Oversight Task Force and residents to glean insight to the civil unrest and precipitating events from May 25 through June 7. The firm reviewed documents, built a timeline and visited the sites of damaged and destroyed properties.

The report focuses on the city’s plans before the protests and riot, its response during the incident and how it followed up. Hillard Heintze notes that it was not looking to assign blame for the civil unrest, but said its report is for learning purposes and improvement in best practice efforts, and is “designed to assist the City of La Mesa with preparing for future incidents” and finding best practices going forward.

The consultants will present their findings Tuesday to the City Council. Because of COVID-19 precautions, the City Council meeting will be held online starting at 6 p.m., and the public is in-

vited to be part of the discussion. The firm’s report is included with the City Council agenda and is available at <https://www.cityoflamesa.us/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Item/5391?fileID=13691>

Among its discoveries:

- The La Mesa Police Department designated a command post and command structure, but neither was able to support an effective response to the growing anger by a mob of protesters who were just outside the police station in downtown La Mesa.

- The city insufficiently prepared its operational plans for protests the night before on May 29, an issue that also came to light on May 30. They wrote: “The operations plans did not include much of the information that is standard within the law enforcement community for developing a comprehensive operations plan. This missing information is important for commanders, supervisors and officers in the field to understand and follow. The absence of some of this information was in part due to the lack of available information regarding the details of the protest, including the inability to identify and connect with an event organizer for the May 30 protest.”

- There was no defined

plan of communication between the Police Department, city officials and the community, leading to struggles by all parties to understand and react to the events as they were happening, and even afterward.

- They wrote: “In addition to the responding agencies’ inability to communicate seamlessly on a single radio channel, the SDCSD (San Diego County Sheriff’s Department) dispatchers and LMPD analysts monitoring social media determined that protesters had discovered the primary radio communication channel and were broadcasting their communications on a live stream. This information informed protesters of police strategies, including locations that responding officers were attempting to reach. As those officers followed the directions from the dispatchers, the officers were met by individuals throwing rocks at the patrol cars, breaking windows and forcing the officers to retreat.”

- The city’s Fire Department was unable to attend to fires set to two banks and another building in the downtown area because they could not be sufficiently protected by officers from the violence under way (including rocks, bottles and fireworks being launched).

- The Police Department’s decision to keep officers out of sight from the public may have led to increased and widespread violence.

They wrote: “Although we acknowledge the significant concerns facing law enforcement and note that the strategy of keeping officers in riot gear out of sight is appropriate, routine patrol officers should continue to function in some capacity to act as a deterrent and send a visual reminder that the department is performing its duties. The presence of officers engaged in patrol duties sends a message that the police department is still open, fully operational and committed to providing service. We learned through interviews that on May 30, some of the peaceful protesters came with questions for the LMPD’s leaders about the Amaurie Johnson incident and wanted to open a dialogue. However, the LMPD’s decision to keep officers inside the station prevented the opportunity for such a dialogue, which may have contributed to increased frustration among those participating in the protest. Even in the midst of protests, many agencies have found it beneficial to proactively engage with individuals they believed may have been leaders within a protest group.”

- Most officers assigned

to crowd-control duties had not had updated crowd-control training and little experience in tactics to help them deal with large crowds.

- The department’s use-of-force policy does not adhere to current best practices and it does not have written policies related to community engagement.

Hillard Heintze also offered key recommendations to correct the Police Department’s inadequacies. The firm suggested the department revise its policies regarding crowds and protests in response to First Amendment events and stick to adhering to principles of the National Incident Management System and the Incident Command System.

It said the department needs clear criteria for a department operations center, training in crowd-control tactics, a citywide communications plan and a way to work with other agencies to develop a formal radio communication plan countywide. It also suggested working toward comprehensive community engagement, cultural competency and (looking at) bias-based policing policies and standards.

Also on Tuesday’s agenda is a response by the acting La Mesa chief of police, Capt. Matt Nicholass, to the report’s recommendations. Nicholass wrote that

the department has already drawn on its experience from May 30-31 “to implement new practices during subsequent protest events” and that the department will “continuously strive for improvement.”

For months since the May event, La Mesa native and local middle school teacher Mayor Mark Arapostathis, along with the rest of the City Council, has taken a lot of heat from the public.

“We welcome the report and we are looking forward to candid feedback that Hillard Heintze will be providing and also to the transparent and open dialogue with the council and the public regarding the information,” Arapostathis said.

