



Unpaid, unelected Encinitas commissioners disrespect America

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Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, a routine rite at the start of many municipal meetings, has generated some soul-searching for Encinitas Traffic and Public Safety Commission members.

Two commissioners — Darius Degher, a Leucadia musician and poet, and Christina Simokat, a New Encinitas resident who teaches environmental science at Cal State San Marcos — threw a spotlight on the standard agenda item when they both chose not to say the pledge during the commission's Dec. 11 meeting and sat while the other commissioners recited it.

At the meeting's end, the other commissioners' reactions ranged from dismay to bewilderment when Degher asked if they could eliminate the pledge from all future agendas, or just do it once or twice a year.

Instead, the commissioners informally agreed to emphasize at future meetings that reciting the pledge is voluntary.

Degher joined the seven-member board of unpaid volunteers last spring. He said Tuesday he has two main reasons for declining to participate. The first relates to the nation's current political conditions. He said he believes that President Donald Trump, Trump's former chief strategist Stephen Bannon and members of the far right are fomenting a "hyper-nationalist movement" by appropriating national symbols for their own ends and using them to try to silence people who oppose them.

"At this moment in which our democracy is being attacked from within, cheerfully standing for the pledge is like wearing bright colors in a funeral procession," he wrote in a statement that he's been giving out to people who ask about his decision to sit during the pledge.

"Consequently, I would like to suggest that at this time, sitting through the Pledge of Allegiance is a statement of resistance patriotism, one aimed at raising the awareness of more Americans in order to effectively thwart the current attacks on our American ways, including attacks on our legal systems, our law enforcement agencies, our journalistic media, women, the LGBT community, and people of color."

That's only half the reason he is declining to participate, he said later.

“The second (reason) is I find the pledge itself objectionable,” he said as he discussed the history of the pledge, the anti-immigrant views of its creator and the Hitler-style salute that children were originally encouraged to give as they recited the pledge.

While Degher details his concerns about the pledge and the country’s current political climate, Simokat has taken a different approach when asked why she’s choosing to sit and remain silent.

She said she’s not going to provide a reason because it’s important that people realize they don’t have to give an explanation — there’s no law requiring them to say the pledge, or to stand and put their hands over their hearts, or even to remove their hats.

“There is also no legal compulsion to explain yourself — no one should feel that they need to,” she said in an interview Tuesday.

Degher and Simokat, who has sat out both recitations of the pledge since she joined the commission in October, are far from the only people who’ve taken a stand on the issue. A quick Internet search finds that everyone from liberal bloggers to a senior editor at the conservative Cato Institute recently have questioned the nation’s attachment to the vow. Many of them note that the pledge only exists today because of a clever marketing gimmick by a children’s magazine in the late 1800s.

“The Youth’s Companion” magazine, which gave away flags as rewards to people who sold lots of magazine subscriptions, produced and marketed the original version of the pledge as part of its flag-in-every-classroom campaign, historical accounts indicate. During the magazine’s big push to get schools to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of the New World with patriotic events and lots of flag decorations, the magazine paid avid socialist Francis Bellamy, a former Baptist minister whose views had recently cost him his job in the pulpit, to write the pledge.

Bellamy’s pledge, which he said at the time took him less than two hours to produce, has been modified since. The most significant revision occurred at the height of the nation’s anti-communism period in the 1950s when the words “under God” were added, a change that’s been an additional source of conflict over the years.

There also has been debate about how to properly salute the flag. Just before America entered World War II, the original straight-arm-out salute — a gesture known as the “Bellamy Salute” — was dropped and replaced with the hand-over-the-heart gesture because the original salute looked a lot like what people were being required to do in Nazi Germany.

On Jan. 8 — the Encinitas Traffic and Public Safety Commission’s first meeting of the new year — the commission will begin its session as usual with a recitation of the pledge, but the audience members will be invited to participate rather than being told to do so, Commission Chairman Charles Lisherness said Tuesday.

“The Pledge of Allegiance will remain on the agenda and I will ask people to join me in the pledge,” Lisherness said, adding, “To remove it from the agenda would be a statement in itself I don’t think we need to make a statement. Let’s focus on our work at hand.”

Lisherness said he wanted to be respectful both to the two commissioners who have decided not to participate and to people like fellow Commissioner Peter Kohl, who said during the December meeting that he found Degher's decision to sit and keep his hat on during the recitation of the pledge disrespectful.

"If you don't want to say it, that's fine with me, but all I'm asking is that you do show some respect for the people that do do it," Kohl, an immigrant and former serviceman who volunteers with the city's senior police patrol, told Degher.

Simokat suggested Lisherness' compromise approach of telling the audience that they had the choice of participating. That suggestion was supported by Degher and all of the other commissioners, including those who said they didn't really have a strong opinion on the issue.

"I don't really care ... I'm just so used to doing (the pledge), I just do it," Commissioner Brian Grover told his fellow commissioners as they debated the topic.