



ST. PETERSBURG CITY COUNCIL

From the office of Council Chair Brandi Gabbard, City of St. Petersburg

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As the Chair of St Petersburg City Council, I want to respond regarding the occurrence last evening during our meeting in open forum. I will start by saying how deeply I believe in every American's right to freedom of speech, opinion, and peaceful protest, and I respect the opportunity that open forum provides in exercising democracy.

The chamber was filled with predominantly St Pete residents from all walks of life. Several were and are of Arab or Palestinian descent and many live right here in my district. Many in attendance were young, well educated, and articulate with their statements.

Overwhelmingly they were respectful of our rules of open forum. Many gave powerful testimony to the fear and pain they are experiencing as they see the ongoing terror taking place on both sides in the Israeli/Hamas war. There were also echoes of ongoing concerns for their own safety and protection from Anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia. These are the same concerns shared by our Jewish community as anti-Semitism continues to be on the rise.

Regarding the resolution passed last week, in hindsight it is unfortunate that the wording did not include support for innocent Palestinians or a call for peace. While I voted in support due to my stance against the brutal slaying of innocent Israelis which had taken place just days before, I do understand how not including such language has made some in our community feel as though they are not being represented. While I would unlikely vote to repeal the prior resolution as was the request of many who spoke, I wholeheartedly would support any new resolution that would include verbiage surrounding a call for peace and humanitarian aid and refuge be given to the innocent people of Gaza.

I believe that our council can both stand up for innocent lives while standing against terrorism. We can stand with both Israelis and Palestinians. These ideals are not mutually exclusive.



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At my core I am a pacifist. I do not believe in war, nor do I believe that violence is the answer to any dispute. I do not pretend to know how to solve the crisis in the Middle East. I do, however want to see peace in our own community. We are a city of people who welcome diversity with open arms. We are a council who is just as diverse as the constituency we represent. I want residents to trust and believe that we see them for who they are, we love them and will always do whatever it takes to protect them.

As long as I am Chair of the City Council, we will have civility in our chambers. Those who disrupted last night's meeting took away the remaining speakers' ability to exercise their rights. They also took away any potential for there to be action upon their request. There is no resolution that comes amid chaos. It is not until we can have dialogue and understanding that we can come together as a community to support each other in our greatest times of difficulty.

We live in a time of fear and uncertainty for many. Those who look to divide us will use these moments for their own political gain. We cannot allow that to happen. We must stand up and stand together. The stakes are too high. The war may be thousands of miles from our city but the battle for unity lives right here. I hope we will choose peace. Let's work together to end hatred and be the unified city I know we truly are.