

## Respect and Civility From the Dais.

Our first 10-1 Council has accomplished much, yet we have fallen short establishing a consistent tone and message of respect and civility from the dais. Let's do better – for each other, our community and our staff.

When we hear statements and comments that exhibit prejudice or racism or could be heard to do so, it is important that we are not numbed through repetition, but rather identify such moments loudly and clearly so that our silence is never taken as acquiescence or even approval.

We cannot let our policy or political goals, even our frustrations and disappointments, create an environment or culture where those testifying before us arrive or leave scared, humiliated, disrespected, or fearful of their interaction with us.

Council Member Zimmerman's recent admonishment to visiting families and children of color that they "do something useful... and... don't have to live off others," is the most recent example of those testifying to Council not receiving the respect they deserve. Austin residents petitioning Council during budget hearings are not being "greedy" nor "selfish." They are exercising a sacred right. I wish now I had spoken up then. I want the community and especially the children to know that many watching Thursday night thought they were seeing a possible council member, mayor, or even President when they imagined the future of these extraordinary children bravely testifying to Council past bedtime.

Earlier at the same meeting, the motivation of our city staff was again impugned. These public servants are doing their utmost to serve Council and our city and are doing an incredible job. Our city is so fortunate to have this talent and skill so selflessly devoted to the common good.

While we have generally done a good job of exercising appropriate decorum toward each other, we can do better, and sighs and rolling eyes can exhibit the same disrespect as spoken words.

As council members, we may disagree – even vehemently – with each other or residents or staff that stand before us. We have an absolute right and even the responsibility and obligation to express our views. The dais is not only a forum for Council to receive information and have questions answered, but it is also a stage on which council members communicate with each other and the public at large – it provides an

opportunity to make policy arguments and to move public sentiment.

We must find a way, however, to perform our fact-finding, policy-making, and will-building functions in a respectful and civil way.

I apologize to you and the community for not having kept a stronger hand in running our meetings in order to ensure respect and civility, and I commit to do better as we go forward. Significant introspection over the last couple of days have led me to the conclusion that I have erred too much on the side of allowing debate to be unrestrained and to go unchallenged. There is great value in such a practice, and it reflects the purest principles of free speech and expression. When that license is abused, however, the cost to the community is even greater, and serves to abridge through intimidation others' engagement in their right of speech and expression. If we each do not temper ourselves, it is appropriate for you and the community to expect the chair to intervene. And know I'd welcome support and help.

Going forward at council meetings, we will not challenge the motivations of those standing in front of us, nor will we call them liars. We can certainly ask questions that seek information. Rhetorical arguments (or rhetorical questions) will need to be made when we are addressing each other. There is an unfair power relationship between council members and people standing at the podium who do not have or feel they have the ability to walk away if they feel offended or disrespected, and who do not have or feel they have the right to ignore questions or statements or to respond, challenge or defend themselves with honesty. These folks are in our home, our turf, and they are entitled to be treated even better than guests – they are our bosses. The staff are our employees and their morale is our responsibility. They are our neighbors, experts, advisors and guests appearing at our invitation or request or pursuant to their right. Whether we agree with everyone or not, we must celebrate their participation.

We need to save our rhetorical questions and policy arguments for when folks are not standing at the podium. Even then, once our points are made, we need to move on.

I pledge to do better. I ask for the Council's support and help.