

7.1 Communication
June 5, 2019 Email from Karen Pyke



Noose on new merchant sign and sign regulations

1 message

Karen Pyke <karendp@ucr.edu>

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To: macuna@cityofplacerville.org, msaragosa@cityofplacerville.org, Borellicouncil@sbcglobal.net, ktaylor@cityofplacerville.org, dthomas@cityofplacerville.org, pv.planning@gmail.com

Cc: Karen D Pyke <karen.pyke@ucr.edu>

Dear Placerville City Council members (cc: Planning Commission),

I am writing you about the need for some reflection and regulation regarding merchant signs after viewing the racially-charged empty hanging noose on the new Hangtown Leathers sign on Main street. Upon seeing the sign, my jaw dropped and I was nauseous for 30 minutes. I did not associate the noose with the imagery of "old hangtown," but with racially-motivated terror and lynchings. My strong visceral response as a white person to this widely-recognized racist symbol was understandably mild in comparison to the response this symbol inspires for many African Americans.

I'm a recently retired sociology professor from University of California, Riverside who researched and taught on racism, served as a university ombuds, and currently consult on race and gender inequities. Since March, 2018, I have been living full time in what became in 2011 our Placerville vacation home. Despite being long familiar with the hangtown Placerville reference, the noose on the sign shocked me, and not a symbol I could disassociate from racist lynching. I've copied below sources confirming the noose as such a symbol, including a recent Sac Bee article about 3 school teachers in Palmdale, California who were suspended after displaying a noose in a photo. Clearly, their school district did not view this symbol as benign, or tolerable.

The display of an empty noose is insensitive and ignorant, at best, and a racist hate crime at worst (punishable as a crime in the states of New York, Virginia, and Connecticut). Given the rise of hate crimes across the U.S. in recent years, more attention has been given to the increased display of the hangman's noose as a symbol of racial hatred. (See, for example, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/us/nooses-hate-crimes-philadelphia-mint.html>) It is thus very unfortunate that a new merchant on Main Street would erect such a sign at this time.

In the contemporary workplace or school setting, the display of a noose is a punishable offense. If a student at the University of California (or Cal State) displayed a noose in their dorm room window similar to the one on the Main Street sign, s/he would face immediate disciplinary action and likely would be expelled from the university. In the workplace, a worker could be fired and an employer could face a discrimination lawsuit (see case referenced below).

The fact that the noose is a recognized hate crime symbol begs the question: Is the city of Placerville socializing its youth to ignorance by implying this racist symbol is benign, thereby potentially setting them up to future shame, social stigma, and punishment should they display a noose in a work or school setting?

I shudder to think of a photo of this sign making its way to the national media, and wonder if our city leadership has considered the bad press that could befall this town, and its merchants, should that happen. In this this day and age, there is absolutely no defense for a noose on a sign. None! Not even reference to cowboys is going to whitewash a hanging noose.

I hope the city leadership will think this one through carefully and create regulations and a review process to guard against racist symbols on merchant signs, if none exist. Perhaps the city can offer to help the local merchant cover expenses to paint a new sign that will not cause a sense of terror for those who see it, and will not bring bad press and boycotts to our town.

I recognize that Placerville has long used the moniker "hangtown" as a tourist draw, and anticipate that moniker will eventually be laid to rest in much the same way that national discussions have cast long shadows on the statues of Confederate leaders and displays of the Confederate flag in the south. That said, if left alone, I suspect the noose on the Hangtown Leathers sign will hasten the demise of the "hangtown" moniker in a most unpleasant and publicized process. Maybe that would ultimately be a good thing, but such negative publicity would cause immense embarrassment and shame to our town, its merchants, and its leaders. Just as cities prepare for natural disasters, the city of Placerville should anticipate and prepare for the social disaster that will certainly befall this town if it becomes associated in the national media with the display of a noose on a merchant sign.

I would be happy to discuss more and would appreciate learning how the city leaders regard their responsibility in this matter. I can be reached by return email.

Below are other sources describing the noose as a symbol of racist terror, including language from the Anti-Defamation League. Please click on the provided link to see the full source.

Sincerely,
Karen Pyke

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1. "The hangman's *noose*, a *symbol* connected to lynching, is one of the most powerful visual *symbols* directed primarily at African-Americans." Source: The Anti-Defamation League
https://www.adl.org/hatesymbolsdatabase?cat_id%5B146%5D=146

2. **"Let's be clear about this: a hangman's noose is RACIST"**

"Another deponent, one of the supervisors, tried to convince me that the hangman's noose wasn't racist, but rather something used by cowboys." Blogpost "The Employer Handbook" by management lawyer. <https://www.theemployerhandbook.com/11259-2/>

3. Sac Bee May 19, 2019 "Smiling teachers in noose photo suspended at California school, superintendent says"

"Some parents were so angry they wouldn't let their children go back to the school this week, KABC reports." How would these same parents feel about bringing their children to visit downtown Placerville?

<https://www.sacbee.com/news/nation-world/national/article230272364.html>