

Erin Dunn
Community Comment
March 13, 2018

This is Erin Dunn of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce with a Community Comment.

In keeping with celebrating the Year of the Dog, today is National K-9 Veterans Day. It's a chance to reflect on and appreciate the dogs who have served our country since the special day was first established in 1942. Look for a Public Service announcement on the Chamber's Facebook and Twitter pages from Fortuna's Dog of the Year and Nordy, Fortuna's K-9 police officer.

I was thinking about the role of applause the other night when I watching Ferndale Rep's comedy musical "Nonsense." People respond to the performers and performances with applause, and it becomes a barometer letting the actors and audience know if, in this case, a musical number is appreciated.

There is a time when applause bugs me though—and that is at public meetings. Allegedly, it's a way for the audience to show they support what is being said.

But it can end up being an intimidation tool. When a room is filled with a group of people who like a particular position, or, don't like a particular position, they can become vocal. I've been to County meetings when the crowd is asked up front to please not applaud during or after someone's statements. Not because they are clamping down on personal expression, but because applause in favor of one person's position can intimidate and may keep someone from standing up and expressing an alternate view.

The most recent case in point was the Arcata City Council meeting a few weeks ago when they addressed the McKinley statue.

My observation of the meeting isn't to point out a pro or con of the decision, but rather how the meeting was conducted.

There was a crowd there to speak against the statue and in favor of having it taken down. There were outbursts of applause after each "take it down" speaker. A few people spoke with a different opinion, but they were heckled and shouted down. No applause for them.

I've been in meetings where the audience assembled is for something I'm against—or vice versa. It is intimidating to me to know that what I'm going to say is disagreeable to the people who are right behind me.

Clapping at public meetings—such as a city council meeting—is a form of bullying. It's intimidating. It sounds harmless— isn't clapping a positive thing? Not in this case.

Clapping doesn't just impact other speakers who have a different opinion, we watched the crowd's behavior make an impression on the council itself. I read where the council said it didn't impact them, but it may have more than they realized.

It looked like the council got caught up in the moment. I can't help but wonder if the outcome would have been different if more people in favor of keeping the statue had been there.

There's a pop culture phrase I see more and more—"clap back." It means responding to a criticism with a withering comeback.

Right now the pro statue constituents are clapping back at the Arcata City Council.

This has been Erin Dunn with a Community Comment.