

OPINION

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION



DON LANDGREN



Your Turn
Joe Wallace
Guest columnist

Pandemic brought region together

The Coachella Valley and its nine cities have always been challenged to take on the big projects in a regional manner. The COVID-19 pandemic changed that. And the changes established a foundation of hope: that the cooperation to survive exhibited selflessly can be sustained going forward.

CVEP partnered with agencies to form the Coachella Valley Economic Recovery Team (CVERT) as soon as the ink was dry on the first lockdown orders.

This group grew to include between 40 and 50 members who met virtually every Thursday morning to discuss actions we could take to help our businesses survive. The membership included representatives from local and federal government: the U.S. Small Business Administration, Riverside County and all nine of the cities.

Between us we assisted thousands of businesses in seeking relief from federal, local, county and state agencies. Many businesses operating now would not have survived without the relief that CVERT helped them access. I never believed I would look back on the pandemic as a career high point for impact and collective action for the good of all. But it is a time I will never forget, and I truly hope that the spirit of the larger community of the Coachella Valley will survive.

I was also honored by Supervisor V. Manual Perez with an appointment to serve on the Riverside County Economic Recovery Team, where I made new friendships that will last a lifetime.

The appointment of the new CEO of the Greater Coachella Valley Chamber of Commerce, Emily Falappino, came from the relationships made at those meetings. She has expressed enthusiasm for joining the regional efforts needed to establish the Coachella Valley as a world class place to do business.

CVEP reached out to the California Office of Emergency Management and received \$3 million in personal protective equipment that was distributed to valley businesses. We along with all the partners have been pleased, proud and exhausted from the last 19 months, but would do it all again.

CVEP proactively launched a telecommuter attraction campaign in early 2020.

One foundation of economic development is wealth creation. Telecommuters have poured into the Coachella Valley to work and enjoy our excellent lifestyles. According to MarketWatch, the median home price in the Coachella Valley has risen by \$160,000 during the pandemic. This has added \$28 billion in wealth to valley homeowners.

When we came together as a united Coachella Valley to help our business community survive, we had more impact than entities serving any single authority could have. We were much better together.

We learned, to paraphrase a best-selling book, that “it takes a region” when the problems are too big for a village to solve.

That same pursuit of regionalism is what will bring a comprehensive university, state-of-the-art bandwidth and economic diversification home to the people of the Coachella Valley.

If we are to “build back better,” it will take regional effort. I am looking forward to the next five years. We will become what we choose to pursue.

Joe Wallace is CEO of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership.

(Editor’s note: Wallace is also a co-founder and board member of the Coachella Valley Journalism Foundation, which raised money to help fund a new opinion editor at The Desert Sun.)

California needs better ways to track hate crimes



CalMatters Commentary
C.C. Yin and Regina Yin
Guest columnists

Gov. Gavin Newsom has signed legislation that includes more than \$157 million for Asian Pacific Islander equity in the 2021-22 California budget. This is a historic three-year investment for California’s growing Asian Pacific Islander community. Nearly \$10 million will go toward better data collection.

With this critical funding as a first step, we look forward to action by the Legislature. When state lawmakers reconvene in January, we urge them to consider legislation that can help track anti-Asian Pacific Islander hate crimes, including setting up a multilingual hate crimes hotline.

This would match on the state level what Congress accomplished earlier this year on the federal level — passing legislation that makes it easier to report hate crimes by improving outreach.

A critical component for our Asian Pacific Islander community is to ensure that victims can easily report hate crimes by phone or online and that accurate data is collected. Such efforts are needed.

In April, a strong supporter and outspoken voice for the Asian Pacific Island community in Northern California became the target of an anti-Asian hate crime. Ironically, Carl Chan, chair of the nonprofit Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs Oakland chapter and president of the Oakland Chinatown Chamber, was on his way to visit a victim of a separate hate crime incident when he was attacked from behind by an assailant making racial slurs.

The quick-thinking Chan whipped out his cellphone and took a photo of the assailant, which led to the swift arrest of 25-year-old James Lee Ramsey, who was on parole for criminal threats. Chan will be able to face his suspect and provide a victim impact statement.

A few months ago, our son-in-law, Harris Liu, a McDonald’s operator in Sacramento, also was physically assaulted and attacked with racial slurs. Fortunately, Liu was able to deflect the perpetrator’s swings and blows, and a nearby police officer arrested the assailant.

