



Published April 24th, 2024

## Protests at Lafayette Elementary School spark controversy

By Lou Fancher

On April 8, Lafayette city council members received, as is the standard procedure at the bi-weekly meetings, several public comments for items not on the agenda. Among them was an issue gaining greater importance in the community, especially for residents with young children who attend Lafayette Elementary School.

Recent protests outside of LES have intensified and the frequency has increased as people hold up signs and vocally express their views on the LGBTQ+ community, and, to a lesser extent, on other current day topics.

The first public speaker, Nikki Cowger, said the protests contend transgender youth. "Their posters and shouted words to passersby are hateful and patently false. (They are) intended to spread fear and contempt for vulnerable children and their families. They take photos and videos of our schools and children, sending those images to other predators encouraging them to come to our town in order to spread hate."

Cowger stated it is "imperative for our local government to take a stand against activities that promote discrimination and intolerance." She suggested the hateful messages threatened the safety of all people-not just the LGBTQ+ community-in Lafayette. Community outreach and educational programs will make the city more welcoming to the LGBTQ+ community, according to Cowger.

The second speaker, who identified himself as the spouse of Cowger, said his statement would be more emphatic than that of his wife. "Lafayette has been attacked," he said. "My family has been attacked." He recalled being bullied in school, which escalated to a physical attack after he had been advised to ignore the bully and was told he would "get bored" and the intimidation would cease. Ignoring the protests, he implied, would not result in the protesters giving up their activities. Having checked in with the school district to ask for their position, he called school district policy "faulty and fundamentally broken and ineffective." He called for "deeds and words from the council to take a stand."

Council member Susan Candell asked when the protesters are at LES. Cowger said protesters arrive approximately 30 minutes before the school children arrive, remain for several hours, leave for a short time midday, then come back after a lunch break. Candell asked if children have to walk around them on the the sidewalks or if protesters blocked traffic at road intersections. Cowger has taken videos and has asked protesters to move aside. She noted they did comply with her requests to move, "But I'm an adult," she emphasized.

Council member Karl Anduri asked for more specificity as to times and the name of the group supporting the protesters. Cowger said during the last two weeks protesters have been in position at 8 a.m. and typically stay until the end of drop-off time. With increasing regularity, they have returned in the afternoons at 2:15 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, and 1:15 p.m. on Wednesdays when pick-up time is one hour earlier.

With public comments on the local concerns received, the matter returned to the council. Mayor Gina Dawson spoke to Lafayette's position and said, "Of course, we welcome children, adults, whoever everyone here. That's a statement I can say. We do strive to be inclusive and I know we do not condone the message of these demonstrations and we don't agree with them. What we can do-and I understand that vice mayor Kwok will be meeting with you Nikki (Cowger) tomorrow with some more representatives so we can hear more about your ideas. We have also worked with our police chief and I have reached out to the superintendent of the Lafayette School District to get more information."

Dawson said city manager Niroop Srivatsa would also be involved in the meetings and that allowing and responding to the protests is "an education process and also, a protection of first amendment rights. These demonstrators are on public property. They are not allowed on the school (property) and they're being very careful of that while the children are in place. And they can actually hand things to the children, so it's one of these things where we do need to help make sure that the school district is helping to educate about what is not acceptable and help protect the kids." She said the council looks forward to following up on the speakers' ideas and appreciates their input. "We do strive to be inclusive and make sure people will feel welcome and safe. Thank you for coming out and expressing these concerns to us. It's important."

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA