

Interview with Logan Municipal Councilwoman Laraine Swenson; Friday afternoon, Jan. 2, 2009

HJ reporter Karen Lambert: How are you doing?

Laraine Swenson: I'm doing well, thanks.

KL: I have a question. I was looking at the city council agenda and I noticed that the prayer that is normally on it is not on it. I was wondering if that was an oversight or if the policy had changed?

LS: Well, the policy changed a couple of years ago. So, to comply with state law we've called it an opening ceremony. You can't call it an opening prayer.

KL: Right, but are you still going to be doing a prayer and so on and so forth?

LS: Um, as of now, we're going to try a different format and leave the ceremony off.

KL: What does that mean? Does that mean there won't be different religious leaders invited to come and give a thought, or a prayer, or—

LS: It does. Uh huh.

KL: OK, and what's the reason for that?

LS: Um, just because it's difficult to get people to come. Some people are uncomfortable with it. It's not required by law. Um, it cuts into the time of our meeting and so I just thought that I would try just going with the Pledge of Allegiance rather than a ceremony.

KL: And who's uncomfortable with it?

LS: Um, I don't really want to say. It's not me. (Laughs.) I'm always happy to say the prayer. But, I have just been told that some people are, you know, not uncomfortable with the ceremony itself, but participating in it. And I don't — Does the county do it?

KL: Um, I don't know. I don't cover the county.

LS: I'm thinking they don't.*

KL: I know some other entities do and some don't. So, I'm not sure.

LS: Well, and you know, it used to be that when I first started it was called the opening prayer and everyone gave their prayer and then when they changed it to a ceremony, um, probably the majority of the time — other than when religious leaders have been invited — it hasn't been a prayer, it's been just kind of a patriotic thought and my thinking was that we could dispense with the patriotic thought and do the Pledge of Allegiance.

KL: Right. OK. And I've noticed there are quite a few different religious leaders from different congregations that have been there, though, and been invited, so—

LS: Uh, huh. If someone would like to volunteer, I would certainly put them on the agenda. It's not that I'm trying to shut anything down. I'm happy to have that, but, and if people would like to volunteer I would be happy to have them come and I've enjoyed that, having the Cache Community Connections participate. But generally they come, they do the ceremony, and then they leave.

KL: Sure.

LS: Which is fine, but in my mind, um, people's time, might, you know, they might choose to do other things, if they weren't requested to do that particular job.

KL: OK, and I'm guessing that maybe — it's maybe a 3- to 5-minute thing when I've been there. Is that about what you'd guess?

LS: Yeah, there have been a couple of times that it's been longer.

KL: OK, and what exactly led up to the decision? Is this something you'd been thinking of doing for a long time when you took over as chairwoman, or—

LS: Well, no, not for a long time. I just looked at it and I said the opening ceremony has become a patriotic thought and I think we could dispense with that in the interest of time. (Pause) It's not any campaign, you know — and off the record,** I'm quite a religious person and I pray before I go to the meetings. I just don't see, you know, I see it as kind of a ceremony.

KL: OK, and how long had this been going on that they'd had something like this?

LS: As long as I've been on the council.

KL: And that's about, was it six years or so?

LS: Uh, five years, uh huh, going into my sixth.

KL: OK, and have you, or did you talk about this with any other of the councilmembers or receive feedback from them?

LS: No, because when they're the chair they'll have the opportunity to do this however they would choose to and if they want to put it back on that's fine, and like I said, if volunteers want to come forward and do this, I'm fine with that, too.

KL: But this is the first time that anyone has ever taken this off the agenda during the time you've been in office?

LS: Uh huh, it is.

KL: OK. Anything else you'd like to add about that?

LS: No, I don't really see it as a huge newsworthy item. Especially when the county doesn't even do it, I don't think.*

KL: Well, it's a change for Logan though. Well, actually, are you planning on making any other changes as chair?

LS: Not to the conducting of our meetings.

KL: Any other issues or major changes in other ways that you, uh, plan to make?

LS: Well, there are, but we'll probably just talk about those when they come forward.

KL: So, they're like issues that you'd like to bring up or is that what you're talking about?

LS: Uh, huh. Uh, huh.

KL: Uh, OK, well, appreciate your time. Thank you.

LS: OK. Thank you, Karen. Goodbye.

*The Cache County Council does typically have an opening prayer in its meetings.

**The Herald Journal chose to include this off-the-record statement because Swenson publicized that information in several e-mails she sent to city and community leaders this week stating she wished it had been included in the newspaper's story.