

Michelle Roberts, Fort Bragg.

I was a bit surprised when I saw the notice for tonight's special meeting regarding changing to district-based elections as the first step in the process of discussing this issue. At its April 23rd meeting, the council established an ad hoc committee to work on the election issue – I haven't seen anything in the staff report to indicate that committee met and developed a plan of action. To have public discussion prior to the public being informed of the committee's goals and structure seems premature. It also may serve to enflame the issue rather than lead to constructive action.

Fostering public participation and good discussion is an important part of our democratic process. To engage in civil discourse is fundamental in determining our best course of action ~~for political and governance issues~~. What I have seen and heard locally in response to this elections issue saddens me – sickens me—and profoundly hurts me personally.

When did we stop debating an issue on its merits and its potential benefit or consequence? When did personal attack take the place of a reasoned argument? When did hate become normal & acceptable?

Most of you are aware of the social media surrounding this election issue. Social media is one tool we have that can help advance understanding of one's position, or it can be used viciously, vindictively to bully and demean those we seek to silence & intimidate. The latter is what has been taking place here: A cowardly, anonymous post on a sophomoric, so-called "satirical" Facebook page was filled with homophobic, racist and anti-Semitic slurs and symbols to distract from the legitimate consideration of the issue. That anyone in this community would add to this hate speech is offensive and shocking to me. But when Fort Bragg city staff willingly joined in the conversation, I was stunned and I was outraged. Public servants and officials were adding fuel to this demeaning and divisive rhetoric, during the work day and using city property. This behavior has degraded the public trust ~~and opened the city to liability for discrimination and retaliation~~. It cannot and should not be tolerated.

Now, I am speaking as the mother of the primary target of this smear campaign. For those of you who will try to minimize this, who will excuse hate speech as free speech, who think it is only a joke, I have this to ask: How would you feel it were your son or daughter that was being targeted this way? Would you think it was funny? Would you laugh? Would others tell you that you were being overly sensitive to be bothered by these cruel tactics and words?

As the parent of a gay man, I have worried all his life that ignorant people would say cruel things, would bully or attack him for being different, and that hate speech might escalate into a hate crime. I never thought it would happen for practicing his profession, and I really didn't think it would happen here, now.

In the Nazi's hierarchy of hate, Jews were the #1 threat to their state, but so were homosexuals, Jehovah Witnesses, the mentally and physically disabled, gypsies, and so on. All

these people were labeled and dehumanized to make it easier to oppress and to exterminate them.

So, again, I ask - why are we not ^{resolving}~~addressing~~ ~~talking about~~ the local election issues? Why no respectful dialog? Why have some opponents to district elections inserted these threatening and painful references to one of the most disturbing and devastating events in our recent history?

I am asking for the city to comply with the CA Voting Rights Act. The law requires it and the citizens deserve it.

I am also asking the city to make a strong statement renouncing all forms of discrimination, bigotry and hate – in words and in action.

Sincerely,
Michelle Roberts