

# 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



JOHN DARKOW

VALLEY VOICE ORIGINAL POEM  
BY MICHAEL SEEGER

## Autumn grace

In the desert's embrace, warm autumn arrives,  
A tapestry of hues, where life still survives —  
Where barren lands meet with the azure sky,  
A symphony of color begins to fly.

The sun, a golden orb, casts its gentle glow,  
Upon the arid landscape, where cacti grow.  
Amidst the sand dunes, whispered breezes blow —  
Sharing secrets of the desert's ebb and flow.

In Coachella's embrace, heat and sand collide,  
Fall reveals its secrets in hues, warm and wide —  
Where cacti stand tall, with thorns as ancient guards,  
A panoply of colors, nature's deck of cards.

The desert blooms with grace, in this season of  
change,  
As wildflowers emerge, their colors rearrange —  
A tapestry of beauty, painted on the sand,  
Every petal token of life's fine command.

Mesquite tree branches, reaching ever high,  
Stand as sentinels beneath the desert sky —  
Their swamy leaves, like mossy flames, shimmer  
As the light across the Valley grows dimmer.

The saguaro cacti, with arms outstretched wide,  
Stand tall and stately, in their desert stride —  
Their spines, like ancient warriors, standing strong,  
Defying the harshness, where they belong.

As twilight descends, a coolness fills the air —  
The land's nocturnal creatures begin to share  
Their songs of solitude, in the moonlit night,  
Echoe through the canyons, with pure delight.

Lone coyote howls echo near and far  
A *berceuse* as the desert day bids *au revoir* —  
The crisp, clear air whispers secrets to the breeze,  
As if the desert's heart, is longing for release.

In this arid refuge, where life finds its way,  
Autumn's touch is subtle, yet it has its say —  
Even in the desert, where scarcity abounds,  
Nature finds a rhythm, where harmony resounds.

So let us embrace this desert's autumn grace  
Where life and stillness mingle, in this sacred  
space —  
For in the barren landscape, beauty does reside,  
In whispered desert breezes, autumn's secrets hide.



Michael Seeger is a poet and educator residing in Cathedral City. Prior to his life as a middle school English instructor, he worked as a technical writer for a baseball card company and served as a Marine infantry officer during Desert Storm. Email him at [Hemingwayhero@dc.rr.com](mailto:Hemingwayhero@dc.rr.com).

### SHARE YOUR VIEWS

The Desert Sun welcomes guest columns or cartoons addressing local political and social issues, or some other aspect of life in the Coachella Valley. General guidelines include:

- Columns should be 500 to 550 words.
- Cartoons can be one panel or multiple.
- We print the author's photo, city of residence and contact info (typically an email address) with a column; and name and city of residence with a cartoon.
- Anonymous columns or cartoons are never published.
- We reserve the right to edit columns and to republish (including electronically) all columns and cartoons.

Direct submissions and questions to [letters@desertsun.com](mailto:letters@desertsun.com).

## Valley businesses will prosper as year-round living becomes normal



**Your Turn**  
Bansree Parikh  
Guest columnist

As civic, business, education, environmental and nonprofit leaders convened in the low desert last week for the annual California Forward Economic Summit, the Coachella Valley was the ideal backdrop with its own exciting economic momentum from which to discuss how we collectively can make a positive impact on the California economy. The 19th annual Coachella Valley Economic Partnership (CVEP) Economic Report was unveiled with economic and demographic data to help kick off the three-day event.

As a leader in banking Inland Empire businesses and households for 90 years, Bank of America has been part of various economic cycles – but the current financial pulse across the low desert is truly notable.

While the Coachella Valley region continues to have its share of income, education and service gaps, over the past few years, we have seen the area economy adapt, get creative and display incredible resiliency in overcoming the pandemic and facing economic headwinds such as inflation. Indeed, there have been tremendous economic strides by businesses across a variety of industries as well as more personal wealth creation from local year-round households that together point to signs of a prospering region.

As a business banking executive for Bank of America in the Inland Empire, this economic momentum is reflected in my own local low desert business clients who are planning for expansions, hiring and launching new ventures this year and into 2024.

### Trends driving momentum

Driving much of this exciting growth is the region's change from a seasonal economy to a year-round one as more people make the Coachella Valley home – and businesses follow those households.

Helping spur this growth even further are notable

projects coming to the region such as the Acrisure Arena, Eisenhower Medical's expansion and Disney's announced master-planned community.

The ripple effect from this economic momentum are jobs in the building trades and contracting industries, and more business for landscapers in landscapers, roofers and restaurants, as well as an uptick for hospitality-related companies.

