



# Council Agenda Report

**From:** Thomas Frutchey, City Manager

**Subject:** Code of Civility

**Date:** June 5, 2018

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## Facts

1. The five members of the City Council seek to represent the full spectrum of political views in our community. Those views are in frequent disagreement. Dealing productively with that disagreement is vital, in order for the Council to be able to craft decisions that serve best the entire community.
2. What is key is how to best create a dialogue that promotes sharing diverse views and finding ways to combine the various perspectives in a productive manner.
3. One of the hallmarks of this current Council is the willingness and ability of all five Councilmembers to respect the opinions of the others, even while disagreeing. This Council epitomizes the ability to disagree without being disagreeable.
4. Such an ability is not automatic. It is also, unfortunately, not as widespread as one might assume. The results of the eighth annual national survey on *Civility in America* found that a record high rate of Americans (75 percent) believe that incivility in America has “risen to crisis levels.”
5. Incivility can have a corrosive effect on community and on democracy.
6. The Mayor’s leadership and our community’s handling of the recent discussions on SB 54 have been widely acknowledged throughout the County as demonstrating the power of civility. Citizens with good ideas need to feel that they are able to share their views openly at Council meetings, regardless of whether they are in the majority or minority, without fear of even latent hostility or intimidation.
7. Adoption of a code of civility is one step to try to strengthen and continue the Council’s successes to date, and push back against the national trend. Even a change in one Councilmember after November’s election could have a significant impact on Council’s current norms.
8. The Code was developed by five elected officials from around the County--Supervisor John Peschong, Supervisor Debbie Arnold, Mayor Heidi Harmon, Mayor John Shoals, and Councilmember Andy Pease, assisted by Melissa James--all of whom went on a trip to Denver and Boulder sponsored by the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce last fall.
9. The Code is being recommended for adoption by the Councilmembers of all seven cities as well as the five members of the Board of Supervisors.
10. The City of Atascadero has already adopted this Code of Civility. The Board and the other cities are also scheduling its discussion.
11. Subsequent steps currently being planned include a Countywide formal adoption event, as well as encouraging citizens to adopt the civility pledge when they attend Board or Council meetings.

## Options

1. Take no action;
2. Adopt the Code of Civility;
3. Provide alternative direction to staff;

## Analysis and Conclusions

Some might argue that adoption of a Code of Civility is an infringement on free speech, that it is just about being nice, or that it devalues principled positions. This is not the case. Civility does not restrict anyone’s ability to make their views known; it does not require withholding emotion; it in no way stifles

constructive dialogue, even debate. It is, however, about designing and adhering to a process of making those views known in a way that also respects the viewpoints of others.

**Fiscal Impact**

None.

**Recommendation**

Adopt the draft Code of Civility and authorize the Mayor to work with representatives of the Board of Supervisors and the other cities to finalize. The final version will be brought back to Council for approval by resolution, as an attachment to the Council's Policies and Procedures.

**Attachments**

1. Draft Code of Civility

# CODE OF CIVILITY

A healthy democracy respects the people's right to debate issues with passion. A healthy democracy not only tolerates disagreement but welcomes it in order to refine ideas and create policies that benefit the greater good.

The deterioration of civility across the country and within our community poses a threat to our democracy and our civic well-being. This deterioration:

- Compromises the integrity of a healthy, representative democracy
- Closes the door on depth of thought, reducing complex problems to harmful oversimplification
- Deters potential leaders from running for office or serving in government
- Poisons the civic well and discourages citizens from engaging on pressing community issues
- Casts the spotlight on poor behavior rather than shining a light on possible solutions
- Sets a poor example for our children

As elected leaders throughout the region we are accountable to each other, the press and the public. We have crafted this Code of Civility as a promise to each other, and to the people and institutions we serve, that we will always strive to conduct our debates - whether in person, online, or in written communication - in ways that allow for the widest range of opinions on ideas and policies, yet also respect the dignity, integrity and rights of those with whom we might disagree.

Therefore, in our deliberations, we pledge to:

## Listen First

*We will make an honest effort to understand views and reasoning of others by listening to understand, not listening to find fault, allowing thoughtful discussion to lead to the best possible outcomes.*

## Respect Different Opinions

*We will invite and consider different perspectives, allowing space for ideas to be expressed, opposed and clarified in a constructive manner.*

## Show Courtesy

*We will treat all colleagues, staff and members of the public in a professional and courteous manner whether in person, online, or in written communication, especially when we disagree.*

## Criticize Constructively

*We strive to advance solutions to community issues; when faced with disagreement, we do more than simply share our concerns with differing positions, we work to propose a course of action of mutual benefit.*

## Debate the Policy Not the Person

*We will focus on the issues, and not personalize debate or use other tactics that divert attention from the issue.*