“We are proud of our Asian heritage,” said Mary Yin Liu, Harris’ wife and Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs’s national president. “To attack someone in the middle of the day claiming that he doesn’t belong here because of his race is dehumanizing and criminal.”

In many of these instances, however, there is no justice for the victim or their loved ones, because there are no arrests.

According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, anti-Asian hate crimes in 16 of America’s largest cities increased 145% in 2020.

We must continue to amplify our voices, including implementing educational prevention programs in the community and school system to deter racism, outreach to address COVID-19 and higher levels of pollution in certain Asian Pacific Islander communities, and engagement with elected and regulatory officials to continue this momentum for reform and positive change.

In May, Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs led a Unity Against Hate Nationwide Rally, partnering with over 180 diverse community organizations in 20 cities from Sacramento to Washington, D.C., including Australia and Canada. Next May, our organization will continue with a national week of action in partnership with many other diverse organizations, including the NAACP and Organization of Chinese Americans.

While California’s \$157 million is a strong start, it is only the beginning.

C.C. Yin and Regina Yin are co-founders of Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs, a nonprofit volunteer organization dedicated to advancing Asian Pacific Islander communities through increased leadership and civic engagement.

Damage from fires, droughts hurts water quality in Central California



California Focus
Tom Elias

It’s always easy to see direct effects of both the unprecedented spate of wildfires that has hit California over the last five years and the advent of this state’s newest multi-year drought.

Those include burned buildings, lung problems from direct smoke inhalation and lingering smoke and ash in the air of distant locations. Plus, ground subsidence, more expensive food as irrigation water becomes scarcer and more expensive, and brown lawns in almost every city and town.

But unseen, less obvious ill effects of both drought and the wildfires intensified by dry conditions are now turning out to be about as pernicious as the more visible direct effects seen on television news shows nightly.

Drought, for one thing, always leads to more groundwater pumping in the Central Valley, where farmers deprived of water supplies from both the state Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project turn straightaway to tapping underground aquifers.

Yes, in a way that’s an obvious drought effect, as the spouts of irrigation pipes that once barely peeked out

from the earth’s surface now sit several feet over ground level, plain measures of subsidence easily visible to drivers along major highways like U.S. 99 and California 152.

But a new study from the U.S. Geological Survey this fall shows that intensive underground pumping has also sped deterioration of groundwater quality over widespread areas.

“This could lead to more public drinking water wells being shut down if costly treatment or cleaner water sources to mix with groundwater are not available,” reported Zeno Levy, a USGS research geologist.

In short, many Central Valley cities draw water from underground when they don’t get surface supplies derived from snowfall runoff originating in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They get water from the same underground supplies farmers also use.

The problem, as revealed by 30 years of studying nitrate concentrations in Central Valley wells, is that those chemicals increase in drinking water when more groundwater is drawn.

A USGS chart shows how most public drinking water wells start out taking water from levels far below where nitrates are most common.

But as neighboring farmers’ wells draw more from those deep levels, the depth at which nitrates are thickest steadily drops and the unhealthy chemicals can eventually make their way into drinking supplies.

Then there are the side effects of fires. A new Stanford University study, for one example, finds that preg-

nant women exposed to smoke from wildfires have an increased chance of giving birth prematurely.

Premature birth leads to incomplete development of babies, which heightens risk of a variety of neurodevelopmental problems, stomach and lung complications and sometimes even early death.

And a reader in Magalia, near the ignition point of the 2018 Camp Fire that destroyed most of the Butte County town of Paradise, reports that benzene has been found in some local drinking water supplies.

Benzene in drinking water has been linked to various cancers including non-Hodgkins Lymphoma and acute myelogenous leukemia. Reported the reader, “Months after the Camp Fire evacuation ended, the grandson of a well-known and adored retail manager was born. Weeks later, he was diagnosed with two forms of childhood leukemia.”

For sure, tens of millions of dollars have already been paid to victims of benzene exposure from motor fuels and other sources. If it now turns out that benzene from burning natural substances has infested drinking water, an entire new source of damage claims against fire-causing utility companies like Pacific Gas & Electric will emerge, and it will be look out below for those firms.

What’s clear is that the cataloging of side effects of both drought and wildfires has barely begun. Which ought to add even more urgency to this state’s often-incomplete and inadequate fire prevention efforts.

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