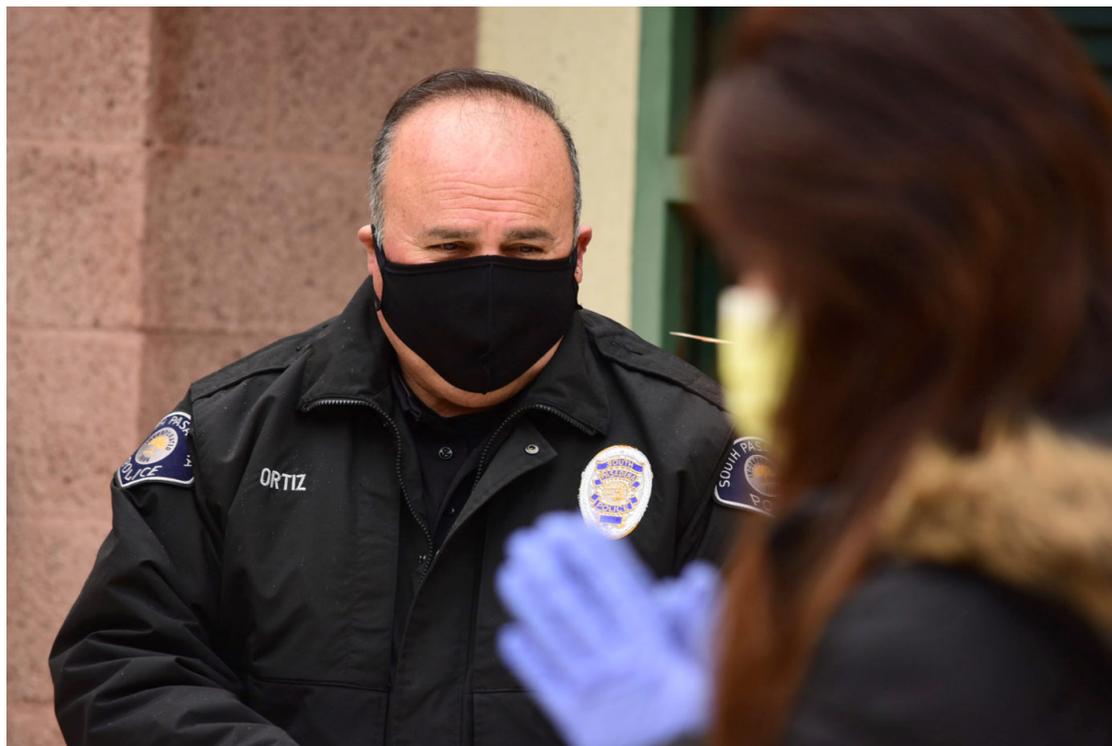


Police Chief Ortiz Takes More Heat Over Cancelled Prayer Event

Responses from the community and City Council candidates abound, the South Pasadena Police Department Chief's decision to allow an extremely conservative religious group to host an event with city officials continues to present repercussions, forgiveness, and disappointment

By **Ben Tansey** - October 8, 2020



FILE PHOTO: Eric Fabbro | SouthPasadenan.com News | SPPD Chief Joe Ortiz

Community angst continues to broil over South Pasadena Police Chief Joe Ortiz's granting permission for and promoting a prayer vigil at the police station by a controversial group that opposes social policies such as same sex marriage, transgenderism, contraception, opposes the Black Lives Matter movement, and was dubbed "anti-LGBT" by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2017.

The timing of the event was inauspicious, as it compounded the relational problems SPPD has been having in connection with a series of recent incidents such as last Saturday, when a man drove his truck onto the sidewalk near a BLM demonstrator but was not immediately cited by police pending an ongoing investigation.

Many written and oral comments, along with an electronic petition signed by some 150 South Pasadenans and hundreds of others from outside the city demanded an investigation into Ortiz's actions and the extent of the SPPD's involvement with the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, which says it has organized "some 3,000 Saint Michael Support the Police rosary rallies" across the country.

