

A PATH FORWARD

# CRAVING CATFISH, CIVIL CONVERSATION IN TODAY'S TIMES

STEVEN P. DINKIN

A couple of weeks ago in this column I made a dire declaration: that civility is on life support. I reached that conclusion after watching the State of the Union address, where incivility was on full display.

If you're less pessimistic than I, you might still agree that when it comes to being civil, we've fallen out of practice. Not so long ago in San Diego we had two clubs that brought together people with different viewpoints to discuss the most challenging issues of the day: the Catfish Club and the City Club. With the passing of their founders, Rev. George Walker Smith and George Mitrovich, our city lost two icons of civility and two outposts for civil discourse.

Smith died last month. His obituary in the Union-Tribune describes him this way: "He had an abiding

belief that if people simply committed to speaking with each other civilly and got to know one another, they would realize they were far more similar than different."

In his book "From the Barrio to Washington: An Educator's Journey," Armando Rodriguez talks about Smith's election to the San Diego Unified School District board in 1963. Rodriguez was his campaign manager. It was the beginning of Smith's growing influence in our community.

He started the Colored Folks Club — a group that met in the church basement, ate catfish and engaged in dialogue on a range of hot topics. Before long, says Rodriguez, so many white people showed up for catfish (and conversation) that in 1970, the name was changed to the Catfish Club. Soon after its founding, the club became "a mandatory stop for aspiring politicians,



U-T FILE

The Rev. George Walker Smith, at his San Diego church in April 1999, died Feb. 15 at age 91.

elected officials and the quiet power brokers in the city," according to the U-T.

A few years later, George Mitrovich founded the City Club of San Diego as a non-partisan public forum. It had a diverse but mostly white membership. The club's slogan, selected by Mitrovich, was "Dedicated

to the Dialogue of Democracy." Occasionally, the Catfish Club and City Club conducted joint meetings.

Mitrovich, who passed away in July 2019, was passionate about politics. He valued respectful give-and-take with others who held opposing views. A City Club tribute to Mitrovich de-

scribes him as a "crusader for the enduring tenets of democracy, civility and kindness." He was named "Peacemaker of the Year" by the San Diego Mediation Center, as the National Conflict Resolution Center was previously called.

Writing about the City Club in 2006, Dean Nelson of Point Loma Nazarene University said, "Whenever I sense that all discourse in San Diego is headed down the toilet. ... I simply go to the City Club. It renews my hope that it is still possible to be challenged and enlightened in a civil manner."

Where do we go now, if not to the City Club or Catfish Club? As a community, we need more places to gather so we can ensure that the respectful exchange of ideas continues. Attendance at houses of worship is declining. So are the ranks of membership organizations. As these critical networks crumble —

and with them, their underlying relationships — we lose social capital.

Smith and Mitrovich both recognized the importance of interpersonal engagement in achieving a strong and civil democracy. Dialogue leads to greater understanding — whether it occurs at a club meeting or in a church social hall. When we participate in a discussion, even if (or especially when) it's with someone who has a different point of view, we learn. The loss of the Catfish Club and City Club creates a gaping hole in our social fabric that we must fill, with urgency.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based organization working to create innovative solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. NCRC is nationally recognized for its conflict management and communication strategies. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com



Brenda Baker, Wendy Brody (gala chair), Debra Turner (sponsor; will chair LJMS SummerFest gala), Mary Ann Beyster, Jeanne Jones, Ted DeDee (LJMS president/CEO)



Ed Gillenwaters, Jeanne Herberger, Don and Stacy Rosenberg, Angel and Fred Kleinbub



John and Susan Major, Peter Cooper, Erik Matwijkow, Melissa Costa, Bill VanDeWeghe



