

SEPTEMBER 19, 2020 BY ZANE HILL

Council Condemns Glendale's Past Racism

With unanimous endorsement by the City Council, Glendale this week cast aside the ambiguity of silence and directly rebuked the past practices of city officials, local organizations and onetime residents that helped give the city the odious reputation of a sundown town.

Moving forward, members of the council have advocated different ways for the city to help turn the page on that past. As Councilman Dan Brotman noted on Tuesday night, the council's vote makes Glendale the third former sundown town in the nation to formally reject that part of its history — and the first in California.

"It's really great to see Glendale lead," Brotman said. "It doesn't make the past go away — or make racism go away, of course. We can see the scars in our modern-day demographics, but it's a big step toward making amends."

The resolution includes a report chronicling the various methods by which Black residents in particular were excluded from property ownership in certain neighborhoods, denying them what has traditionally been the way working-class Americans advance to the middle class and build generational net worth. Additionally, there exists much documentation on how residents through either demands to the city or their own public actions showcased, at best, hostility to Black and other minority residents, if not outright violence.

"This was transformative for me," Councilwoman Paula Devine said. "You can hear about it in little bits and pieces but when you read something like this report, it's very shocking and it's hurtful to me. I'm just so sorry that it ever happened."

"A city that grew up and was designed as a white enclave whose selling point to a large extent was that it excluded Blacks and Mexicans and Jews is now officially and very publicly acknowledging, apologizing for and condemning its legacy," Brotman added. "That's pretty amazing."

The city was tasked with conducting the research to back up the resolution in July, after it had initially prepared a more general resolution as a response to the nation's dialogue on reckoning with

racism beginning in late May. Nationwide protests and marches throughout June demanded law enforcement reform and other institutional changes after George Floyd died in the custody of Minneapolis police after an officer knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes.

During that period, a handful of protests were held in Montrose and a large march in downtown Glendale attracted more than 1,500 participants. After that event, local organizations hosted a candlelight vigil outside City Hall for the victims of police brutality.

Tuesday's vote also ordered the preparation of a "historic context" statement for the city, specifically tailored to outline how Black, Latino, East Asian and West Asian people were discriminated against in the past.

"Cities utilize historic context statements as an organizing structure for grouping information about historic properties that share a common theme, place and time," explained Christine Powers, the senior executive analyst who worked on the report. "They're not intended as a comprehensive history, but rather focus on historical development patterns. They can have differing themes, including race and ethnicity, which is part of today's recommendation."

Powers worked with other city staffers to compile historical information for the report and also with an anti-racism coalition of community organizations and leaders to flesh out the language of the resolution.

"Her empathy and her ability to listen is, I really feel, why we're here today," said YWCA CEO Tara Peterson, who is in the coalition, during public comment.

Illustrating the history being discussed, Peterson also used her public comment to read from letters and statements sent to the City Council during the 1930s and 1940s that had been compiled, the content of which endorsed racist practices affiliated with the city. Many contained an especially objectionable racial slur.

"Although we don't hear those words said today out in public as much, a lot of those undertones are what we feel in this community," said Peterson, who is Black.

"When I first moved here," added coalition member Tanita Harris-Ligons, founder of Black in Glendale, "it didn't take me long to even sense the energy of Glendale — to know that I was in a city that was a former sundown town — because of the interactions with people or lack thereof in Glendale."

Lucy Petrosian, chairwoman of the Armenian National Committee of America's Glendale chapter, praised the work behind the resolution "because it shows that our Jewel City is devoted to being a place where all communities can thrive."

"We are very fortunate to live in a city that is committed to the safety, prosperity and inclusivity of all its residents," Petrosian added.

The agenda item did bring in one detractor in resident Mike Mohill, who called it "polarizing" and described the city as being "very fine" in its current era.

“We are going in the wrong direction,” he told the council Tuesday. “We are not far-left San Francisco or New York City. We are the small conservative town called Glendale. Who had the audacity to place this item on the agenda tonight and waste valuable city resources for a few people who want to feel good about themselves?”

Mohill, who has previously run for a council seat and maintains a community newsletter, added that he, as a boy, first experienced anti-Semitism directed at him in the 1950s, while he attended Wilson Junior High School.

“And you know what? I moved on in spite of the name calling and bullying,” he said. “I have Black friends, Armenian friends, Mexican friends, Italian friends, Filipino friends, and we have all experienced some kind of ethnic slurs or racism in Glendale and everywhere. So what? Hate people, never win. There will always want to be people who hate somebody or something.”

Mohill, however, in a recent newsletter amplified a common anti-Semitic conspiracy theory targeting George Soros, a liberal financier frequently characterized using the “puppet master” trope of the New World Order genre of conspiracies. The newsletter also cited the widely debunked claim that Soros, who is Jewish, gave up other Jews to Nazi occupiers while he was a boy in Hungary. In his comment Tuesday, Mohill also referenced African kings who he said participated in past slave trade.

Brotman, who also is Jewish, later responded to Mohill and claimed that the ongoing discussion showed Glendale was more politically cosmopolitan than the resident described.

“To me, it shows us how today’s Glendale, despite what Mr. Mohill says, is not the Glendale of old,” Brotman said. “We are different, and we are moving in the right direction, and that makes me very proud.”

Councilman Ara Najarian suggested that the council use its role to be “ambassadors” to the country clubs and other longtime social groups and encourage them to also come to terms with their past practices. Additionally, Councilman Ardy Kassakhian suggested the city fund a grant for college students — preferably at Glendale Community College — who conduct research into Glendale’s history.

“The vast majority of our residents are good people who care to make Glendale a more fair, open and inclusive city,” Kassakhian said. “This work, though, will require each and every single one of us to be engaged and work together, work that moves just beyond any simple slogans or hashtags on social media.”

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