

Council condemns Alvarez's 'Hitler' comments

Mayor pro tem apologizes for her verbal attack on landlord, son amid calls for her resignation.

SANTA ANA • The City Council on Tuesday voted to condemn statements made by Claudia Alvarez, the mayor pro tem, at the previous council meeting, when she compared downtown landlord Irv Chase to Adolf Hitler and accused Chase and his son, Ryan Chase, of "ethnic cleansing."



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However, the council chose not to take other possible actions proposed before the meeting by members David Benavides and Carlos Bustamante, such as removing Alvarez from her position as mayor pro tem or as chairman of the Orange County Water District's board. It did find that Alvarez violated the city's Code of Ethics and Conduct with her Aug. 24 remarks aimed at the Chases.

The council's decision came near the end of a four-hour meeting, after dozens



PHOTOS: KEVIN SULLIVAN, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
Mayor Pro Tem Claudia Alvarez, left, and Mayor Miguel Pulido listen to public comments Tuesday during the Santa Ana City Council.



Archer Altstaetter admonishes Mayor Pro Tem Claudia Alvarez.



Fina Chaves wears her support for Mayor Pro Tem Claudia Alvarez.

of members of the public and all seven council members had spoken on the issue.

While many in the crowd that packed the Council Chambers on Tuesday night criticized Alvarez, others showed support for her, including a group of downtown property owners who brought baskets of fruit and flowers as gifts for her.

The gifts were intended to show gratitude for Alvarez, who has championed the property owners in their fight against a special property tax assessment to fund a downtown business improvement district. The Chases have had prominent roles in Downtown Inc., the entity that administers the district.

Alvarez, while appreciative of the support, said she couldn't accept the gifts and asked that they be donated to nonprofit groups that feed the hungry.

After Benavides spoke in favor of removing Alvarez as mayor pro tem, Councilman Vincent Sarmiento offered a competing motion to condemn her comments and find her in violation of the code. Sarmiento's motion passed on a 4-3 vote, with Alvarez among those voting for it.

The mayor pro tem runs council meetings in the absence of the mayor. Alvarez had taken charge of the Aug. 24 meeting when she made her incendiary remarks, after Mayor Miguel Pulido recused himself because of a conflict of interest.

At Tuesday's meeting, Alvarez apologized for those remarks and said she

has reached out to the Chases, hoping to personally apologize to them when they are ready. She also has met with local rabbis and the Anti-Defamation League, she said.

"To err is human, and I am human and I erred. I was very passionate about an issue and yes, I mis-spoke. By no means did I intend to insult anybody," she said.

"I do want to apologize for those comments. ... I understand that I hurt a lot of people," Alvarez says. "This is not by any means a Jewish-Latino fight. Both communities have worked to stop racism and will continue to do so."

Benavides said he believed Alvarez was "genuinely sincere in her apology. I believe people do make mistakes ... I do believe in second chances." He then dropped a proposal that the council ask Alvarez for her resignation but pressed forward with his motion to remove her as mayor pro tem. Bustamante seconded that motion.

Then, saying "it's important to be proportionate," Sarmiento offered his substitute motion, which condemned Alvarez's remarks and found her in violation of the ethics and conduct code but did not seek to remove her from any of her official roles.

"I can't defend the comments that were made by my colleague, Councilwoman Alvarez. I'm not going to begin to try," he said. "I think they're regrettable" and have tainted the whole council, he said.

But Sarmiento also spoke about a climate of disrespect fostered in part by anonymous comments bashing Santa Ana on blogs and online news articles, including The Santa Ana Register blog at ocregister.com.

He referred to "ruthless" comments that invoke racial or ethnic stereotypes to insult the city and its residents. Sarmiento, in his motion, proposed working with the county's Human Relations Commission to set up a countywide town hall meeting on race and civility.

Councilman Sal Tinajero later picked up Sarmiento's theme, reading several harshly negative comments about Santa Ana that were posted by anonymous readers of The Santa Ana Register blog.

"I'm the darkest one up here. I've had to deal with racism my whole life," he said. "It

took me years to look in the mirror and say you're all right. I've taught my children to love themselves and love others. My kids are 100 percent Mexican and they're 100 percent white."

"I think there's a responsibility on blogs and newspapers when they allow people to be openly disrespectful," Tinajero said, then quickly added that Alvarez's comments were wrong.

"I don't condone those comments ... but some of us have been hurt, too," he said.



Benavides



Sarmiento

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