John and Susan Major, Ingrid Hibben, Victor LaMagna, Noni and Drew Senyei

SCENE

## Elegance on a winter's night

La Jolla Music Society gala

STORY AND PHOTOS BY VINCENT ANDRUNAS • SPECIAL TO THE U-T

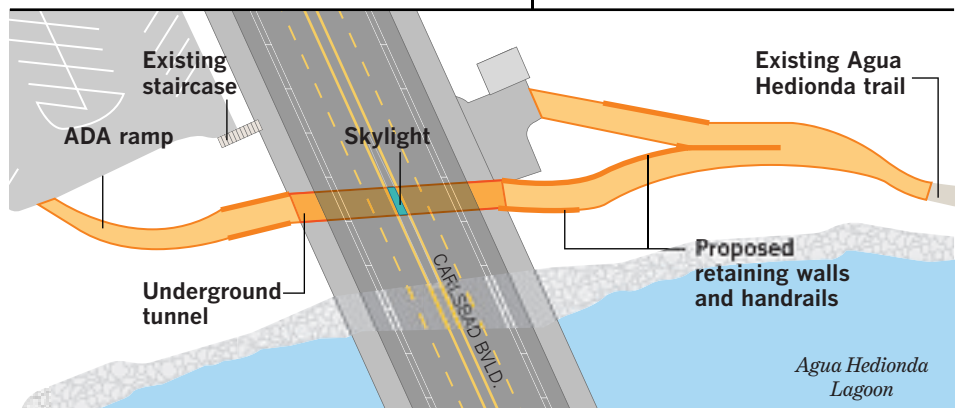
Wendy Brody chaired La Jolla Music Society's "WinterFest Wonderland" gala, held early February at its architecturally stunning Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center. The 170 black-tie guests loved the décor and menu, inspired by St. Petersburg's White Nights Festival. After cocktails and lavish hors d'oeuvres, LJMS CEO Ted DeDee welcomed them to a thematic dinner featuring winter greens salad and short rib stroganoff. Then, no-spill

"adult sippy-cups" in hand, they entered the Baker-Baum Concert Hall. After a live auction and paddle-raise, young (29) Russian piano virtuoso Daniil Trifonov performed Bach's Chaconne for the Left Hand, six increasingly-complex fugue counterpoints, and finally Bach's much-loved "Joy."

The elegant evening's proceeds topped \$617,000 to fund the Education and Community Engagement Programs.

### Pedestrian underpass proposed

Carlsbad has proposed building a pedestrian walkway under Highway 101 from the Tamarack beach parking lot to the trails along Agua Hedionda Lagoon.



Sources: City of Carlsbad; Nextzen; OpenStreetMap

MICHELLE GUERRERO U-T

### ACCESS

FROM B1 also known as Highway 101, then replace the roadway across the top. In this case, most of the planning and staging would be done in advance. Construction probably would require sections of the highway to be closed, one direction at a time, for a few nights.

Both ends of the state beach now have asphalt ramps, one to the lower seawall on the north and the other to the Tamarack parking lot on the south. There also are six "switchback" stairways from the sidewalk on the upper seawall down to the lower seawall and the beach that are generally inaccessible to the handicapped.

Both the existing ramps allow pedestrians, lifeguards trucks and emergency vehicles to get to the beach but are too steep to meet require-

ments for handicapped access under the Americans with Disabilities Act. The existing ramps each now serve more than 5,000 people on a busy weekend day, Lancaster said. They would remain in place.

The new ramps would be longer and less steep, and the surfaces would be supported by piers above the ground to minimize disruption to the steep slope.

The city's parks and recreation commissioners said they support the project.

"As someone who has taken a wheelchair down that ramp, anything is going to be an improvement," said Commissioner Amy Allemann.

The new ramps would have an ADA accessible ramp up to the eastern sidewalk on Carlsbad Boulevard.

At present, the only way to legally get from the parking lot to the lagoon is to go up the ramp or stairs to the crosswalk on Carlsbad Boul-

levard at Tamarack Avenue.

Preliminary planning for the underpass included a review of the city's Sea Level Rise Vulnerability Assessment. The assessment showed the highest waves now can reach 12 feet below the surface of the Carlsbad Boulevard bridge and by 2100 the highest waves could be 5.6 feet beneath the bridge.

