

Chapter Chair Chat

Our Nonrepresentative Form of Government

By Carole Mintzer, Santa Lucia Chapter Chair

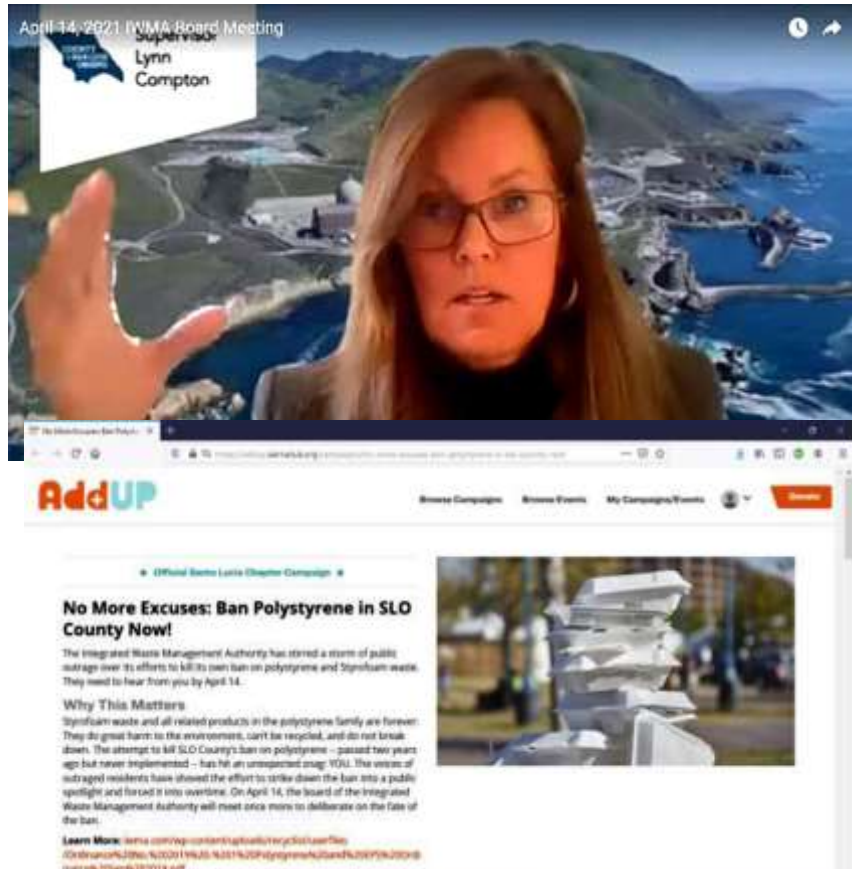
Since becoming Chapter Chair, I've had several occasions to listen to and participate in public meetings – specifically the SLO County Board of Supervisors and the SLO County Integrated Waste Management Authority (IWMA). While the proceedings can be a bit dull at times, they also are instructive of challenges we face here in making progress on environmental issues.

SLO County, with its mix of cities and rural communities, is a microcosm of the political dynamics that are playing out throughout California and the nation. Generally speaking, we have moderate to progressive politics in our largest city and coastal communities and moderate to conservative politics in outlying rural cities and communities.

But there's nothing progressive or moderate about the conservative majority on the County Board of Supervisors. Last fall, they voted to allow campaign contributions of up to \$25,000 rather than accept the limit in a new state law (AB 571) of \$4700. In January, they voted against having a Citizen Advisory Committee redraw district lines based on the 2020 Census. Instead, they decided to have a County Staff Advisory Committee take on this task, just as they did following the 2010 Census. While the Supervisors themselves do not draw the district boundaries, it's hard to feel comfortable that they won't try to influence staff. After all, staff work for them, unlike citizens who employ the Supervisors. More recently, conservative Supervisors have been questioning the safety and security of our elections and appear poised to root out non-existent voter fraud. They tasked County Clerk-Recorder Tommy Gong with conducting a survey to find out how citizens felt about the last election and what changes to voting should be considered going forward. [I hope you took the survey.](#)

The Board of Supervisors has also been making some alarming decisions that affect our environment. Last year, they refused to give residents in unincorporated areas the same option to sign up for community choice energy (Central Coast Community Energy), which is now available in all but one city in the county. Not only would this have saved those residents money on their electric bill, but it would help move the county toward greater use of renewable energy, something that benefits us all. They frequently approve development projects that are not environmentally sustainable, such as adding housing in Los Osos when there still is insufficient water for existing residents and approving a temporary construction storage yard in a residential neighborhood. Fortunately, appeals to the Coastal Commission can overturn these decisions, but only because concerned citizens have taken the time and effort to appeal.

Most recently, the conservative members of the Board of Supervisors, as Directors of IWMA, led an effort to repeal the ban on polystyrene products that was passed in 2019 but hadn't yet gone into effect. They ginned up an excuse of only wanting to implement state mandates despite IWMA's state mandate to reduce waste. They threatened to break up IWMA, a Joint Powers Authority that brings a countywide perspective to waste management and significant savings due to economies of scale. Their effort to repeal the ordinance failed and the polystyrene ban is now in effect. Whether they will carry out their costly threat to break up IWMA remains to be seen.



And I would have gotten away with it if it wasn't for you meddling kids! Supervisor Lynn Compton reserved special ire for the role of the Sierra Club in her failure to kill the polystyrene ordinance.

During the meetings I've observed, one thing has stood out. The conservatives seem quite dismissive of public input that doesn't match their own opinion. At the last IWMA meeting, one director singled out Sierra Club for distributing a form letter, proclaiming those don't count as expressions of public sentiment. (A note for Supervisor Compton: If you receive multiple emails that say "Implement the Polystyrene Ban Now" or equivalent, that's exactly what each of those individuals means. If your response is "I ignore form letters," you are saying "I am ignoring my constituents.") Never mind that in this instance, IWMA received nearly 150 emails from the public, nearly all of which were different in their specific content but common in their support for banning polystyrene. That's on top of 270 emails in February, and 145 emails in March, and virtually every single comment was against repeal. Similarly, overwhelming public input against high campaign contributions and local development projects has fallen on deaf ears.

So, what are we to do?

Pay attention. We cannot afford to be complacent and assume that just because we live in a county with more Democrats (38%) than Republicans (35%), that our elected office holders have our backs. The Republicans in county office right now seem very interested in

copying the efforts of their colleagues in other states, especially with regard to voting rights and democracy. Yes, voter suppression could happen here.

Speak out. Send emails and/or call in to public meetings. Even if it seems like they aren't listening, they need to hear from us. If we are silent, then they will be even more emboldened. We can't allow that to happen.

Participate. There are so many ways to get involved – here are a few ideas. Help register people to vote. Join our Political Committee to engage with elected officials and identify candidates worthy of a Sierra Club endorsement: <https://www.sierraclub.org/santa-lucia/political-committee>. Learn about the guidelines for redistricting and then attend public meetings on redistricting to make sure our supervisor district lines are drawn appropriately. Encourage pro-environment individuals to run for elected office. Campaign for pro-environment candidates. Vote.

Until next time, stay safe, get outdoors, and advocate for a clean environment here on the Central Coast.

Carole