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SANTA BARBARA CITY COLLEGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES: LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL? WITH PRESSURE FROM HUNDREDS IN CROWD, TRUSTEES REINSTATE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

By MITCHELL WHITE, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER
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Man's use of racial slur during public comment creates conflict with students, who call for more action on campus racism

Following hours of soliciting public comment, the Santa Barbara City College Board of Trustees voted unanimously to permanently recite the Pledge of Allegiance before board meeting.

Hundreds of local residents attended Thursday's meeting at the Harold Thornton Auditorium on the SBCC Wake Campus. Dozens spoke in support of the pledge, promoting patriotism and denouncing Trustee President Robert Miller's views that the pledge is "steeped in expressions of nativism and white nationalism."

Former veterans, including some dressed in uniform, were joined by other free speech advocates criticizing Mr. Miller for removing the pledge from the board agenda - while other members of the campus community were outraged at the sudden action following what they say has been months of racism and bigotry on campus.

As the meeting began, Mr. Miller informed the audience the board would allow public comment on the resolution but only allowed each speaker two minutes, as opposed to the traditional five minutes. While board

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Grace Wallace, draped in an American flag, salutes Vietnam veteran Stephen Penner after he pleaded with the Board of Trustees to utilize the Pledge of Allegiance.

NICK MASUDA/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

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policy allows a 20-minute maximum for any one topic regardless of the number of speakers, with more than 60 speakers wishing to discuss the issue, Mr. Miller explained the shortened time would allow for everyone to have their say.

Those who spoke against Mr. Miller's decision did so in a spirited and robust fashion. People shared their personal affiliations with the pledge and combat veterans shared why the pledge is so important to them.

Stephen Penner, a Vietnam veteran who told the board he fired the last shot in the Vietnam War on Jan. 28, 1973, said that Dr. Martin Luther King and his protestors marched in 1964 and carried the American flag, while others protested carrying the Confederate flag. He also mentioned the recent Charlottesville, VA rally, with white people carrying Nazi and Confederate flags.

"If these same Nazi flag were to show up with their thugs in Santa Barbara, California, my friends and I would be there to stand up against, them," he said. "We'd be standing under the stars and stripes."

Others called for Mr. Miller to resign for his unilateral decision to remove the pledge from board meetings and some cautioned that the school could lose funding for removing the pledge.

Laurie Punches told the board she was ashamed that none of the board members stood up with former adjunct professor Celeste Barber when she recited the pledge at a January meeting. Students protesting the meeting for the college's decision to allow Vice President of Business Services Lyndsay Maas to return to campus could be heard shouting over Ms. Barber.

"Of all the countries in the world past and present, there is no country that is more deserving of its patriots than America," Ms. Barber said. "And I would just like to say, on Valentine's Day, I love you America."

Linda Seals, a retired attorney, told the board that the video involving Ms. Barber has been viewed 4 million times online.

"When the kids stomp and when they try and speak over you they're usually 5-years-old," Ms. Seals said. "It's very disturbing to see kids - and I'm calling them kids because they are kids. They have no life experiences."

Ms. Seals explained that college is supposed to be a transition into real life and that the students would struggle in the future if the board doesn't set its standards higher.

"They're going to have a lot of problems in life if you don't set those standards higher and not allow kids to think that the school belongs to them - it does not," Ms. Seals said. "It belongs to the tax payers, it belongs to the people whose names are on the buildings, and it belongs to the people who are teaching. Without all of the money that comes in and all of the grants that they have available to them they wouldn't be here."

Cage Englander, a 16-year-old middle college student, echoed some of those sentiments and said the college is making students "ill-prepared for life."

As the speakers continued the crowd began to grow restless. On several occasions, Paige Miller stood up from the back of the auditorium and shouted in displeasure



Top photo, Gary Vandeman utilized a racial slur during his two minutes asking for the Pledge to return, causing uproar from many students in attendance, including Krystle Farmer, below.



From top to bottom, hundreds attended the SBCC Board of Trustees meeting on Thursday, which was kicked off by the Board reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, drawing cheers from the bulk of the audience.

Many veterans spoke on their commitment to the American flag, including Dennis Peterson, a Vietnam veteran.

about how the public comments were handled.

Anne Sprecher was one of the few attendees who spoke in support of Mr. Miller's decision.

"I would like to remind the audience if they actually believe in democracy that all of these people were elected freely by the community - they were not appointed and they are not here for money or glory," Ms. Sprecher said.

"I believe this is an educational facility, it is an institution to teach - it is not military, it is not Congress and it is not here to pass laws," she continued. "We should really pick our battles."

Things appeared calm and collected until Gary Vandeman addressed the board on his views of racism.