Across the Inland Empire, we are also seeing projects that were put on hold during the pandemic now back online and generating job activity and revenue in the low desert. The health care industry overall also continues to be a strong economic driver in the region, with ancillary health and wellness-related services and businesses expanding into the Coachella Valley.

### Local business growth

In the Coachella Valley, we are also seeing positive growth trends among small and mid-size businesses. Recently, Bank of America released its first-ever Mid-Size Business Owner report, a survey of business owners with \$5 million to \$50 million in annual revenues. Nationally, key findings found that over the next year 75% of mid-sized business owners expect their revenue to increase, 71% are planning to hire and 90% are investing in digital strategies to further optimize their businesses and operations.

Locally, mid-size business owners are also optimistic as commodities prices level out and non-discretionary products continue to remain in high demand.

Inland Empire small businesses are growing -- at a rate of 4.75% each year, and Bank of America's local small businesses clients are seeing top line revenues continuing to grow as well. As the nation's number one small business and small business administration lender, Bank of America currently has nearly \$460 million in credit extended to small businesses across the Inland Empire.

Small businesses are also optimistic about the economic strength of the Coachella Valley, as

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### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Let 'Marilyn' remain where she is

The "Forever Marilyn" statue, while a source of ongoing debate, remains a popular fixture on Museum Way, with PS Resorts having played a pivotal role in its placement. Originally, the Desert Mall renovations called for an open street to lead up to the museum. However, Marilyn showed up and after much dialogue, the street was closed for her placement, ostensibly for three years. Doubts linger about its reopening.

Today, revisiting Marilyn's statue location appears irrelevant. Securing funding for relocation seems improbable. The adjacent park, once a potential site, has evolved to host different events and is adorned with elegant palm trees that wouldn't suit her presence.

A better solution would be to let Marilyn remain where she is and introduce additional statues and artwork along the Way. This could include the anticipated AIDS Memorial, the Bogert statue and others to connect with the museum and Aluminaire House. Rather than quibble over Marilyn's placement, expand the landscape around her. It's time to consider a broader perspective and embrace the possibilities artistic diversity and cultural enrichment would add to the Museum Way. In the future, a celebrity Walk of Stars

could be added to the Way.

Dennis Sieting, Cathedral City

#### GOP Rep. Ken Calvert's voting record says it all

The definition of "hypocrisy" is "advocating behaviors that one does not practice. GOP Rep. Ken Calvert votes against bills that would bring much-needed aid to our area, then crows about getting results. Did Ken Calvert believe CA 41 had no infrastructure needs when he voted "no" on the most historic piece of infrastructure legislation in a generation?

If you've sat in traffic on I-10, I-15, or I-215, you know the dire need for increased infrastructure funding for the Inland Empire and Coachella Valley. Ken Calvert voted against the bipartisan infrastructure bill that will provide millions of dollars for local transportation and infrastructure projects.

Calvert is happy to announce that he secured \$23.8 million in our annual transportation appropriations bill that will help build projects all around CA 41 to relieve congestion and benefit commuters but just last cycle he voted against a huge bill worth \$22 Billion for California! In 2024 I'm going to vote for a Congressman who will actually vote yes on bills that bring much-

needed funding, jobs and aid to CA 41. My vote goes to Will Rollins.

Steve Jeffrey, La Quinta

#### I urge Rep. Ken Calvert to oppose Jim Jordan

I am a constituent of Representative Calvert's congressional district and I am very concerned about his support for Jim Jordan for Speaker of the House of Representatives.

I vehemently feel that the election of Jim Jordan is against the interests of the constituents of his district and I have urged him to support a person who can positively work to achieve benefits for all Americans and not just a sliver of all Americans (and, further, who just reflects a sliver of Republicans).

Calvert represents a highly evenly divided political district. To represent his district properly, Calvert needs to support a person who reflects the breadth of his district and not vote to elect Jim Jordan as the next Speaker. He shouldn't give in to the aggressive tactics of those persons pushing a Jordan Speakership that will inevitably be at odds with a vast majority of the people Calvert represents.

Walt Mitchell, Palm Springs

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## OPINION



MONTE WOLVERTON

## Kindness always will trump hate



**Your Turn**  
Ray Matlock Smythe  
Guest columnist

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love/It’s the only thing that there’s just too little of, What the world needs now is love, sweet love/No, not just for some, but everyone.” Jackie DeShannon’s song is very relevant to the world we are living in today.

