

Richmond commission tries to quell 'hate speech' directed at gays

By Robert Rogers Contra Costa Times

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RICHMOND -- Prompted by a series of controversies and ugly episodes at City Council meetings swirling around the local gay community and its critics, the city's Human Rights and Human Relations Commission explored the line between free speech and hate speech Monday evening.

The commission hopes to tamp down rhetoric and public discord and potentially set new rules for what kind of speech is permissible in public meetings.

"My hope is that by agendizing this topic," said commission Chairwoman Vivien Feyrer, "the commission can play a role in hosting a productive conversation and perhaps begin to heal some of the hurt that has been created in the larger community."

The meeting comes after a series of verbal and email exchanges have demonstrated that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer, or LGBTQ, issues still elicit more vigorous disagreements in Richmond than in many Bay Area communities.

In June, Councilwoman Jovanka Beckles and Mayor Gayle McLaughlin decided to fly a rainbow flag at City Hall in recognition of Pride Month, which every June commemorates the Stonewall riots in 1969. That move prompted three city employees to send out staffwide emails in opposition.

At a subsequent City Council meeting, a handful of residents also voiced their displeasure, some using language that included comparing LGBTQ people to animals and deviants.

A YouTube video of one meeting, posted by LGBTQ advocates, has gone viral in the city and has drawn backlash against City Council members who have not condemned the language.

Councilman Nat Bates, who is singled out for scorn in the video, dismissed the criticism as politically motivated.

"The video was selectively edited," Bates said Monday. "I indicated that I support the gay situation, and I have a lot of friends and relatives with a different lifestyle than mine. They are just looking ahead to the mayor election (in 2014) and trying to destroy me."

At Monday's meeting, there was virtually unanimous support for the LGBTQ community, but the line between hate speech and free speech remained fuzzy.

"I support freedom of speech, but I don't think verbal abuse is appropriate," said Najari Smith, a local activist.

Doria Robinson, the executive director of Urban Tilth, a local urban farming organization, said speech comparing LGBTQ residents to animals went too far.

"It goes way beyond free speech," Robinson said. "It absolutely incites violence."

One speaker, 18-year-old Edgar Jimenez, said permitting hate speech in the City Council chamber infringes on the free speech of those attacked by discouraging their participation.

"I have been the victim of emotional and verbal bullying since the first grade," Jimenez said, adding that the decision to fly the pride flag gave him a feeling of "belonging" that he did not have before.

Bates said no one has been "physically attacked or threatened" by a public speaker in City Council meetings.

"Everyone has a right to free speech," Bates said. "You can't shut down someone who disagrees with you and call it hate speech."

Feyer said she hopes Monday's meeting will serve as an example of respectful discourse for the City Council.

The commission voted to craft a public statement defining and condemning "hate speech" and calling for greater tolerance toward the local gay community.