



March 3, 2025

VIA E-MAIL

Stephen Zollman, Mayor
Jill McLewis, Vice Mayor
Phill Carter, Councilmember
Neysa Hinton, Councilmember
Sandra Maurer, Councilmember
City of Sebastopol
7120 Bodega Avenue
Sebastopol, CA 95472
Email: citycouncil@cityofsebastopol.gov

Dear City Council members:

We are writing on behalf of the First Amendment Coalition and the Society of Professional Journalists of Northern California to express our concerns over the city's new and restrictive approach to responding to press inquiries, which chills the rights of city staff to share information of public concern and therefore impairs the important work of journalists in keeping the community informed.

As we understand it, the City Council in November 2024 adopted a [policy](#) governing the role of the mayor, which states in relevant part, "It is the Mayor's duty to serve as the City's primary media spokesperson in coordination with City staff." It goes on to say, "Appropriate City staff should always be alerted to media contact," while also affirming stating that "Nothing under the Mayor's duties shall limit any individual Council Member's ability to interact with members of the public or media. The [staff report](#) for item No. 16 on the March 4 [meeting agenda](#) states "the intent of the policy was to designate one single point of contact." Following the adoption of this policy, we understand Mayor Zollman has developed "protocols and processes" related to this, as reported in the [Sebastopol Times](#) and published in the staff report for item No. 16.

We urge you to repeal this policy and abandon the related protocols and processes relayed by the mayor because it creates an anti-transparency mayor-centric regime for controlling the flow of information to the press.

Journalists have already experienced barriers to information that appear related to this shift in city practices. As we hope you would agree, the public greatly benefits from the ability of journalists to get information and insights from various city staff members, including the city manager and relevant department leaders. The paid, professional staff are often more familiar with the details of city business and therefore in the best position to respond to press inquiries. To the extent the city intends to require staff to seek permission before speaking with the press about any subject under any circumstances, any such requirement would violate the First Amendment as an unconstitutional prior restraint on speech.

A mayor-controlled regime for dissemination of information about city business creates less accountability. The mayor stated in the staff report that the press protocols are designed to ensure communications are “timely, accurate and aligned with the City’s goals and values.” The mayor also states a desire for messages to be “consistent.” We agree it is crucially important for the public to get timely and accurate information, but we disagree the new approach achieves this goal. Instead, we worry Sebastopol is creating a system where one person can create carefully crafted narratives, which can deprive the public of information, which may, for instance, be politically inconvenient.

As you know, the office of mayor in Sebastopol is one member of the city council in a council-manager system. By contrast, there are full-time staff who are often more familiar with the operations of routine city business that journalists need in order to inform the public. We urge the city to operate with the understanding that both the professional staff and elected officials must be responsive to the people and the press.

Given these concerns, we ask the City Council to do the following:

- Take the necessary steps to promptly repeal the November 2024 policy relating to the mayor and press.
- Abandon the “current protocol and processes” as detailed in Mayor Zollman’s email to reporters that appears in Staff Report for agenda item No. 16.
- Publicly commit to recognizing the role of a free press in keeping the community informed and the ability of city staff and all council members to exercise their First Amendment rights.

The only “policy” that matters here is the one introduced by James Madison in June 1789. To journalists, the freedom of the press guaranteed by the First Amendment is not simply the only right in the constitution granted to a profession. It is a mandate — a duty, in fact — to serve the American people with aggressive, independent reportage that is a check on government power. Mayors or any government official cannot control a good reporter, tell a good reporter what they can and cannot do, any more than they can control the wind. A good reporter is going to operate how he or she sees fit in order to serve the public. Mr. Madison would have it no other way.

Sincerely,

FIRST AMENDMENT COALITION

Ginny LaRoe
Advocacy Director

SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS
OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez, President

cc: Don Schwartz, City Manager