

OUR VIEW

Stalemate

The first of two public hearings into the coroner's inquest process took place yesterday at County Commission chambers and not much happened. Well, that's not completely accurate. A lot happened.

An official from the Las Vegas Police Protective Association, the union representing rank-and-file officers of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, blathered on about how the PPA feels that the coroner's inquest—which determines if officers are criminally liable in homicide cases—works just fine. In fact, the PPA believes, it's one of the best such systems in the nation, a point of study for other jurisdictions looking at how to do it right. The PPA official made it clear that it participated in months of multi-party meetings to reform the inquest because it was acting in good faith and wanted to ensure public support of the process.

Then PPA official noted that the group supports—or rather has decided not to fight—two of the three recommendations the working group came up with. It tacitly backs:

- Replacing hearing masters, who oversee the proceedings, with justices of the peace — elected officials who are, presumably, accountable to voters.

- Replacing representatives of the Clark County District Attorney's Office, currently the chief questioners during inquests, with lawyers from the state Attorney General's office; this move is meant to eliminate the potential for partiality, the thinking being that the DA's office and Metro are in bed.

What the PPA doesn't agree with is the third recommendation:

- Allowing relatives of shooting victims, who are currently allowed to submit questions in writing, to ask questions in open court. The PPA fears that this could prejudice the jury; family members might ask incendiary or misleading questions that aren't germane to the hearing.

The PPA then blamed the American Civil Liberties Union for stalling what had been good progress by insisting that third recommendation was part of an all-or-nothing stance. If everyone didn't agree on the recommendation No. 3, the PPA intimated, then the ACLU would take its ball and go home.

What happened next wasn't entirely unexpected: A representative from the American Civil Liberties Union denied the accusation and put the onus on the PPA, saying that the ACLU's position has been clear all along and that the police union isn't interested in getting at the true facts of these inquest cases. The ACLU even offered a partial compromise, agreeing to give justices of the peace the ability to give anyone asking inappropriate questions the heave-ho.

Representatives of the Citizens Review Board and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, as well as a handful of citizens offered their input.

So, yes, a lot did happen. How much of it was constructive remains to be seen. Tonight's public forum is the last one on the issue (6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Clark County Government Center, 500 Grand Central Parkway.) Hopefully you will come out and express your opinion. After all, it's your two cents that mean the most. If the community demands reform, then all the talk dominated yesterday's forum—and the last five months—will have to move to action.



Dems shake up safe agenda

By George E. Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

After outlining a safe agenda of its first 100 hours, Democrats in Congress are being forced to become more aggressive in challenging President Bush on the Iraq war and may have to address growing complaints that they are moving too slowly in developing an urban agenda.

Democrats regained control of Congress not because of a masterful political strategy, but largely because of the public's disenchantment with our military presence in Iraq. Until this week, Democrats had been reluctant to challenge Bush on the war for fear of being depicted as being unsupportive of U.S. combat troops. Republican propagandists have repeatedly described Democrats as offering a "cut and run" strategy in Iraq and gun-shy, fragmented Democrats have been content letting Republicans mis-define them.

Even after voters repudiated George Bush's "stay the course" policies in the Persian Gulf, Democrats were still hesitant to act on the central issue that swept them into power in the first place—the war. But Bush's Wednesday night speech on the war in which he clearly announced a plan to send more troops into Iraq, changed that. It forces Democrats to abandon their intention of focusing only on safe domestic issues, such as raising the minimum wage, expanding college aid,



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and funding stem cell research.

Voters have made it clear at the polls in November and in subsequent public opinion polls that they want the new Congress to deal with the war. A recent CBS News poll showed that 45 percent of the public wants Democrats to focus on the war; a distant second at 7 percent wants an emphasis on the economy and jobs.

With Bush going on the offensive with a nationally-televised speech to the nation, Democrats have shifted into second-gear by quickly arranging a series of public hearings. On Wednesday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is expected to have Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice discuss Bush's strategy in Iraq. On Thursday, Rice is expected to testify before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. And on Friday, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Marine Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff, are expected to appear before the House Armed Services Committee.

All of the jockeying by Democrats and Republicans is done with an eye cast toward the 2008 presidential election. Democrats want to show before the next election that they can lead effectively. Republicans want to portray them as being weak on terrorism, paving the way for them to return to power in 2008. Both sides are making their moves while claiming to be interested in bipartisan cooperation.

As Democrats step up their involvement in addressing the war and continue to champion their announced 100-hour agenda, they are facing criticism from Jesse Jackson and others who charge that Democrats have no urban agenda.

At his 10th annual Wall Street conference this week in New York, Jackson assembled Congressional leaders, mayors and civil rights leaders in an effort to pressure Congress to pay more attention to Urban America.

"We need an economic agenda that corresponds with our political victory in November," Jackson said. He noted that while it is important to raise the minimum wage, that action alone does not address the needs of the unemployed or other serious problems facing cities.

Indeed, the new leaders in Congress could help revitalize urban America by simply restoring the cuts in domestic spending. There is no question that cities need more help. A survey released in December by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, for example, showed that overall requests for emergency food assistance increased in 2006 by an average of 7 percent over the previous year; 74 percent of the surveyed cities registering an increase.

"This survey represents real people with real needs in cities all across our nation," U.S. Conference of Mayors President Douglas H. Palmer,

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