Hillard Heintze, paid \$145,254 by the city, with a contingency of \$30,000 for any additional needs, was also asked to get a preliminary understanding of what the community wants to see in a new police chief.

Walt Vasquez abruptly announced his retirement in a press release while the City Council held a Town Hall on Aug. 13. Nicholass and Capt. Ray Sweeney have been handling police chief duties while the city conducts a nationwide search for a new leader.

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SMOLENS

FROM B1
“Our finances remain strong,” Fletcher said in an interview last week.

The county still has problems. It is the lead local agency responding to COVID-19 and the effort to combat the pandemic at times has been balky, including a slow vaccine rollout that has been a concern statewide. However, more vaccines are coming and another vaccine “super station” was just opened.

The number and regularity of inmate deaths in county jails has been a growing controversy, as has the level of medical care for those incarcerated. The supervisors have begun to address that.

The new board majority also is moving to undo policies from previous boards that Fletcher said limited the county in providing certain services to residents. For example, he said the county has an

arbitrary cap on the number of health and human services employees per capita. He said that gets in the way of expanding health care and mental health services, one of his top priorities.

Public safety agencies don’t have that kind of restriction.

Decades ago, the county almost went bankrupt, and new supervisors at the time — including Cox and Jacob — focused on making sure that didn’t happen. Over the years, they not only righted the financial ship, but built up huge reserves in the neighborhood of \$2 billion.

When Fletcher ran for supervisor in 2018, he was critical of the board sitting on so much money while needs of county residents — particularly at the lower end of the economic scale — went unmet.

“They’re not there to look at and admire,” he said in the interview, referring to large reserves.

The previous board did

loosen the purse strings over the last couple of years — in part motivated by Fletcher — on mental health services and other programs, and ramped up spending to deal with the pandemic.

Fletcher said his approach does not mean emptying out the county treasury. He served in the state Assembly during the Great Recession and in the aftermath as the state was climbing out of a catastrophic budget hole. He said he was “scarred” by the experience.

“I never want us to return to that,” he said.

Gloria also wants to do a lot of things to implement his vision. Having more money to spend would help.

The recent election bolstered the Democratic majority on the nine-member council, which now has only one seat filled by a Republican, Chris Cate, who was recently named chair of the council’s budget committee.

The Democratic mayor’s

political views may be more in line with the majority, but he may have to rely on Cate to help hold the line. The council members have released their budget priorities and they’re talking about increasing, not reducing, spending for programs for youth, business pandemic aid, Internet access for the poor and raises for city workers.

The council members, and Gloria, made a lot of promises during the recent election campaign, and now their supporters will expect them to produce.

The city had built up some reserves under Faulconer, but that won’t solve the problem and Gloria already is calling for budget cuts.

The city now has “a projected \$154 million deficit, which is nearly double the \$86 million shortfall projected in November,” according to David Garrick of The San Diego Union-Tribune, who noted that’s “roughly a 10 percent gap in the city’s annual operating

budget of \$1.5 billion.”

San Diego officials, like local and state governments everywhere, hope they will get financial relief from Washington to offset the impacts of the pandemic.

Much of the city’s shortfall results from the COVID economy, particularly the lack of revenue from tourism. But the city also learned that it must pay \$50 million more than expected to cover pension costs.

Beyond that, a judge recently invalidated Proposition B, the 2012 voter-approved initiative that did away with pensions for new city employees and replaced them with a 401(k)-style program. Other courts also have ruled against Proposition B and Gloria said it’s time for the city to move on and stop spending money on continued appeals, as Faulconer did.

But unwinding the measure will be time-consuming and, ultimately, costly.

The Gloria administration also must pick up

the pieces of the city’s lease-purchase agreement for a high-rise office building at 101 Ash St. The troubled real estate deal engineered by Faulconer, and initially supported by Gloria, threatens to become a legal quagmire and financial black hole for the city.

Meanwhile, the city’s effort to negotiate a new energy franchise pact that has long been held by San Diego Gas & Electric has been set back almost to square one.

Gloria is leaning into the future, but he’s going to spend a lot of time dealing with the past.

No doubt he’d like to have admirable big reserves to help with that.

Tweet of the Week

Goes to Matt Oswalt (@MattOswaltVA), actor, on Inauguration Day.

“I feel like Marty McFly opening the garage and finding a brand new truck.”

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