

Va. city council suspends comments

Virtual remarks at meeting flood with slurs

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CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. – The Charlottesville City Council has suspended virtual public comments during public meetings after anonymous callers Zoomed into a council meeting and made racist remarks.

The Daily Progress reported that the decision came after an Oct. 2 council meeting was interrupted repeatedly by people who turned their cameras off, used fake names and flooded the public comment period with racist slurs and praise for Adolf Hitler.

"We struggled for a while in trying to figure out what we could constitutionally do and concluded there was not really a good answer," Mayor Lloyd Snook told the newspaper last week. "Do we listen to everybody as they're ranting, knowing that if they were there in person, they probably wouldn't do it, but feel free to do it anonymously online?"

Under the new policy, the public will still be able to attend meetings virtually, but anyone who wishes to speak will have to do so in person.

In August 2017, hundreds of white nationalists descended on Charlottesville, ostensibly to protest city plans to remove a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

James Alex Fields Jr., of Maumee, Ohio, rammed his car into a crowd of people who were protesting against the white nationalists, injuring dozens and killing Heather Heyer, a 32-year-old paralegal and civil rights activist. Fields is serving life in prison for murder, hate crimes and other charges.

Councilmember Brian Pinkston called the decision to suspend virtual comments a "judgement call."

"On one hand, we obviously value people's input and desire to participate remotely and we'd love to continue to do that," he told the newspaper. "But at same time, I'll call it taking care of the community and protecting those from behavior that's not just offensive but deeply hurtful."

During the meeting, the people in attendance could be heard gasping after some of the remarks, and several demanded that the speakers be cut off.

Council members questioned whether the virtual public comments were protected by the First Amendment, as the first speaker to make racist remarks claimed.

Snook eventually looked to city attorney Jacob Stroman for guidance, and Stroman said the council could cut off the speaker.

"The gross insult" to community members was unacceptable, "even under the broadest interpretation of the First Amendment," Stroman said.

The Daily Progress reported that the remarks at the meeting seemed spurred at least in part by the city's decision to lift the curfew at a park after police were accused of mistreating the homeless population there. That story had been circulating in national rightwing media ahead of the meeting. Police Chief Michael Kochis called the allegations "unfounded."