

A PATH FORWARD Steven P. Dinkin

LESS INTEREST IN CIVIC EDUCATION HURTS OUR DEMOCRACY

Happy Constitution Day! If you somehow forgot to mark your calendar, you're probably not alone. The federal observance was established by law in 2004, to commemorate the signing of the Constitution in 1787. Once it was called Citizenship Day.

When asked why the Constitution is so important, the Honorable Sandra Day O'Connor, former associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, said, "It is, quite simply, the most powerful vision of freedom ever expressed ... neither so rigid as to be stifling, nor so malleable as to be devoid of meaning."

O'Connor continued, "Our Constitution has been an inspiration that changed the trajectory of world history for the perpetual benefit of mankind. In 1787, no country in the world had ever allowed its citizens to select their own form of government, much less to select a democratic government."

"What was revolutionary when it was written, and what continues to inspire the world today, is that the Constitution put governance in the hands of the people."

Considering all that the Constitution prescribes — when it comes to our systems of government and rights as Americans — it's impossible to imagine our leaders coming together to create a modern-day version.

The act establishing Constitution Day requires federally funded educational institutions to provide instruction on the Constitution, in conjunction with the observance. For a lot of students, it may provide their only glimpse into the way American democracy is supposed to work. That's bound to have consequences for the future of our country.

School districts across America have placed a rightful focus on reading and math curricula, to counter the learning losses that occurred during the pandemic. All the while, civics education has been relegated to second-tier status (or disappeared entirely), a trend that began in 2010.

According to nonprofit news organization Marketplace, that was the year Congress first shifted dollars toward STEM (science, technology, engineer-

ing, and math) and away from subjects like civics. In 2019, the federal government spent almost \$3 billion on STEM education, compared with \$4 million on civics — about 5 cents per student.

We are seeing the effects: In data released by the Department of Education earlier this year, eighth-graders scored worse on the history section of the National Assessment of Educational Progress than in any year since testing began in 1994. Fewer than 1 in 4 students achieved proficiency in civics.

Sal Khan, who leads Khan Academy, and Jeffrey Rosen, head of the National Constitution Center, have called this a crisis — one deepened by political polarization and efforts to limit the free exchange of ideas in school classrooms. In a Time magazine article earlier this year, Khan and Rosen wrote, "If we fail to teach our children the principles of democracy and the habits of civil dialogue necessary to sustaining it, we will endanger the American project. Instead of building a better future by finding common

ground, they will only slide deeper into partisanship and extremism."

Similarly, civic education has been all but abandoned on college campuses. Professors Debra Satz and Dan Edelman of Stanford University have linked the trend to a spate of incidents involving free speech — specifically, attempts to rescind invitations or to silence controversial speakers.

In their recent New York Times essay, Satz and Edelman blamed the decline in civic education, in part, on "vocationalism": students deserting humanities classes in favor of preprofessional tracks, as they pursue lucrative careers. They wrote, "When universities do not signal the intrinsic value of certain topics or texts by requiring them, many students simply follow market cues." Civic education, by contrast, is a public good.

It points to a larger conversation we continue to have: What is the purpose of education? Some years ago, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker tried to change the century-old mission of my alma

mater, the University of Wisconsin. State code commands the university to "search for truth" and "improve the human condition." Walker wanted the code to say "meet the state's workforce needs" instead. He was roundly criticized and backed off.

I get Walker's point, but education is about more than work readiness — it's about preparing young people for a fulfilling life, giving them the tools needed to contribute to society. That means, in part, going beyond STEM to imbue in them the ability to listen and engage in respectful dialogue with people whose views differ from their own, learning that acceptance of differences makes us stronger as Americans.

It's a core tenant of every civics course — and an idea all of us should be able to agree upon, no matter our politics.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit ncrconline.com

SMOLENS • Has real change been made for homeless residents?

FROM B1 before the ordinance took effect. Outreach workers had spread word of what was likely coming.

"When we went into Balboa Park, we expected ... more encampments," Capt. Shawn Takeuchi, head of the city's neighborhood policing division, told Nelson. "They chose to leave on their own."

Takeuchi said there had been 88 warnings under the camping ban by the end of last month, but police did not provide further details, such as the locations where they were issued. That number also does not include possible warnings or actions under other laws, like the city's encroachment ordinance, which has been used to move homeless people out of the public right of way.

It's hard to say whether the situation in Balboa Park and downtown, however superficial it may be, will relieve pressure on Mayor Todd Gloria, who

has been under fire for both not cracking down enough on homelessness and ramping up enforcement too much.

It's instructive that some change has occurred in those particular locations, though not everyone agrees it has.

Public frustration over homelessness has been building for years, but heightened action seems to happen when complaints by influential San Diegans — particularly downtown interests — reach a crescendo.

That occurred with former Mayor Kevin Faulconer as it has with Gloria.

Everybody wants a long-term, comprehensive solution to homelessness. But a lot of people also want homeless people off the street and, to put it bluntly, out of sight — now. Whether what appears to be occurring now assuages those demands remains to be seen.

