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Orinda U-turn: city council agrees to ban Zoom comments at meetings

By Sora O'Doherty

After a tie vote on the ratification of a decision by Orinda City Manager David Biggs to end the availability of remote comments during city council meetings on the Zoom platform resulted in the recommendation not being adopted in November, the council reconsidered the matter at its Dec. 5 meeting. With Council Member Janet Riley and the rest of the council members present, the recommendation was adopted by a vote of 4-1. One public comment was submitted on the subject for the December meeting by Steve Cohn, who argued that the city council should not limit Zoom comments but should actually do just the opposite, returning more public meetings to the Zoom platform. "It is hard enough to be heard in this City," he wrote, "making it harder to be heard and to hear what others are saying (which is the case once you stop Zooming meetings) does not produce a better Orinda." It was clarified during the December meeting that city council meetings would continue to be available to watch on Zoom and on YouTube. Only public comments during the meeting via the Zoom platform would be suspended. Several other written public comments in favor of keeping Zoom comments open had been submitted prior to the November meeting.

Council member Riley initially indicated that she wouldn't agree to ratify the city manager's recommendation to end Zoom comments. However, upon hearing comments for the rest of the council, which she deemed to be persuasive, and based on the very low use of Zoom comments during the initial trial period, Riley did vote with the majority to prohibit Zoom comments during city council meetings. Council Member Brandyn Iverson changed her vote, also based on the data that showed that there had been very little public utilization of the ability to comment via Zoom, but Council Member Latika Malkani voted to continue to allow remote comments via Zoom during meetings.

Vice Mayor Darlene Gee was particularly passionate on the subject. She believes that there are groups outside of the community, indeed, outside of the country, who are looking for opportunities to inject hate speech into local communities using Zoom, and that, as more and more communities prohibit the use of Zoom for public comments, those groups will actively seek out the ones who have not yet banned Zoom comments. "I don't understand why we're inviting hate speech into our community that is not from our community," she said. "It is not okay for anybody to just be able to say anything they want. And I find it reprehensible to think that we just want to set ourselves up for this when we have no obligation to do so. To me this is not freedom of speech, this is freedom of keeping hate speech out of our community," she concluded.

Mayor Inga Miller brought her personal history to bear on the subject, recalling a time when she was a student at Miramonte High School and was exposed to speech by the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club. She also considered the history of broadcast media in the past, citing the examples of the use of radio by Adolph Hitler before World War II and how radio broadcasts generated genocide in Rwanda. "We're not worried about words," she said, "we're worried about what people do with those words and what it empowers." She noted that if a person from Orinda appears at a city council meeting, there are consequences to what they say, as they are known to the local community. But she added, "we're not talking about people in Contra Costa County or California or the United States. We're giving the microphone to Russia, to Hamas, we're giving the microphone to everybody all over the world and I don't see any rational reason that we would do that."

However, it was agreed that if technology develops better systems for dealing with hate speech via remote platforms in the future, remote comments could once again be allowed, if the council so decides.

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