"Somehow, it's become okay to have black only words," he said. "For some reason, enunciating the word n----r is okay if my skin is dark enough. Discrimination in any context is divisive and wrong. My goal is to have equality and opportunity for all we represent."

Mr. Vandeman received applause from a portion of the crowd as other members of the audience grew enraged for the lack of acknowledgment of the racial slur.

Krystle Farmer, a former SBCC student who was elected the student trustee last summer only to resign after she said the board was not responsive to her calls for racial justice on campus, got into a shouting match with Mr. Miller.

"We have real racism here," she said, as other members of the crowd shouted at her and Mr. Miller banged his gavel on the stage of the auditorium.

Right before Mr. Miller called for a short recess to bring order to the meeting, Trustee Kate Parker said it was important to address that comment.

"We do recognize that everybody has a right to come to that podium and say what they're going to say, but it was so distracting, so offensive and it just makes it harder for me to move forward with the discussion," she said.

"I just don't think we can let that kind of speech fly by."

Board member Jonathan Abboud said it was unfair that Ms. Farmer was gavelled but Mr. Vandeman was not.

Superintendent and President Anthony Beebe remained silent throughout the meeting.

After taking a recess, the board heard from more than a dozen other public speakers before taking up the resolution.

The speakers spoke on the acts of racism they have either heard or experienced on campus and requested an external review board be appointed to process complaints and grievance issues at SBCC and that whoever was appointed be selected with the student's approval.

Ms. Farmer, who did not turn in a comment slip, attempted to speak at the podium after another speaker yielded her time to her. The board was not allowing for yielded time and a motion was passed ruling her out of order.

Ms. Miller, who earlier criticized the public comment process, told the board the pledge isn't an issue on campus but rather a poor decision by Mr. Miller. She said she personally hasn't had any bad experiences at SBCC but hears stories from others.

"I hear the plea for help and I am prying and you people are doing nothing to actively help them," Ms. Miller said. "I don't care about your plans for the future, what are you going to do today?"

Ms. Miller remained at the podium for several minutes after her allotted time was up. She began to shout at the board, calling for action. The board passed a motion and ruled her out of order.

"You are using your rules to protect yourselves from the truth," she said. "You can hide behind that nice long table, with your pretty suits on and listen to these people tell you over and over how hurt they are because of something that has nothing to do with our City College students."

After several minutes of back and forth, the board took up the resolution.

"I have not changed my views on the pledge but the interest of the college comes first," Mr. Miller said. "The controversy has been an unwelcomed distraction from our

primary goal to educate students and maximize their chances for success."

Following the meeting, Mr. Miller declined further comment when asked to address his decision to remove the pledge.

Kenny Igbechi, the student trustee, told the crowd that none of the students at SBCC were involved in the decision to remove the pledge.

Mr. Abboud said he was ashamed that no one called Mr. Vandeman for his comments.

"I didn't hear a single person who came up here and espoused how great America was, 'Justice for all' - they didn't say anything," he said.

Mr. Abboud explained that those who care about the pledge are in a different place than the students telling the board to better serve people of color.

"We're told that student success is the number one goal of the board - this has nothing to do with student success," he said, adding that the board silencing Ms. Farmer made it clear that white supremacy is alive and well in Santa Barbara.

"This country has never had liberty and justice for all. Never. And I don't know if we'll ever get there," he continued. "But we're working to get there but it is a fools statement to say there is liberty for and justice for all in the United States of America, or in Santa Barbara, or at Santa Barbara City College."

Mr. Abboud initially requested that it be made clear that no one has to recite the pledge, and that the phrase "someday" be added at the end. His request was not brought up when the resolution was voted upon.

Ms. Parker, who was attending her fourth meeting after sitting on the board for the Santa Barbara Unified School District for 12 years, said she hoped the board would use the discussion as an opportunity to move forward and requested a resolution be added on next week's agenda to address the racism on campus.

Trustee Craig Nielson told the crowd that many investigations remain ongoing and that change will come when the results are known.

"It's really hard to take actions on things when you don't have facts," he said, as a member of the audience interrupted and quickly interjected "It's my turn, I listened to you people out there."

After the meeting, Mr. Nielson said there was no animosity and if he said the wrong word that inferred something else it was not meant.

"It was just words," he told the News-Press.

"I was just trying to say 'I listened to you, and now it's my turn.'"

While speaking with the News-Press following the meeting, Ms. Farmer said that many of the issues black students have been raising in recent months were things she had discussed when she was on the board in the fall.

"If it's really liberty and justice for all, then be justice for all," she said. "None of us are protesting the pledge. We do not care about the pledge."

"What they showed today is what we've been trying to get, we've been trying to collaborate," she continued.

"Look how they cared about a bunch of white conservative people, but yet students have been coming crying on the mic? they haven't flinched."

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