

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT OF DECENCY WE ALL SHOULD SIGN

A few weeks ago, I admitted in this column to being on my last nerve when it comes to the anti-(COVID) vaccination crowd. I described their disregard for the rest of us as inconsiderate and irresponsible in a time of a public health crisis. And I couldn't see any way to find common ground. It wasn't my most beloved column. Some readers were looking for ideas to bridge the vaccination divide — especially with friends and family members in both camps and the holidays around the corner. Their reaction made me think that I may have lost some perspective. And it reminded me that I don't own the only truth.

That said, my perspective is perfectly clear on the matter of free speech. It has its limits. We shouldn't tolerate hateful rhetoric in public forums.

In case you missed it, a verbal melee broke out at the Nov. 2 San Diego County Board of Supervisors meeting.

Nearly 70 people attended the meeting to speak out against vaccine mandates. One of the

speakers spewed insults and threats at Supervisors Nathan Fletcher, Terra Lawson-Remer and Nora Vargas; he also leveled a racist remark at San Diego County Chief Medical Officer Dr. Wilma Wooten, who is Black.

Others in the group cheered his vile remarks.

While incivility has been on full display at recent Board of Supervisors meetings, the recent meeting hit a new low.

Still, Fletcher (the board chairman) carefully showed deference to the principles of free speech when he spoke to participants, noting that disagreement has always been welcome. Fletcher said, "We sit here and we listen, (because) the First Amendment affords people the right to come down and say anything that they want to say. Even if it's untrue, even if it's vulgar, even if it's profane."

But Fletcher also objected to the way in which the meetings have devolved, saying it's become "sport or game" for some people to see how outrageous or offensive they can be. Amid the chorus of

insults and threats, important points get lost. And public participation is chilled, due to fears of harassment or intimidation. It's difficult to conduct county business.

The board's "Rules of Procedure," which define meeting protocol and participation, were first adopted in 1970. The rules permit speakers to say whatever they want in their allotted time. Fletcher suggested that changes would be coming. "We are going to always comply with all applicable laws," he stated, adding, "This isn't about free speech or disagreement, this is about decency."

Fletcher wasn't kidding — the changes came quickly. On Wednesday, the Board of Supervisors met to consider new rules that would discourage "hate speech and racism" during their public meetings. The rules call for adoption of the National Conflict Resolution Center's "Code of Civil Discourse" as an aspirational goal. The code sets out guidelines for communication by and between elected officials and com-

munity members. It envisions talk that is inclusive, respectful and free from personal attacks.

To some, the new public-speaking protocols may sound like a slippery slope. After all, the First Amendment is sacrosanct.

It connects us as Americans, equally protecting our right to self-expression and the rights of others with whom we disagree. When we exercise our First Amendment freedoms, we demonstrate democracy at its best.

That very concern was expressed by a number of people who called into the meeting to oppose the policy changes. Their belief was that the actions of one speaker — who they uniformly agreed was out of line — would result in a loss of their free-speech privileges.

Still, the new rules were approved. Fletcher, Lawson-Remer and Vargas voted in favor of their adoption, while Supervisor Joel Anderson voted no. Supervisor Jim Desmond was on a pre-planned trip and absent from the meeting. The changes will go into effect immediately.

But here's the reality: What occurred on Nov. 2 (and is occurring in public forums around the country, mostly in response to vaccine mandates) is about more than acknowledging and protecting our First Amendment rights. It goes beyond the fine line between free speech and hate speech. It's about our responsibilities as citizens.

In order for a democracy to function, we must adhere to a social contract. That means complying with social norms, principles and laws to ensure the protection of all.

The contract applies uniformly — whether we're talking about national matters or local concerns, as discussed at a Board of Supervisors meeting.

Let's adhere to the social contract and join together, as citizens, to sign on the dotted line.

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.

LEAGUE

FROM B1

three years as president of the SDA Little League. Over the past 18 months she has repeatedly called city officials asking for help at the park. So far, none has arrived.

