

Dear Peter Blake:

We have a very outspoken citizenry here in Laguna Beach, a healthy amount of back and forth which makes us a vibrant town with passionate people. While I enjoy reading about the different points of view, I have had zero interest in engagement of this sort and have never even considered writing in to put my feelings into words for everyone to consider. I also have strong trepidation about using my name and putting myself out there in this very public way. So here I am not only doing it, but doing it in this full page ad. Probably if it were not for my deep sense of dread relating to our country's divisions and my very strong reaction to your written "manifesto" I would remain silent and nameless. But I feel compelled to address your written statements and positions, not because you don't have every right to say what you believe, but because you want to be our public representative as a member of our city council. As such I am unable to leave your written words in the air without speaking out in opposition. Every word I am saying represents my perspectives only. As one vote and one voice.

Just for clarification: I actually agree directionally with several of your stated positions. No one should have their home put into an historic designation without the owners' approval. We do need to improve the design review process and make it less arbitrary. I also agree that it should not be so painful to open up a bricks and mortar retail business or improve one's home. As far as development, I do believe the downtown retail experience has deteriorated and needs to be proactively retooled in keeping with the times we live in. We can revitalize without giving up our unique character and it can and must be done with a sensitivity to the local residents living in close proximity. Personally it doesn't bother me in the least that you are supported by a PAC made of those who would like to see a more progressive stance on development, if that in fact is the case.

That said, I believe the solutions to our most contentious issues do not lie in the extremes and are better arbitrated amicably and respectfully. We all love Laguna differently and have strong opinions, which is healthy and part of the discourse needed to evaluate whom we support. A certain amount of rhetoric in any election is expected. All sides are complicit. Our country is rapidly moving toward a dangerous direction where people are finding

themselves unable to even tolerate those with whom they disagree. Where norms have fallen by the wayside and confrontational name calling and finger pointing is the coin of the realm. As a community we must resist this trend by electing leaders who channel their passions productively.

While you have strong convictions and solid support, in you I see the beginning of a very disturbing turn in our local discourse and I truly dread where it might take us. What I love best about Laguna as a small town is the connectedness we share, with tolerance for our differences and the civility that we show one another as a community. That is one of the things that makes life here so special. After carefully reading what you had to say and the way you have said it, what troubles me is the strident, absolutist perspective in which you have written and the combative and at times disrespectful approach you take with those whom you disagree with, particularly those that have participated in public service in efforts toward making things better.

In your description of yourself you are unabashed about your approach to leadership. Making a bragging point of a “lack of compromise and willingness to make concessions.” Leadership requires working closely with those who have differing points of view, while maintaining an open mind and coming up with solutions together that serve the greater good. As a city council member, one must interact with, listen to, and collaborate with citizens, staff, service providers, volunteers and other city council members. This requires arbitrating between highly emotional perspectives even when in personal disagreement with one issue or another. The leadership style represented in your words is contrary to productive discourse, which is an absolute necessity for effective governance. Leaders must represent not just the content, but also the values and culture of our town so we do not regress into the lowest common denominators of human behavior which is so easy to do in the times we live in. What I read was a self-centered, autocratic, winner takes all approach, which I find troubling in someone who wants to govern us.

In your letter you reference the “misguided socialites attending galas” in a disrespectful and derisive manner. You, who wish to serve the community as a leader, refer with disdain to those who dedicate themselves to making the community better for all. You act as if the galas that raise funds for any number of meaningful causes are shallow parties for the high class instead of part of the glue that binds us together. We have an extraordinarily vibrant

citizenry in Laguna Beach with all the supporters of the many causes and endeavors that make our town more livable, cultured, pristine and civil. These “misguided socialites” support the Laguna Playhouse, Laguna Beach Live!, Laguna Dance Festival, LCAD, Laguna Art Museum, Friendship Shelter, so many ocean and canyon conservation organizations like the Laguna Canyon Foundation, and our many artistic festivals like Pageant of The Masters, among so many other causes. One would think that these are the very same people who are your clients purchasing high priced art in your gallery. I find your resentful attitude toward them hard to reconcile and personally offensive.

All of this indicates to me that you do not have the demeanor to hold public office. We are better served by leaders who bring us together rather than divide us. This again is sadly reflective of politics on the national level.

I was particularly taken aback by the anger and aggression you represented toward the homeless. While this might provide good sound bites to all of us who are justifiably put off by having the problem in our midst, it does nothing to solve it. I was less concerned with the lack of empathy in your words, however, than I was in the lack of understanding that you display toward making headway on dealing with the issue. With something as pervasive and destructive as homelessness, we need our focus to be on creating solutions which serve all of our best interests. Laguna Beach will always draw people; wealthy, homeless and everything in between. That is a given, part of the high class problem we all share living here. The notion that providing support draws more homeless individuals here is unproven, inaccurate and mostly an excuse to avoid engaging in solutions. Homelessness is destructive, and “a burden to all of us not just the homeless themselves” (Friendship Shelter’s words here, not my own). Attacking the people who have fallen through the cracks and are suffering and desperate, who have no place to go, is no way to provide leadership. Making broad strokes to characterize entire populations of people in order to diminish them will not make the problem go away.

Supporters of the Friendship Shelter are as averse to panhandling, crime and trespassing as you are but they come to the table with real actions and thoughtful activities to address the issues instead of saber rattling. As far as any criminal activity, solid policing is critical. Where there may be bad players and situations, address them with dispatch and professionalism. If our collective desire is to remove homelessness from our streets then

If our collective desire is to remove homelessness from our streets then let's follow the playbook that gets the best results and put our frustrations into positive actions. Permanent supportive housing is the singular most important and significant solution to removing homelessness from our street corners. The cost benefit analysis indicates time and again, in both small communities and large that providing permanent supportive housing versus over-burdening city services delivers the most effective and cost efficient reductions in homelessness. What the Friendship Shelter does do is work together with the county and other nearby cities; they work with local police and Mission Hospital. They utilize grants and generous contributions from South Orange County residents to actually transition the most vulnerable from our streets into housing with services. This is the model of active productive leadership we need to support and applaud, not denigrate.

It seems our election here in Laguna is a microcosm of what we are experiencing in the nation as a whole with issues boiling up and driving our fundamental beliefs about leadership's role in driving change. It is up to us to determine the difference between true leadership, strength and character versus self-indulgence, aggressiveness and intolerance.

Whether it is over issues and frustrations relating to the degree of growth and development we desire and the way in which the city regulates and manages us related to our homes and property or how we intend to address concerns about crime and the uncomfortable sight of homelessness around us. These are significant issues and they require thoughtful leaders working together to address them. Voters must decide what style of leadership they believe should take us forward. For me I want leaders who can create bridges and thoughtful actions that bind us together toward resolutions. I am highly skeptical of those who claim to be firebrands with loud megaphones who encourage us to blow it all up and start over again. Each of us must choose what model we support. My hope is that here, of all places, we choose leaders who work toward unifying us in the difficult road to resolving our issues versus dividing us. To me tonality matters, hurtful words and reactionary politics take us backward.

That is why Peter while I respect you as a fellow citizen with your own unique voice, you are very definitely not the change I wish to see as a city council person here in Laguna Beach, and I hope others feel the same way.

Signed Steve Robbins