

Plaza chickens to stay

sub: Disgruntled audience flocks from meeting

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By Neal Ross

More than a dozen people walked out of Wednesday night's packed Sonoma City Council meeting before the council -- while taking no formal action -- decided to leave its Sonoma Plaza chicken-culling policy intact.

The 45-minute discussion was punctuated by angry audience murmurs as well as gavel-banging by Mayor Louis Ramponi, who had earlier in the evening threatened to halt the public hearing if decorum was not observed.

"This can be very emotional for some people," Ramponi said.

Brought to the council agenda by Councilmember Ken Brown, the discussion followed last month's widely-televised protest against former Mayor Phyllis Carter's decision to permanently relocate the Plaza chicken population. Protestors, some clad in chicken suits or other poultry paraphernalia, cited the birds' uniqueness and rustic charm as well as tourist appeal.

City public works officials have annually thinned the 8-acre park's duck and chicken flocks when the population reached a certain level -- approximately 40 chickens and half again as many ducks -- so that birds and human visitors can "comfortably co-exist," said City Manager Pam Gibson.

Public Works Superintendent Al Bandur said the chickens were relative newcomers during his 18-year tenure, and added that it was never the city's policy to "eradicate ducks or chickens."

"You can only have so many people in this room before we ask you to leave," Bandur clarified. "It's the same concept."

But Carter, who stepped down as mayor last December, said her decision to find off-Plaza homes for the chickens was based on a concern for the birds' safety.

"We don't own these chickens -- they were dumped on the Plaza like so much garbage," Carter said. She explained that the "final straw" for her was seeing children chase the birds and, after she asked them to stop, being told by the parents, "They're just having fun."

Her voice shaking, Carter also targeted the culprits who left two decapitated chickens last month in the West Napa Street car wash of protest co-organizer Jerry Marino. Calling the action "a travesty," Carter told the audience, "You can take your chicken suits and rubber chickens and have a show ... (but) our chickens in the Plaza deserve a lot more. I'm not here to joke about it."

After a slight pause, seven local residents got up -- one by one -- and spoke in favor of keeping the birds where they are.

Howard Egger-Bovet speculated that the chickens "serve a wonderful service in our town" by telling motorists and other citizens to slow down and remember life's simplicities. "This is a healthy thing -- this is a good thing," he said, adding that he would like to see the birds honored and protected rather than harassed and banished.

Marilyn Goode, who called the chickens "much more interesting than the ducks," told of bringing her 100-year-old mother to the Plaza to enjoy the chickens. She suggested posting signs calling for a \$50 fine against those who molest the birds.

"I think we need to control the people, not the birds," added Tom Cannard.

John McEndy, who also helped organize the Jan. 22 chicken rally, agreed with the previous speakers. Calling the Plaza protest "a lot of fun," McEndy emphasized that he didn't want the chickens harassed either -- and suggested building a coop or other sanctuary to "keep the chickens safe from these idiots who abuse them."

Jerry Marino displayed an old Poultry Producers of Central California sign threatening a \$250 reward for information leading to the arrest of "chicken thieves." He asked for the city to draft a similarly tough law.

Bandur replied that an anti-animal abuse ordinance is already on the city's books, saying "We could put up signs for everything ... People have a responsibility for their actions and for their kids."

Carter also pointed out that not everyone slows down for the chickens, who sometimes wander into the streets and get hit by cars. She also decried as "sad" that the Index-Tribune's only reprinted issue concerned Buffy, a Plaza chicken who laid eggs at a local shop to the delight of owners and tourists.

Ramponi rapped twice for order as one audience member left, and the council chamber filled with angry murmurs and cries of "Phyllis, you're missing the point."

"Sorry if you don't want to hear this," Carter said, and added that she didn't want the public works staff to be harassed or "to take the police department away from important things to police chickens."

Again Ramponi banged his gavel to silence the crowd's mutterings, saying he'd call for a recess if they didn't settle down. Shortly thereafter, about one-third of the audience stood up and noisily walked out.

Following another brief pause, the councilmembers decided not to change the current policy, with Larry Barnett pointing out the near-impossibility of rounding up all of the

chickens. Brown agreed, but called the discussion a "worthwhile dialogue ... It's not for us to be judgmental for why citizens attend (council meetings)."

Al Mazza said the sign idea could be tried, but suggested the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau could also put out the anti-abuse word in its tourist literature. "There are a lot of ignorant people when it comes to animals," he said.