Among the many problems at Memorial park detailed by Pelayo and other SDA parents are burned-out field lights, a broken scoreboard, filthy restrooms, graffiti, litter, missing and stolen baseball equipment, homeless people and dogs relieving themselves near or on the fields, bleachers so old and uneven that they tip when people sit on them, rotting and unpainted wood benches in the dugouts and uneven outfield grass that can be a tripping hazard.

One of the League's biggest challenges has been the loss of snack bar revenue that occurred after the city crews renovating the park in 2018 accidentally cut the underground water line to the snack bar building. Without the ability to serve hot items like nachos and hot dogs, the league could no longer earn the \$500 to \$600 in weekly snack sales income that it used to pay for umpires, park fees, insurance and equipment.

Although the city hasn't taken action on Pelayo's and other parents' complaints yet, they haven't fallen on deaf ears.

San Diego District 8 City Councilwoman Vivian Moreno declined to be interviewed for this article but she did issue a statement. She also sent a memorandum Tuesday about her concerns to Andy Field, the city's director of Parks and Recreation. Field did not return a phone call to his office on Thursday.

"I have received over two dozen emails and calls in the last month from parents and residents concerned about the conditions at Memorial Park," Moreno wrote in her statement to the U-T. "Upon receiving these complaints, my office immediately reached out to the Parks & Recreation Department requesting a meeting. Since we

have not heard back from City staff for an update, I formally requested that the Parks and Recreation Department address the issues at Memorial Park and present a comprehensive improvement plan to the community at an upcoming Memorial Park Advisory Group meeting."

But Pelayo — who has a 6-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son playing in the league — said parents have grown tired of waiting for the city to respond, so they have begun mobilizing to solve some of the problems themselves.

In October, Pelayo launched a GoFundMe account that has raised \$2,000 in donations to pay for new baseball gear, season fees and permits. Also last month, a group of parents organized a clean-up committee, where they concentrated on picking up the plastic bottles and bags, fast food wrappers and dog feces that litter the fields each week. One couple who heard about the problems at the field volunteered to rebuild the pitcher's mound on one field that had been out of alignment for years.

Parents have also volunteered to paint over the graffiti that pops up on a weekly basis on the bleachers, sidewalks and snack bar, but Pelayo said the city said it can only be done with a specific type of paint that it has not supplied to the league.

The main ballfield has two tall light poles with a combined seven flood lights on top. Six of the lights face the parking lot. Only one is turned toward the field and it's been burned out for years, Pelayo said. Parents have offered to shinny up the pole to replace the bulbs but they're not sure what type the light needs. The light would be especially useful now. Although the league is authorized to use the fields until 7 p.m. each night, it's now so dark in the early evenings — because of daylight saving time ending — that all of the league's seven teams are usually off the ballfields by 5 p.m.

One problem with the field that will be harder for the city and the league to



ANA RAMIREZ U-T PHOTOS
Maria Pelayo, president of the San Diego American Little League, opens the door to the snack bar, which has no running water after a water line was cut in 2018.



Little Leaguers practice at Memorial Community Park, where lack of working lights is also an issue.

solve is a resident community of homeless men who congregate on the grass around the restroom and snack bar. Garcia said the homeless men regularly smear feces on the bathroom walls and sometimes there are feces on the floor, making it unsanitary for children to use the facilities. When the restrooms are locked, these individuals urinate and defecate along the walls of the snack bar. And on the weekends, when the bathrooms aren't cleaned as often, they frequently run out of soap and toilet paper.

At 4 p.m. Thursday afternoon, baseball practices were under way on two of the ballfields and the new children's play area was packed with dozens of children and their parents. But just 50 or so feet from the playground, three homeless men were

sleeping or standing around the restrooms building. In front of the restroom doors, one man who seemed heavily inebriated, stood in a pool of urine, naked from the waist down with his pants dropped around his ankles. Garbage littered the ground around him. Graffiti could be seen on nearby walls, sidewalks and bleachers. On the snack bar is a fresh bit of tagging: a black line drawing of a man smoking marijuana with a can of beer by his side.

Moreno detailed all of these problems in her memo to Field, the director of Parks and Recreation and she wrote that the problem should be addressed "immediately."