The underpass would have a 4-foot-high berm to keep water out, would be sloped toward a drain, and could be closed with a gate when flooded.

The state Department of Parks and Recreation owns about six of Carlsbad's seven miles of beach, from about Pine Avenue south to Encinitas. However, the city has an agreement with the state under which Carlsbad maintains the heavily used northern areas to a higher standard than the state can afford to provide.

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### SMOLENS

FROM B1

Currently, Levin seems better positioned for reelection than his fellow first-term California Democrats in formerly Republican districts.

The Cook Political Report, a respected nonpartisan newsletter that analyzes elections and campaigns, concludes Levin's 49th District is "likely" to remain in Democratic hands. According to the report, the likely ranking means districts "are not considered competitive at this point, but have the potential to become engaged."

Interestingly, only one other of the seven districts is given that status: the 25th District vacated by Katie Hill, who resigned last fall when revelations surfaced that she had an affair with a campaign aide and, allegedly, a congressional staffer. Nude photos of Hill also had been published.

Democratic Assemblywoman Christy Smith and former GOP Rep. Steve Knight, who lost to Hill, are considered the front-runners in the northern Los Angeles County district, which has a larger Democratic voter registration than most of those other districts.

Cook considers the other five seats to be "leaning" Democratic, which denotes a Democratic advantage in a competitive race.

There were some very close elections in those districts, but Levin's was not one of them. He won the 49th, which straddles the San Diego and Orange County line, by nearly 14 percentage points over Republican Diane Harkey, who was the GOP choice going into the 2018 primary over several other Republicans. He was the only one of the seven Democratic win-

ners to post a double-digit victory.

Hillary Clinton won the 49th by more than seven points over Donald Trump in 2016.

Levin's strength and Harkey's weakness — even some Republicans openly criticized her fundraising performance — defined the election. The Republican Party basically gave up on her weeks before the election in what was supposed to be a hotly contested race for an open seat. Longtime Republican incumbent Darrell Issa decided not to run for reelection following polls that showed he was likely to lose.

But that was then. Unlike last time, the GOP essentially cleared the Republican primary field, giving Maryott a clear shot at November. He has also raised around \$1 million, though that includes hundreds of thousands of dollars in his own contributions and loans. Levin has raised twice as much, with no personal infusion of funds.

The Los Angeles Times recently published a story about the GOP's California congressional effort, which included an interview with state party chair Jessica Millan Patterson, that concluded "Democratic Rep. Mike Levin in San Juan Capistrano appears likely to get by without a serious challenge."

Nevertheless, Maryott was named one of the GOP's "Young Guns — Contenders," which isn't an age designation but the party's acknowledgment that a candidate's campaign has met certain organizational and fundraising metrics. That could put him in position to receive considerable institutional party support, depending on how things shake out as November approaches.

Maryott has been trying to make the case that Levin

is a liberal who is out of touch with the district and supports "socialist" programs such as Medicare-for-All and the Green New Deal.

Levin got an immediate post-election boost from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who put him on environmental and veterans committees. She also made him chairman of the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. He has successfully advanced legislation aimed at assisting veterans and protecting the environment, some with bipartisan support.

The expectation has always been the Republican Party would be gunning for him in 2020.

Come the fall campaign, Levin may have to deal with sharing the ballot with a self-described democratic socialist. He has not yet endorsed a presidential candidate. Some people think Democratic fears of Sanders losing both the presidential race and the House majority are overblown, noting that polls have him defeating Trump nationally and in some pivotal states.

Demographics may have shifted the 49th District from red to purple, but it couldn't be called a liberal bastion. Having to defend a controversial presidential candidate, or having to explain your differences with him, is not an enviable position to be in.

Just ask some of the former GOP incumbents.

### Tweet of the Week

Goes to Rachel Laing (@RachelLaing), communications specialist and lobbyist.

"I'm old enough to remember when Republicans nominating Trump was the Dems' sure ticket to the White House."

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