

WVF Watsonville - Govt & Politics

Only Watsonville prays aloud at city meetings

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By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville's City Council may be the only local government agency that opens its meetings with prayer delivered by clergy.

The practice has faded out or has been changed to "a moment of silence" elsewhere.

In Scotts Valley, the council, staff and audience is asked to stand for a moment of silent prayer. In the city and county of Santa Cruz, where a moment of silence is observed, there is no direction as to what should be done during the silence. In Capitola and at the Pajaro Valley school district meetings, attendees simply say the Pledge of Allegiance and get on to business.

Recent Supreme Court rulings have upheld the principle of separation of church and state in cases regarding prayers at school gradu-

ations and events. Other cases throughout the country have been decided similarly — forcing public entities to remove Christmas decorations, for example — and in some cases, disallowing even the moment of silence, since a prayer is implied.

Watsonville City Attorney Luis Hernandez said he thinks the recent Supreme Court rulings, which were specific to schools, have very narrow applications. Congressional meetings open with prayers, he said, and he believes council meetings are following in the same tradition.

Watsonville City Councilman Todd McFarren said he's had a few complaints from residents who told him they thought the prayers were inappropriate.

The prayers, which generally ask God for wisdom, compassion

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and guidance in decision making, are delivered on a rotating basis by various members of the clergy from the area. Although they don't specifically mention Jesus in the prayers, all of the clergy are Christian.

"I like the ceremonial aspect of it," McFarren said, "But it's inconsistent with what I believe the Constitution to be ... That's the continuing trend anyway — prayer and public settings don't go together."

McFarren said he thinks the council needs to address the issue before someone presses the matter in a lawsuit. But, he admitted, it's going to be a highly emotional debate, and he's not looking forward to it. He said he's not planning to bring the matter before the council anytime soon.

In Santa Cruz, Mayor Don Lane said prayers were said before he became mayor last November, although the city had been having trouble finding clergy who would offer the prayers on a regular basis.

"Half the time no one showed up," he said.

Lane, who is Jewish, said he and a former council member who was also Jewish, were concerned that, when prayers were delivered, a variety of religions would be represented. There were also some guidelines that were put into place about exactly what could be said

in the prayers.

Lane said he had no interest in continuing the prayers when he became mayor and so the city now has "a moment of silence." There is no direction to the audience about what to do during that time, he said.

Although there had been some complaints about the prayers, no one has complained about the silence, he said.

The Capitola City Council doesn't have a prayer or a prayerful moment, except on rare occasions, such as when someone has died, Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan said. Former Councilman Bob Garcia said, "I don't think we ever did."

Santa Cruz-area Supervisor Gary Patton said the Board of Supervisors had not said a prayer at least as long as he's been on the board — 17½ years. Patton said he thinks the practice was changed by former Supervisor Pat Liteky, who was known for his leftist political leanings. Liteky resigned from the board shortly after Patton came on.

"I really feel better with what we're doing," Patton said, referring to the board's moment of silence.

He said he thinks it's good to take time to reflect a bit before beginning. But Patton admitted doing that comes naturally to him. As a Quaker, he said he's used to silence as a form of prayer.

Patton and Board Chairwoman Jan Beautz said they had not had complaints about the moment of silence.