"The condition of the baseball fields, the snack bar, the scoreboard and the lack of equipment all stand in stark contrast to the con-

dition and amenities that baseball fields in other city-operated parks receive. The continued lack of attention to the poor maintenance of the baseball fields, snack bar and restrooms is unacceptable," she wrote.

According to the city's latest Park Master Plan report adopted in August, Memorial park is just one of nearly 150 city parks in need of upgrades and improvements.

The 260-page report detailed the Parks & Rec department priorities for the coming years, including a goal to address "long-standing inequities" in park access and amenities to citizens in "communities of concern" like Logan Heights. Communities of concern are neighborhoods that have historically experienced lower levels of public and private investment in development and supporting infrastructure such as parks. These communities also include more low-income residents who often rely more on public or nonprofit recreation facilities.

"In San Diego, the city's central and southern areas tend to have a greater need for additional recreational opportunities based on historical disinvestments," the report says. "Neighborhood parks in the city's central post-World War II communities tend to have even higher

maintenance and replacement backlogs."

In its report, the department identified 144 parks in communities of concern that could use upgrades and improvements. Memorial Community Park ranks 14th on the list. Above it on the list is Presidio Park at No. 1 and Balboa Park at Nov. 5. Almost all of the others high on the list are in southeast and central San Diego, including Colina Del Sol Community Park near Talmadge at No. 2, Officer Jeremy Henwood Memorial Park in City Heights at No. 3, Downtown's Marina Linear Neighborhood Park at No. 4 and Clay Avenue Mini Park near Logan Heights, at No. 6.

Pelayo said the last time she spoke with Moreno's office a couple of months ago, she was told that the city was planning to send a plumber out to the park to run a camera through the water pipe beneath the snack bar to figure out where the water line was cut. That has yet to occur. Pelayo said she was also told that the snack bar wasn't on the park's original blueprints, so the city may not be financially responsible for restoring water flow.

Pelayo said she has been encouraged by the community's support of her GoFundMe account and the volunteer efforts of team parents in recent weeks. After being shut down for most of the pandemic, the league relaunched last March. Fall ball season is now under way and spring season registration will begin in January.

The league now serves about 100 players from Logan Heights, Sherman Heights, Downtown San Diego, Shelltown and Barrio Logan. Most of the players are boys but a couple teams have a few girl players. Pelayo said SDA Little League hasn't won a championship in years, but its parents aren't there for trophies. They're there to provide a safe and wholesome form of recreation for their children.

"We are small but striving," Pelayo said. "We're trying our best to keep the youth out of the gangs."

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OFFICERS

FROM B1

ters."

In one case, an officer who used inappropriate "initial tactics" is under review and could be disciplined, he said. That discipline could include additional training or a range of different responses.

The Rev. Jason Coker, lead pastor of the Oceanside Sanctuary church, hosted the meeting Tuesday at the church. Members of St. John Church and St. Thomas More Church also participated. More than 100 people attended in person, all wearing masks, and the event was streamed live for about 80 people who watched on Zoom.

Coker praised Armijo's response in a news release issued Wednesday by the San Diego Organizing Project.

"This one small policy change would go a long way toward protecting people's lives — officers and civilians alike — and build more trust between the Police Department and our community at large," Coker said.

De-escalation is a strategy finding increasing acceptance in law enforcement as a way to calm potentially violent situations. Techniques include listening, acknowledging what was said, and agreeing, apologizing or

clarifying when appropriate. All are considered teachable skills.

"We have a lot of work ahead of us," Armijo said at the meeting. "The organization needs to become a bit more contemporary. We have some things in the works to help us move in that direction."

