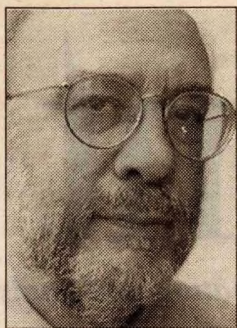


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Our Town

by Don Kazak

An official's silence

I've been a reporter for a long time and have covered many public officials over the years. But I've never had an elected official ever just stop talking to me before.

This started a couple of months ago when I was doing interviews for what would be a Weekly cover story about the March 5 IKEA election in East Palo Alto. I had been having trouble reaching City Councilwoman Myrtle Walker by phone for an interview.

I didn't think much of it. Some people are better at returning calls than others. We're all busy, and it comes with the job.

Before the next City Council meeting got underway, I walked up to the council dais to talk with Walker.

I explained why I had been calling her and asked her for a time when I could talk with her. She just said, "No."

I was taken aback. I had never heard any complaints from her about anything I had written in my coverage of East Palo Alto. I reminded her that other people may characterize her position on IKEA and say things about her, and I wouldn't be able to put in any response from her.

That was fine, she said. Print that.

Since then, I've made repeated calls to her without ever getting a call back. Weekly Editor Jay Thorwaldson — who has known and worked with her for years — also made several calls, again without ever getting a response.

An elected official is elected to serve and be accountable to the public.

And like it or not, we in the media are a prime avenue for that accountability. When mayors or city council members talk to me, they are talking indirectly to thousands of people, and it's my job to attempt to convey their words and positions fairly.

I have a lot of respect for the public service that elected officials such as Walker have put in over the years — mainly because it's something I would never have the stomach or patience for myself. They put up with long, tireless and often thankless hours, sometimes with a lot of guff and abuse from the public.

From covering the City Council

there for so long, I know that Walker has had a tough time of it in recent years. She has taken a sometimes contrarian stance at council meetings, since the current nominal council majority of Mayor Duane Bay, Vice Mayor Pat Foster and Councilwoman Sharifa Wilson doesn't include her.

It's more than that, actually. The IKEA issue and ballot measure split the council and the community. Walker, on election night, hosted the anti-IKEA election party at her house.

Since then, she has been mostly missing from council meetings because of a health problem, reportedly a pinched nerve.

I don't know why Walker has deliberately silenced herself to readers, but she has. And that has kept me from doing my job as completely as I can, which I resent.

Neither democracy nor journalism is rocket science.

I get paid by the Weekly but I've always thought of myself as serving the public, of trying to be the public's voice through what I see and hear and learn. That's why reader phone calls and e-mails are so important to me.

I'm accountable for what I do, because it is all too public, week after week. When I'm stupid and goof up, it's right there in print, and then I get the e-mails to set me straight. But at least I'm willing to listen and learn.

There is no law, of course, that requires any elected official to talk with reporters. But it's not very politically astute to shut out the press. Really savvy elected officials depend on the press to get their viewpoints out to the electorate.

Part of that is being accountable to the public through the press, including being open and available to answer questions from reporters about votes or positions they take on controversial issues.

Walker is one of two East Palo Alto City Council members up for election this year. If she runs, presumably she will need to get her viewpoints and positions out to voters. But if she remains silent, that will be difficult to do.

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