

STEVEN P. DIKIN A Path Forward

# HOPE FOR THE NEW YEAR: CIVIL DISCOURSE FROM PARENTS

It's not just kids making wish lists this holiday season. School boards around the country are making their lists, too. At the top: a return to the good old days, when they could focus on the needs of their students.

As I've written before, this has been a year of bad behavior, with parents commandeering school board meetings to express their anger — mostly about mask and vaccine mandates, but also curriculum matters, like instruction in critical race theory. As if the shouting and insults weren't enough, school board members have endured threats and acts of violence. Social media has fueled the vitriol.

I can't help but think about the late composer Stephen Sondheim, who wrote the perfect song for these times: "Send in the Clowns." Some meetings have taken on a circus-like atmosphere, without any of the joy.

It's why the San Diego Unified Board of Education on Tuesday unanimously approved a plan to implement a "Code of Civil Dis-

course." The code, which was developed by the National Conflict Resolution Center, sets out communication guidelines that affirm the right to free expression when exercised in a manner that is constructive and respectful of different points of view.

Absent guidelines, we're seeing discourse shut down, leaving the issues at hand unaddressed.

The "Code of Civil Discourse" was recently adopted as an aspirational goal by the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, following a series of contentious meetings. The school board will formally vote on adoption at its next governance meeting.

Richard Barrera is the San Diego Unified school board president. Before the meeting, Barrera said, "It's so important for every public agency to model civility and respect ... but school boards need to always remember that the way we conduct ourselves sets a model for our students."

Barrera, who's served on the school board for 13 years, still believes that people sincerely care

about and have the best intentions for their kids, even if they fervently disagree with each other.

What's different today, he told me, is that disagreement has led to demonization. If your beliefs are different from mine, then you are the enemy. He lamented the environment we've created, where it's OK to level hate at others and to show our worst selves. We are sowing division to advance our political agendas — even in school board meetings.

I asked Barrera which issues are most contentious. At the top of the list, unsurprisingly, are mask and vaccine mandates. Just recently, a Scripps Ranch High School student — who sued San Diego Unified over its vaccine order (because it doesn't allow religious exemptions) — asked the U.S. Supreme Court to intervene on her behalf.

Parents are also fired up about a requirement that California high school students complete a semester of ethnic studies in order to graduate, starting with the class of 2030. They worry it paves

the way for teaching critical race theory in schools. CRT is a practice of interrogating race and racism in society and the way it impacts people. Opponents allege that CRT levels blame at White people for racial inequity and advocates discrimination against them to compensate for past injustices.

If that's not enough, the district is also grappling with a rise in anti-Semitic acts and Islamophobia.

As Barrera described his world, I couldn't help but wonder why anyone would want to serve on a school board today. It deepened my admiration for people who step into and stay in this important role.

With the turn of the year just ahead, I asked Barrera, "What gives you hope?" His list was long — and encouraging.

Students, he said, are optimistic and engaged. They see and seize opportunities for change, whether it's weighing in on school curricula or leading a successful petition drive to rebrand Junipero

Serra High School.

At the students' urging, the school board voted to change the school name to Canyon Hills High School. The school's mascot also changed, from the Conquistadors to the Rattlers. Students were concerned that honoring Serra ignores a brutal period in California's history, when Spanish conquerors assimilated or killed millions of Indigenous people.

In his daily work, Barrera sees that students want to be the drivers of a better world. They are eager to lead and willing to listen. And so, we as parents have an obligation to create a culture of civility, setting up conditions that allow students to succeed.

His advice is sound: Let's be humble and get out of the way. The kids can figure it out. And then they can teach us.

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](http://ncrconline.com).



ERNESTO RIVERA

From left, Farrah Morrissey; Vanessa Casas; Amy Bosler; Alex Tietz (owner of the Delorean, playing Doc from Back to the Future); Sofia Salgado Robitaille; Erica Johnson. (All except Tietz are SWC Foundation staff).

## SCENE

### Jaguar Awards Luncheon

Southwestern College Foundation

BY U-T STAFF

The Southwestern College Foundation's Jaguar Awards Luncheon was held last month at Coasterra restaurant in San Diego. The theme was "Back to the Future."

The luncheon honored Ron Cohn for his contributions to the college's Jaguar Kitchen/Food Pantry.

The award is a clocktower because just as the clocktower was key to Marty McFly getting back to his future, Ron Cohn and his generous support are key to students getting successfully to theirs.

If your organization has held a philanthropic event, you're welcome to email a high-resolution photo along with information on the

event to [society@sduniontribune.com](mailto:society@sduniontribune.com).

Please clearly identify those in the photo, make them aware their image might appear in print and online, include the photographer's name for credit and be sure to include the who, what, where, when and why information on the event.

## SCENE

### USD Founders Gala

Event raises millions for the university's students

BY U-T STAFF

The University of San Diego held its Founders Gala last month on the field at Petco Park. The event raised a record \$2.3 million for scholarships for USD undergraduate, graduate and law students.

More than 600 of the region's most prominent corporate, philanthropic and community leaders, administrators, alumni and

university friends attended the event, with a goal to give back and support students.

About 70 percent of USD students rely on some form of financial aid. Proceeds from the Founders Gala support the Founders Endowed Scholarship Fund, providing financial aid to USD's most deserving students. This was the sixth Founders Gala.

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ZACHARY BARRON PHOTOGRAPHY

This year's University of San Diego Founders Gala was held at Petco Park.

## DOG Damage to snout factor in return

FROM B1 to endure police work.

"They are resilient animals," said Moore. "Look at Aros and what he went through. He still wants to go out. He still has his energy."

A retired Escondido police officer has launched a GoFundMe campaign called "Help Aros Heal" to raise money to support the Escondido Police Department's canine program. Damian Torres said donations would assist the department if it needs to replace Aros. The campaign had raised more than \$5,300 by Friday evening.

