

NOTE: Windham Town Council meetings begin and end with an agenda item known as "Citizens and Delegations", where members of the public are free to express their views on matters concerning the town. At the previous meeting, an individual blamed the Puerto Rican community for the town's problems. Many of his comments were hurtful and could be labeled as hate speech.

What follows below is a response from a member of the Town Council.

Windham CT Town Council
Tuesday, July 19, 2011

Freedom of speech is a beautiful "right" to have, but with this precious right comes a level of responsibility and awareness. With this in mind, it is my opinion and belief that bigotry, xenophobia, and provoking odium from one group racial group to another is not the best exercise of "freedom of speech". We as citizens should be thankful for the freedoms and rights we have obtained and in turn practice them safely and courteously.

It may be known by some of us that in many countries (such as France) that hate speech is not tolerated and any citizen may be prosecuted by law for doing so. So I repeat once more, let's refrain and practice the right of freedom of speech during our "citizens and delegations meetings" a little safer and with less odium.

Initially I would like to affirm that this it is not the first time I have heard personal attacks against a particular member of the council from a citizen...but it was the first time hearing an attack to an important sector of our community. During citizens and delegations we exercise our right to express our ideas, opinions, the way we think and feel about certain issues. This is great; it is part of living in a democratic society, with freedom and liberty. For this reason, we should respect and act with decorum.

Since this incident occurred, I think we should have a careful and serious review of citizens and delegation guidelines in order to avoid the misuse of this valuable right. I was shocked in the last council meeting, listening to what to me was a clear and flagrant attack on one sector of this community by a citizen, blaming Puerto Ricans for the problems this town faces.

It is a sad day when I have to spend time—mine and yours—on an issue that I thought was buried and dead a long time ago, especially in this town founded by so many immigrants groups, now most of them proud citizens of this great nation. I guess we have a selective memory when it comes to attack certain groups. In particular, the ones without power and authority. I think is easy to forget where we came from, who our ancestors were, and what they had to do to achieve what we have today. Some of our ancestors achieved by good deeds, some by bad. Some of these deeds we may never want to forget and should be proud of, and some we would rather not remember. This is why it is so important that we look at our history; that we look at the foundation of Windham. This and only this will help us to conduct ourselves properly and prevent us from casting "the first stone" of accusation.

Sometimes poverty places citizens in situations that are not conducive for the collective whole of a community. Let's be sensible—poverty develops and enhances the negative

aspects of any demographic. Thus and I state, this case in point has been shared by all ethnic groups that have helped form this country. In retrospect, every ethnic group in this country that has been scrutinized by the "majority" has progressed, but has done so with an unnecessary burden. This burden has been passed down from the established majority demographic to the developing minority demographic. The particular burden I speak of is the unnecessary burden of bigotry. Putting this thought aside, what is most important is that we remember what we have forgotten. We have forgotten is that this is a country that has been enriched by many different cultures. We have forgotten that all of these different cultures were both a minority and a majority at one point in time, and that denying this fact is a display of ignorance.

Lastly, we should conduct ourselves with humility...and realize that it is wiser to confront our financial reality as one entity and that before we speak with intolerance we remember our ancestors and ask ourselves, what did they go through in order to progress? This is more productive than looking for scapegoats to cover our own frustrations. Thus in turn I humbly think we should call for unity instead of blaming particular sectors of our community due to race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. United we will make a better Windham.

Arnaldo Rivera
Windham, CT Council Member