

LaCava to pursue changes to municipal code to target illegal beach fires

By ASHLEY MACKIN-SOLOMON

San Diego City Councilman Joe LaCava says he will work in the coming year toward changing the municipal code to clear up confusion about beach fires.

The councilman, whose District 1 includes La Jolla, discussed that issue and other citywide and La Jolla concerns during a talk and question-and-answer session Nov. 10 at the La Jolla Community Center. He called it his first large in-person event in a couple of months.

LaCava told the approximately 20 people who attended that beach fires are a topic he “wasn’t thinking about when I was elected to office” a year ago but has “heard a lot about” since.

He said that with more people looking for outdoor activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, beach attendance and beach fires have increased. He said his office has received reports of illegal bonfires on Friday and Saturday nights and beach-goers burying hot coals in the sand. The coals remain hot and can injure unsuspecting people walking on the beach.

Beach bonfires are allowed in city-provided fire rings, but many La Jolla beaches such as Marine Street Beach and La Jolla Shores do not have them.

The San Diego municipal code states that fires also may be in a “portable barbecue or similar device.” City spokesman Tim Graham has said “the distinction is that smaller barbecue devices used to cook food are allowed on the beach, provided they are self-contained, are above the sand and people remove any hot coals. Bonfires for the purpose of keeping people warm or providing light at night must be in a city-provided fire ring.”

In recent months, local community groups have sought different measures to deter illegal beach fires, with little or no response from the city.

LaCava said he is working with the San Diego Police Department to set up a team to patrol La Jolla beaches, including pocket beaches. “I’m grateful [the department’s] Northern Division is responding to our concerns,” he said. “They have committed to trying to be better and be more observant to discourage” illegal activity.

In the new year, LaCava said, he will propose changes to the municipal code that clarify what is allowed on La Jolla beaches.

In 2020, the La Jolla Parks & Beaches board lent its support to the Barber Tract Neighborhood Association in its quest for a ban on wood and charcoal fires on beaches in that area. LJP&B voted in December to write a



San Diego City Councilman Joe LaCava speaks at the La Jolla Community Center about beach fires and other local issues.(Ashley Mackin-Solomon)

letter to the city asking that only propane-fueled fires be permitted at Barber Tract beaches, including Marine Street Beach.

The La Jolla Shores Association is seeking a similar ban on wood and charcoal fires at beaches in its area and recently decided to send a letter to the city.

“The challenge with our municipal code ... is that our city rules are kind of confusing, so the public, lifeguards and even city signage are not really sure of what’s allowed. That’s not good for anybody,” LaCava said. “It’s always been illegal to build fire directly in the sand and burn used lumber and leave hot coals in the sand, so I want to stop those activities and reduce confusion.”

The code states that “coals from any portable barbecue or similar device shall either be removed from the beach area or be deposited in a city-provided fire container or designated hot-coal container provided on the beach for such purposes.”

Other issues:

LaCava spoke to other citywide and local issues in addition to beach fires. He said he could not discuss the ongoing city redistricting process, despite frequent questions about it.

Climate plan: Speaking about the city’s Climate Action Plan, an updated draft of which was released Nov. 10 and sets the goal to achieve “net zero” greenhouse gas emissions by 2035, LaCava said: “I’m going to be looking for a more refined plan, with really actionable targets. I don’t like plans that sound good but don’t do anything. I want direction to get from where we are to meet our goals. One of the things I’m looking at is electric vehicles ... because transportation produces almost half of our greenhouse gases.”

Point La Jolla closure: Earlier this year, LaCava helped usher in a closure of Point La Jolla, a rocky area between La Jolla Cove beach and Boomer Beach where sea lions often go on land to rest. It was closed on an emergency basis for five weeks in late summer to keep people away from the sea lions.

“I hated to be that harsh, but it seemed to get the kind of result we were hoping for, and we needed to say it was important to us,” he said.

Ahead of the reopening Sept. 16, LaCava said the city would “follow up with a coastal development permit for [more closures in] subsequent [sea lion] pupping seasons.”

He told the Community Center audience that “now we are looking at a more permanent solution ... with public input” and that the process is ongoing.

LaCava said he would continue to have a presence at the La Jolla Open Aire Market from about 8:30 a.m. to noon the first Sunday of every month to answer constituents’ questions. The market is on the Girard Avenue side of the La Jolla Elementary School campus. ♦



Remnants from a beach fire are scattered in the sand at Marine Street Beach in La Jolla.(File)