In his first appearance at a regular City Council meeting, Interim City Manager Sean Joyce said while the Council normally doesn't "and shouldn't" respond to public comment, he

asked the Council's indulgence to note that Ortiz had issued "a full throated apology [and] asked for forgiveness. There is no expectation that a similar event will be repeated."

Ortiz has said that on Sept. 21, he was contacted by a local representative of the group who asked if she needed permission or a permit to hold an event to pray for the police on Sept. 26. Ortiz authorized the event. At about 3 pm Sept. 24, he invited the police department, City Council and Public Safety Commission to attend, saying they would "offer prayers and blessings" to the city's first responders. But three hours later, he sent a second message saying the event had been "postponed."

"My error in judgement was the result of good intentions," he said in an apology posted by the City Manager Sept. 25, but "I deeply regret that my lack of due diligence has caused confusion and doubt."

"Chief Ortiz's invitation of a group espousing racism, bigotry and xenophobia to gather on city property is a breach of our trust and confidence," according to a petition signed by nearly two dozen, mostly local social justice groups. "At a minimum, the City Council must investigate this incident."

South Pasadenan Steve Zikman wrote the Council saying he was "disgusted" by Ortiz's action and that while aware the chief had apologized, submitted a series of questions he wants answered about Ortiz's "haste" in granting the permit and his failure to do "due diligence" on the group.

Meantime, while most of those offering comments supported it, London Lang and Anne Bagasao cited the dip in community confidence in the city and the SPPD in particular to oppose the South Pasadena High School Anti-Bias Club's request to use an outside wall of City Hall for a BLM mural.

"Our city does not deserve to have a mural representing support for BLM without there first being meaningful change," Bagasao said. She noted it's been months since the Council formed a subcommittee on police reform and yet not "one conversation has been had by the city or the Anti-Bias Club regarding reform or change of local policing."

During a candidates' forum Sept. 30, most city council candidates said Ortiz made a misstep but declined to call for his resignation.

It was a "moment of oversight" said District 2 write-in candidate Stephen Rossi. People should be given an opportunity to grow and learn from their mistakes. District 2 candidate Jack Donovan said he's open to asking the City Manager to request from the chief a report on how the permit request "ever found its way to his desk. How did it get through a vetting process?"

District 3 candidate Jon Primuth said the public square is protected by the First Amendment, but not when city employees are involved. He said the Chief didn't understand how important it was not to endorse and vet a group he intended to partner with. He called it a "learning opportunity" but said Ortiz should meet with the people who felt hurt and disappointed.

District 3 candidate Michelle Hammond also said city staff should not have been involved in a religious event, and the chief should have understood that. She accepted the apology but said “we need to dig into” what his motives were.

District 3 candidate Alan Ehrlich said it wasn’t just a religious event but a “radically conservative religious group that has many anti-family, anti Black Lives Matter, anti- things that people in South Pasadena hold dear.” As a member of the Public Safety Commission, he said he’d already sent a letter to the Mayor and Chief asking the issue be brought before the Commission “so we can find out what happened.”

Mayor Bob Joe of District 1 said flatly, “the chief made a mistake.” And while he apologized, Joe wanted the City Manager to learn more about what happened. “I need to know a little bit more why he did what he did.” Evelyn Zneimer, also running for District 1, said the group at issue is “very radical” and has many values not shared in South Pasadena. She too wanted to know more about how the permit was approved and said there should be a dialogue with members of the community who felt hurt.

Ben Tansey

<https://southpasadenan.com>

Ben Tansey is a journalist and author. He grew up in the South Bay and is a graduate of Evergreen State College. He worked in Washington State as a reporter in a rural timber community and for many years as an editor for a Western electric energy policy publication based in Seattle. He and his wife Karin, an arts administrator from El Sereno, live in South Pasadena.