"I have an affinity for working class dogs and as a citizen of Escondido felt compelled to help," Torres wrote about the campaign in an email response to



CHARLIE NEUMAN

Aros' vet says the dog seems to be healing well and is expected to make a full recovery.

questions from the Union-Tribune. "I feel this gives those who donated a chance to act as stakeholders when they see a Police Service Dog, and knowing their contribution helped to add an additional dog and handler to protect their community."

He said all donations will be given to the city of Escondido's police K9 coordinator. Aros has worked as a police dog for about 3 1/2 years and he's one of six police dogs on the Escondido force. Each dog costs about \$12,000, Petersen said.

This isn't the first time the Escondido department has had a police dog injured in the line of duty. In 2001, a police dog named Zak was shot during a running gun-battle between police and a burglary suspect, who was shot and killed by officers. Zak recovered and was able to work on the force again.

"(Aros) could come back to work and that's our goal," Petersen said. "He still has some years of service ahead of him."

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## SAN DIEGO City largest in state to enact ban

FROM B1 filed suit in spring 2019 just as the ban was taking full effect.

The new analysis shows that the ban could move forward without any fundamental changes, said Heidi Vonblum, the city's deputy director of environmental policy and public spaces.

"Even projecting that worst-case scenario, the increase in greenhouse gas emissions is very, very, very minimal," Vonblum said this week. "There's nothing that turned up during the more detailed environmental analysis that would necessitate a change to what was initially brought forward."

But Vonblum said city officials are taking the conservative approach in the environmental impact report by saying that the ban could have "potentially significant" impacts.

They aren't proposing any mitigation measures or changes to the ban, but they included in the analysis two alternatives to the city's proposed ban.

One proposal is to enact the ban along with a "codified list" of acceptable alternative materials to use in place of foam products. The second proposal includes that list and would add a 25-cent fee on businesses for each disposable cup they use.

Vonblum said the final legislation the city enacts could change if new ideas or new creative solutions emerge during the final approval process, which is likely to take place this spring.

The environmental impact report was released for public review Dec. 10, launching a 45-day comment period that ends Jan. 24. City officials must then

respond to those comments and present a final EIR to the City Council for approval.

Alex Ferron, chair of the San Diego Surfrider Foundation, said Friday it has been frustrating to see San Diego's polystyrene ban stalled for so long when more than 100 other California cities have bans in place.

San Diego, the largest city in the state to adopt a ban, was the first and only city to face a lawsuit for not doing an environmental impact report.

The restaurant association, a statewide lobbying group, has managed to delay implementation of the ban nearly three years, partly thanks to COVID-19 delays.

"They tried to kick the can down the road and they did it at the perfect time," Ferron said. "It's good to see this finally move forward. San Diego gets lots of attention because it's such a big city."

The restaurant association did not respond Friday to requests for comment.

Nearly all national and regional restaurant chains long ago stopped using polystyrene in response to lobbying from environmental groups and backlash from customers concerned that foam isn't biodegradable.

But many taco shops, pizza parlors, convenience stores and other small businesses continue to use foam products to save money.

To soften the impact on those businesses, San Diego's ban included phased implementation of the new rules and the opportunity for businesses to apply for hardship exemptions. It's unclear whether the three-year delay will make the council less inclined to be so generous.

Ken Prue, a manager in the city's Environmental Services Department, said there hasn't been outreach to affected businesses during the creation of the EIR.

"It's kind of been a holding pattern to determine what the next steps are, if any," he said this week.

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## COUNCIL Members keep jobs full time

FROM B1 from more people to potentially serve in elected office, McNamara said.

"Who can run for office? If you don't pay a wage where people can run for office, you're either a retiree or independently wealthy," or you would need another job, McNamara said.

"I say that in defense of my colleagues, who are not making the same amount of money as I am as the mayor," McNamara said, even though they show up every day and on weekends to deal with city business. "Because this is somewhat of a

third rail in politics, to vote yourself a raise."

Morasco said the last time the issue came up in 2019, turning down a raise seemed appropriate. However, he said, a raise "seems like a reasonable adjustment to make at this time. Especially since it doesn't become applicable for another year."

Morasco also alluded to comments by City Attorney Michael McGuinness, who suggested the council could create a thornier problem by getting too far behind in council compensation and then having to catch up.

"I think it was wise counsel from the city attorney this evening, about being cautious that we don't keep kicking the can down the road because then it's going to become problematic," Morasco said.

Martinez said Escondido council members generally hold full-time jobs in

addition to their council duties, and that unlike colleagues in larger cities, they don't have staff members to assist them, or receive full-time salaries.

"It's definitely something we do for the love of our city, not for the compensation," said Martinez.

According to a report by McGuinness, the council could have raised its salary by a maximum of 5 percent per year since its last raise, or 20 percent to take effect next year. However, the motion voted on by the council would have provided a 5 percent raise for the mayor and council members.

Before the vote, McNamara, citing the disparity between pay for the mayor and council members, suggested a raise only for council members, an offer his council colleagues declined.

The city received only one written comment on the compensation issue,

from former Escondido Councilmember Ed Gallo, who opposed any salary increase for the mayor or council. "I think we all agree that increasing one's own salary is a bit distasteful and especially during tight financial times," Gallo wrote.

Information on the websites of North County cities show the annual salary for San Marcos mayor and council members is \$11,732. In Vista, the mayor earns \$34,848 and council members earn \$33,576. In Oceanside, the mayor earns \$36,695 including pay for expenses and council members earn \$33,993. Base pay for the Carlsbad mayor is \$25,826, and for the council is \$24,626, and members also are paid extra for attending additional meetings.

Tash is a freelance writer.