Yesterday, my friend Jo Ann Wegmann and I gave a presentation on coping with grief at the Mizell Center in Palm Springs. The participants were very vocal and focused on the topic. After our presentation, we had wonderful shares. It is simply phenomenal how so many people are struggling with grief. Having said that, everyone in that Mizell room was willing to share their stories to help others with their grief challenges. The heartfelt stories were about love and loss, but their stories were told with love for everyone in the room.

When we ended the class, there were lots of hugs. This is the kind of experience we need most in America: small groups of citizens who get together to discuss and share solutions for our homeless population, drug abuse challenges, our border wall problem, educational issues and of course, our fractured politics. We have more in common with each other than most people realize. We can get better if we just sit down and listen to one another. Yet, you can’t make progress if you come into a gathering with a clenched fist. However, if you can open that fist and give a firm handshake, you are on the road to having an open mind for discussion and change.

Little kind deeds of love make a huge difference. Let me share a couple from yesterday here in our desert. I was walking out to the Mizell Center parking lot with two boxes and some posters I had used in my presentation. Somehow, one box got out of balance and the box of quote cards fell onto the parking lot scattering them in all sorts of directions. There were about 75 cards on the pavement. Before I could try to find a place to set my other box and posters down, two wom-

en came over and got down on their hands and knees and picked up all my quote cards. Then one of the women walked me to my car so I wouldn’t have to balance the two boxes again. After getting everything into my trunk, I gave her a copy of my “Coping with Grief” book. She told me her husband was in hospice, so it was serendipitous that we shared some kindness and love with each other.

As we were leaving the Mizell Center and walking onto the hot parking lot, Charles came running out to us. He is the man in charge of programs at the center. He wanted to thank us again for coming to present and wanted to make sure we knew that he appreciated us. I thought that it was such a thoughtful, kind and loving gesture. He took that extra step to come out onto that sizzling parking lot to thank us one more time. These may seem like small deeds, but small acts of kindness and love are the most important ones.

The world needs a lot of love right now. No one would dispute that fact. Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, Russia, North Korea, Iran and China are all hot spots. Hamas and other terrorist groups seem to have no compassion for innocent men, women and children. Yet, revenge only breeds more revenge. Just remember the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. It was a treaty of revenge and 20 years later, World War II began. We need charismatic and intelligent diplomats to promote peace, stability and love. I am not naïve; I know it is huge task, but hate has never helped the world. It is only with love that people can reach out to others and change things for the better.

Jackie DeShannon sang “What the World Needs Now is Love” back in 1965. Her song needs to be heard repeatedly in 2023. Miracles do happen and they occur when people believe that they can happen. Let’s hope that our diplomats and elected officials can bring some miracles of peace and love not only to the world, but even here in our desert community.

Ray Matlock Smythe is an author/retired teacher. His two newest books are “Coping with Grief – My Personal Journey of Learning to Overcome Sorrow” and “Creating a More Positive Life, One Column at a Time.” He lives in Cathedral City and can be reached at Rayme49@aol.com

## ‘Would you be up for having coffee?’ — ‘I’d rather have a root canal’

**Your Turn** John Stark | Guest columnist

More and more, whenever I visit a store, medical office, dine out, go to the emergency room, or even to a car wash, I get sent an email or text the next day requesting comments regarding my customer experience. To better get with the times, I’ve devised a short survey to send to my friends, colleagues, business associates, etc., regarding their time with me.

The following survey is for coffee dates and can easily be applied or altered to include dinners, drinks, blind dates, nature walks, et al.

Dear (Whoever),  
Please provide feedback on your experience with me on our recent coffee date at Starbucks. By sharing your thoughts and feelings about your experience of having coffee and scones with me, I can help make my coffee dates with you and others better. (Please note, space has been provided at the end of this survey for you to comment on good or bad things that you were happy or not happy about. Please limit responses to 50 words, unless they are positive! Do not use profanities and avoid innuendos.)

On a scale of 1 to 3 (1 being the best, 3 the worst), please select the response that most describes your experience:

**Would you be up for having coffee with me again?**

1) Book it! 2) Can I think about it? 3) I’d rather have a root canal.

**How likely would you be to recommend me to have coffee with a friend or colleague?**

1) They would adore you! 2) Maybe, maybe not. 3) I can’t risk my reputation.

**Did I express enough concern for your questions and/or worries?**

1) You should be a therapist. 2) Try turning off your phone. 3) You really said, “Get over it?”

**How did you find my level of conversation?**

1) Engaging! 2) Too political. 2) Is “vapid” a verb or noun?

**What one thing could I do to make your coffee date experience with me better?**

1) Not a thing. 2) Dress your age. 3) Try listening.

**How long were you kept waiting to see me?**

1) Johnny on the spot! 2) I checked my watch several times. 2) I’m still waiting...