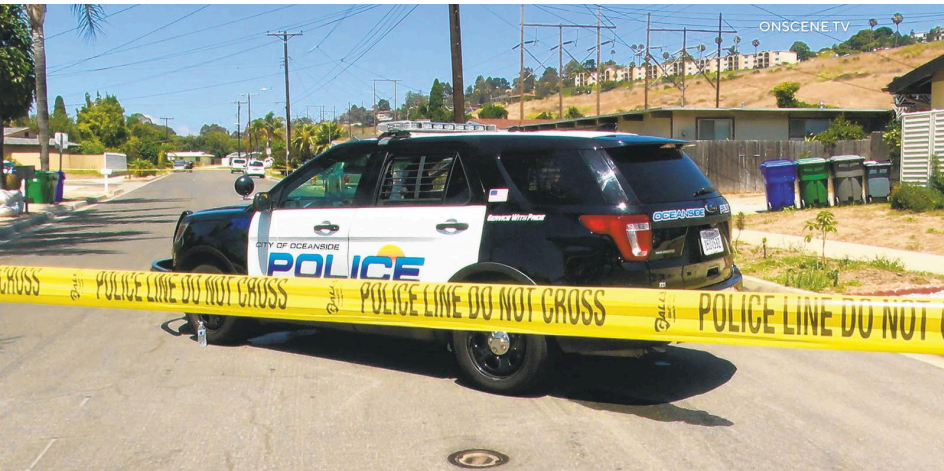
Each of the Police Department's three captains also attended the meeting and spoke briefly in support of the police chief's efforts.

"We understand we cannot arrest our way or force our way to a peaceful community," said Capt. Kendrick Sadler, a 20-year veteran of the department who is Black.

Recent statistics show that the demographics of Oceanside's Police Department more closely resemble those of the city's population than those of most other law enforcement agencies in San Diego County.

The 223-member Oceanside department has 13 Black officers or 6 percent of the total, according to a Union-Tribune story in January. That percentage nearly equals that of the city's Black population, 6.6 percent.

White officers make up 64.7 percent of the Oceanside department, compared with 66 percent of the city population. And the department is 20.4 percent His-



ONSCENE TV FILE
A new manual for Oceanside police conduct makes de-escalation mandatory.

panic, compared with 30.2 percent of the city.

In comparison, the inland North County city of Escondido's Police Department is 76.1 percent White, while the city's population is 35.5 percent White. Escondido's officers are 18.1 percent Hispanic in a city that is 51.9 percent Hispanic.

Armijo said he intends to create a public webpage "dashboard" where anyone can see current information about his department's demographics and how they may change when new officers are hired.

Oceanside is working to be a leader in efforts to prevent police violence, Armijo said.

The city's Police Depart-

ment was the first to complete the San Diego County Sheriff's Department's de-escalation training in August 2020, and since then, OPD officers have helped train others in the procedures, he said.

Coker said the churches have "a wonderful working relationship" with the police chief and his administrators.

"Chief Armijo has been more open, more transparent and more willing to meet with our team than we have experienced in the past," Coker said.

The Rev. Dr. Kadri Webb, lead pastor of the predominantly Black St. John Church, spoke eloquently Tuesday about some of the nationally known cases of

police brutality against minorities and the need to tamp down violence.

"All of these killings occurred ... because someone in blue felt that he or she had the power ... to attack," Webb said. "No officer just has the right to shoot and end someone's life."

It's a great injustice that citizens are held accountable for violent actions, while police officers are not, he said.

A 15-page report released by the San Diego County District Attorney's Office in 2019 said that over the previous 25 years, law enforcement officers in the county shot more than 450 people, and 55 percent of the shootings were fatal.

Most of the shootings involved the San Diego Police Department or the county Sheriff's Department, which together serve 70 percent of the county's population. The El Cajon Police Department had the third-highest total, with 25 of the incidents.

In 40 percent of the cases, a White officer shot someone who was not White. In 92 percent of the incidents, the person shot by police was armed, and in 38 percent the weapon was a gun.

Armijo, an Oceanside native, was appointed police chief in March after the retirement of Frank McCoy, who was the longest serving chief in Oceanside's 132-year history.

McCoy's retirement was delayed after community groups, including the San Diego Organizing Project, objected to reports that his replacement could be hired from within the department. Some people said the city should look harder for someone from outside the area who would add diversity and would be more receptive to changes in policing.

The city extended the search to interview more candidates, but in the end the city manager hired Armijo, who started working for the city as a lifeguard and has been in the Police Department for 27 years.

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