The decrease in downtown homelessness has been dramatic, according to data compiled by the Downtown San Diego Partnership. In May, there were more than 2,100 homeless people living in and around downtown. The number has dropped each month since, to 1,268 in August. That's still a lot of people out on the street, however.

The enforcement focus on Balboa Park certainly hasn't mollified Bill Walton, the civic figure and former NBA star who continues to be one of Gloria's most unrelenting critics on homelessness.

Walton has lived in Hillcrest on the edge of Balboa Park for more than four decades and has repeatedly vented his outrage at the mayor publicly for what he says has been the degradation of the city's crown jewel.

In a commentary published by the Times of San Diego on Thursday, Walton rejected what he said are

Gloria's "claims he's cleaning up from the disastrous mess that his homeless crisis has created for all of us."

San Diego's homeless population has grown in recent years, though the city's unsheltered population at times has been slightly larger in the past. One difference is that there have been greater concentrations in downtown and possibly Balboa Park.

"A closer look at the numbers over the past decade shows there were times when the countywide population of homeless people living outdoors was larger than today," according to a Union-Tribune story in June about the annual homeless count.

"Downtown San Diego, however, has seen the number of people living on sidewalk encampments surge to almost 2,000, making the crisis more visible than ever."

Another difference may be there were more tents,

which increased the visibility of homelessness. In recent years, some volunteer groups distributed free tents to provide homeless people with some shelter.

This is not to suggest homelessness is less of a problem than before. The homeless counts take place on one day each January, and some say it's a flawed snapshot. The true picture may be told by the number of people seeking homeless services, which has skyrocketed in recent years.

The pace of people falling into homelessness regularly outpaces people gaining housing.

What the future holds is uncertain, but it doesn't seem any big improvement on the homeless front is coming soon, even if unsheltered people are clearing out of certain areas.

Better assessments of how the camping ban is working will come with time, if and when data surfaces about where people have gone.

Meanwhile, more shelter options will be coming online, including another "safe sleeping" site for up to 400 tents at Parking Lot O in Balboa Park. But other shelters are being shut down or moved, including one at Golden Hall and, by the end of the year, the one at the city maintenance yard at 20th and B streets, which has space for 136 tents.

But none of the homelessness policies now in place will provide enough beds for all of the region's unsheltered people in the foreseeable future.

What they said

From a Los Angeles Times story on this being the warmest summer on record in the Northern Hemisphere.

"Earth is now well outside of the safe operating space for humanity," the study said."

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Together San Diego

LIVESTREAM

Community relations manager Paola Hernández-Jiao interviews the people and organizations working to make our community a better place.



Thursday, Sept. 21
at 12 p.m.

Venus Molina

Co-chair of Brindis Gala Committee
MANA de San Diego

Brindis Gala raises funds for Hermanitas Youth program

Hear from Venus Molina about the 35-year celebration of MANA de San Diego's Hermanitas Youth Leadership Mentor Program and the upcoming Brindis Gala. MANA de San Diego transforms communities by empowering Latinas to achieve upward mobility and a better quality of life through its five programs. Molina is an alumna of the Hermanitas program.

Watch the interview at:
SanDiegoUnionTribune.com/TogetherSDLive

The San Diego Union-Tribune
Know your community

TAX • Half-cent increase approved to last for 7 years, but could be extended

FROM B1 money would be used for police, fire and crime prevention programs, to expand the maintenance of streets, parks and beaches, and to address the city's increasing homelessness issues.

A committee of seven residents appointed by the City Council oversees Measure X spending.

The additional \$200,000 allocation for gang diversion this year will pay for more after-school programs, Gossman said.

"This type of programming not only keeps kids engaged in healthy activities, it expands options for kids that are beyond just sports," he said.

Measure X is on track to raise a total of \$117.7 million over its seven-year life, according to a tentative

budget presented by Gossman.

The estimated seven-year total includes \$3.5 million for youth programs, \$10 million for homelessness prevention, \$18.7 million for police protection, \$19.3 million for fire safety services, and \$66.2 million for roads, beaches, recreation and other infrastructure.

About \$13.2 million of the infrastructure funding is being used for a single project, the replacement of the downtown Fire Station No. 1.

Mayor Esther Sanchez said Friday that Measure X has been such a success that she would like to see Oceanside voters extend it.

"We have been able to get so many wonderful projects done for the city," Sanchez said.

Most cities in San Diego

County have a sales tax rate of 7.75 percent. That includes the state sales tax rate of 7.25 percent, and the half-cent regional sales tax known as Transnet approved by county voters to pay for transportation projects.

With the additional half-cent, Oceanside's total sales tax is 8.25 percent, which is the same as in Vista, where the 8.25 percent total includes a half-cent municipal tax approved by voters in 2006.

In Del Mar, the county's smallest city, voters approved a 1 percent increase in 2016 to make the total 8.75 percent. Elsewhere in Southern California, sales tax tops out in Long Beach and Santa Monica, both with 10.25 percent.

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