

The Press Democrat

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March 3, 2025

Stephen Zollman, Mayor
Jill McLewis, Vice Mayor
Phill Carter, Councilmember
Neysa Hinton, Councilmember
Sandra Maurer, Councilmember

City of Sebastopol
7120 Bodega Avenue
Sebastopol, CA 95472

Email: citycouncil@cityofsebastopol.gov

Dear Mayor Zollman and members of the City Council:

As representatives of the largest media organization in the North Bay, we write to express our alarm over the city policy aimed at muzzling city staff members and elected officials to keep them from talking to the press.

This is blatantly unconstitutional in numerous respects as outlined in the letter by our colleagues at the First Amendment Coalition and the Society of Professional Journalists of Northern California, which we wholeheartedly endorse.

In addition to the numerous constitutional issues outlined in the letter, it's just bad public policy. At a time in our country's history when trust in government is at a low ebb, you should be pushing policies that promote transparency, not those that erode it.

We needn't remind you that this is the era of social media and the 24/7 news cycle. The old line about how "a lie travels around the world before the truth can even put its pants on" is truer now than it has ever been. That is why it is more important than ever for your staff and electeds to be able to counter any rumors, innuendos and lies about the City of Sebastopol in real time.

And the best way you can do that is to allow the people closest to the information to speak with journalists in the moment to put the correct information before the people we both serve – your constituents.

Councilmembers, you are in your positions because the people who elected you trusted you to represent their best interests. Those voters deserve to hear directly from you -- and the other officials whose salaries they pay -- without having you mute and filter your voices through the Orwellian information bottleneck this system has so needlessly created.

One of the reasons our Founding Fathers enshrined the First Amendment in the U.S. Constitution was because they believed that a free and independent press is the best way to inform citizens about the inner workings of their government, and that government works best when its citizens are armed with information about it.

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As James Madison, the author of the First Amendment once wrote, “A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both.”

Therefore, we make the same requests of you as outlined by the First Amendment Coalition and the Society of Professional Journalists:

- Promptly repeal the November 2024 policy relating to the mayor and press.
- Pull Item No. 16 from Tuesday night’s agenda and abandon the “current protocol and processes” as detailed in Mayor Zollman’s email to reporters that appears in Staff Report for that time.
- Publicly commit to recognizing the role of a free press in keeping the community informed and the ability of city staff and all council members to exercise their First Amendment rights.

In addition, we respectfully request that this letter be included with the other community comments as part of the public record for Tuesday night’s council meeting.

Respectfully,

Eric Johnston
CEO and Publisher
Sonoma Media Investments

Chris Fusco
Executive Editor
The Press Democrat

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