

Redevelopment Debate Becomes 'Civil' Matter

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TEMPLE - TERRACE -- Contentious debate about redevelopment has prompted the Temple Terrace City Council to consider a civility policy for public hearings.

The idea was proposed by City Attorney Ted Taub during a council meeting Tuesday. He said there is a need for a means to force residents to abstain from making "personal or slanderous remarks" or "referencing an individual by name" when making a complaint. Taub used the city of Destin as an example of where speakers can be asked to leave a public meeting.

"People want to slam people; they have a lever to pull from time to time," Taub said of Destin's city council.

Destin City Clerk Dana Williams said the city employs several means to remind speakers to mind their words: a plaque on the wall outside an entrance to council chambers, a proclamation of Civility Month in May and in the rules for public input at city council meetings.

Those rules state, "Any person making personal, impertinent or slanderous remarks, or who shall become boisterous or use offensive language, will be requested to leave the meeting, either voluntarily or with the assistance of the sheriff's office."

"It has been at least four years that we have had the plaque, and it's been four or five years since we have had to have anyone escorted out of a meeting," Williams said. "If we know we are going to have a contentious issue, and we have quite a few, we will have the sheriff's office send a deputy to sit in the audience. That goes a long way to keeping egos in check."

The Temple Terrace City Council asked Taub to look into a similar policy.

"I agree with you. Over the last few months we have had more than we should have tolerated," Mayor Joe Affronti said to Taub. "If they have any issues regarding the city, we're going to listen."

Residents who regularly speak at council meetings had mixed views on the issue, but all agreed civility is important in public settings.

"First of all, we shouldn't have to have that kind of a code, but unfortunately, since we have some citizens who feel they have to attack our mayor and council personally, we do," said D'ee Griffith. "We don't have to attack people personally because we disagree with them. They were all elected; they all own businesses; they are kind; they are churchgoers, and they don't deserve to be put on the spit."

Griffith questioned whether Temple Terrace police officers have been ordered to frequent council meetings in light of the increased incivility. City spokeswoman Paula MacDonald said, "No."

"I am not aware that is the reason why," she said. "Chief Tony Velong typically has other staff there to assist him in answering questions or if he isn't in the area to be at the meeting."

Some residents who are outspoken critics of the city council found it unusual that Taub would be the one to introduce the idea of a civility policy.

Bart Siegel said it is ironic that Taub would propose such a policy. During a May 3 council meeting, it was Siegel who called on Taub to be more civil. Siegel's comments followed a discussion on redevelopment that involved Taub, several council members and resident Ken Tozier, according to minutes of the meeting.

"I think Mr. Taub is one of the worst violators of any kind of civility code there is. He is a verbal contortionist," Siegel said Wednesday. "I think the public should be free to address an elected official if they so choose during their three minutes, but I think a certain amount of decorum should be required of all people."

As for whether the civility policy is needed, Siegel and Tozier said it's not.

"If we have managed to get by for 80 years without such a thing, I don't think we need to shut down the citizens' right of expression," Tozier said. "I will hasten to point out the present city council is confronted with a variety of contentious problems, mainly of their making. They made their bed; they have to sleep in it."

Siegel said the reason people are becoming more boisterous at meetings is out of anger over the city council's continued efforts at redevelopment of the city's downtown core, despite an August referendum defeat of the project's financing plan.

"If people talk politely, they get ignored. It's a point of self-reflection for them. They should be asking themselves, 'Why are the people so angry?' " he said. "We had a vote; they were the ones who set up the premise that this was not just a vote on the tax increase, but on redevelopment, and now they are trying to act like they never said that. It's getting those of us who sent a very strong message against it very upset."