By answering this questionnaire (please see terms & agreements), you are allowing these results to be available on my website (johnstark.net), Facebook, Instagram and other social media outlets. Thank you for participating.

John Stark lives in Palm Springs full-time and is a retired journalist who has been working as a tour guide locally for the past five years. He is the author of the forthcoming book, “What to See in Palm Springs? Local Tour Guide Tells All. The sites, history & stories.” He can be reached at johnstark73@gmail.com

## SEND YOUR LETTER

Email letters to [letters@desertsun.com](mailto:letters@desertsun.com)

- Letters must include the writer’s name, address and telephone number for verification
  - Letters should be fewer than 200 words
  - Letters may be edited for length, clarity and taste
- See a complete list of rules online.

## Don’t let chaplains replace mental health experts in schools

**Your Turn** Sheri Allen and The Rev. Andy Stoker | Guest columnists

With half of Texas school districts lacking mental health services, state lawmakers have opted to anoint chaplains as the solution.

In June, Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law SB 763, a bill authorizing public schools to divert money from safety funds to support chaplain employment programs. Each Texas school district has been directed to vote on whether to implement this program.

As clergy members, we believe inserting chaplains in place of professional counselors into our schools is a grave threat to democracy and to the well-being of children across the state. The law violates a core tenet of American democracy – namely, that state-sanctioned religion is constitutionally prohibited from public institutions.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment states that the government cannot favor one religion over another, protecting every person’s right to believe as they choose without fear of coercion, and ensuring the separation between religion and government.

The dangers of this bill go even further: Lawmakers did not set forth any requirements barring chaplains from proselytizing in schools.

Without any oversight to prevent chaplains from imposing their own religious viewpoint on the children they serve, SB 763 could make students of all faiths and no faiths feel unsafe in schools and undermine their religious freedom rights.

For a transgender student experiencing anxiety, stress or other mental health concerns, especially in light of the state’s ban on gender-affirming care, having a chaplain provide counsel could be potentially dangerous and threatening.

Proponents have touted the bill as a remedy to youth mental health needs, but we would beg to differ.

We should leave mental health care services to the professional school counselors who are actually qualified to do the job. Furthermore, this bill has no certification requirement of any kind. Any person who passes a background check and bears the title of chaplain can be recognized as such.

Don’t just take it from us: More than 100 multifaith chaplains across Texas recently wrote in a joint letter that replacing school counselors with chaplains would be “harmful to our public schools and the students and families they serve.”

It’s easy to discern the true motivations behind this bill. This past year has seen some of the most blatant

religiously motivated legislation emanate from the Texas Legislature, including one bill requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments and another that would allot specific periods during the school day for prayer sessions.

While both bills ultimately failed to move forward, there is a clear and disturbing throughline from these efforts to the resurgent Christian nationalist movement, which seeks to fuse a hard-line form of religious identity with public life. Christian nationalists and their allies are bent on imposing one worldview on everyone else, including in our schools, and the chaplain bills cannot be separated from that context.

SB 763 is one example of extremists trying to hijack our public education system. By voting against chaplaincy programs in schools, every school district has the opportunity now to take a stand for our kids, and to send a message to state lawmakers that true religious freedom and democracy are sacrosanct in Texas.

Cantor Sheri Allen is the co-founder of Congregation Makom Shelanu in Fort Worth, Texas. The Rev. Andy Stoker is the interim executive director of Interfaith Alliance of Texas and a board member of Pastors for Texas Children. He is based in Dallas. This column first ran at the Austin American-Statesman.

## Parikh

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construction, restaurants, medical practices and health-related businesses continue to expand here. Our local small business bankers report significantly more SBA loan activity, a trend in line with Bank of America’s recent Women & Minority Business Owner Spotlight report which found the majority of women and minority business owners nationwide plan to ex-

pand their business and hire more employees over the next 12 months.

## New wealth creation

Despite inflation and the current interest environment, consumers coming out of the pandemic have been steadily saving money, investing wisely and building their own wealth. This isn’t just in the traditionally affluent communities of the low desert – more families throughout the Coachella Valley were able to purchase homes in recent years, enabling them to

build property value that builds wealth creation for the next generation of working families.

Given this exciting progress across the region, the timing couldn’t be better to address how to make this growth sustainable and equitable for even more people across the Coachella Valley to prosper and succeed.

Bansree Parikh is the senior vice president, market executive for Bank of America business banking in the Inland Empire, leading a team of bankers supporting local companies with \$5 million to \$50 million in annual revenue. She can be reached at [Inland.Empire.Market.President@bofa.com](mailto:Inland.Empire.Market.President@bofa.com).