

County clerk refuses meeting with conservative group

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LAS CRUCES - A local conservative organization is upset the Doña Ana County Clerk will not meet with them to respond to questions about local elections. The clerk declined the invitation last month despite claiming publicly she welcomed opportunities to educate the public and dispel misinformation. In an October interview with the *Sun-News*, Doña Ana County Clerk Amanda López Askin said she was trying to find a balance between responsibly debunking misinformation and amplifying conspiracy theories. She warned that election misinformation could depress voter turnout. But she signaled her approach was shifting toward an “offensive approach” of engagement, telling the newspaper on Oct. 26 she was willing to meet with groups that had questions to squash falsehoods about election administration and integrity. “I will present to and have presented to any group that asks me to, to talk about elections or updates and/or ... misinformation,” the county clerk told the *Sun-News* in October. Juan Garcia, chairman of Coalition of Conservatives in Action — a local group which calls itself nonpartisan but advocates for conservative values and causes — attempted to take her up on that offer. Emails provided to the *Sun-News* from both parties show Garcia invited López Askin in an Oct. 28 email to present to the group about local elections. “The purpose is for the organization to understand voting in Dona (sic) Ana,” Garcia said in his email. His email also directly references the clerk’s remarks to the *Sun-News* days before. Garcia said CCIA’s mission is to educate residents in community issues so they can engage in civil discourse with and appropriately challenge elected officials. Some of the issues Garcia said CCIA focuses on are crime, education and election integrity. Las Cruces Mayor Ken Miyagishima, Las Cruces City Councilor Kasandra Gandara, Las Cruces Public Schools Superintendent Ralph Ramos and School Board President Ray Jaramillo have been guest speakers at CCIA meetings. Miyagishima and Gandara said their discussions with the group were civil, and the organization engaged them in good faith.

Jaramillo said he found the experience inviting, civil and productive. He said one woman attempted to ask a question that was about a personal grievance with him, but Jaramillo said Garcia shut her question down. Ramos did not return a phone call to the *Sun-News* asking about his experience. “They were very professional with me,” Jaramillo said. Emails further showed the clerk refused a meeting with the organization due to its association with a report alleging election fraud in New Mexico. So far, no evidence has pointed to widespread election fraud in New Mexico or nationwide in 2020, the election year that’s received the most intense scrutiny. “It has come to my attention that your group is the local main proponent of the ‘Election Fraud in New Mexico’ publication,” the county clerk wrote in a Nov. 4 email. “As such, I will not be meeting with your group.” Garcia, in an email reply, expressed disappointment at the clerk’s refusal. He asked López Askin to reconsider her decision and invited her to discuss the offer further with him.

“Part of the reason I was inviting you was to put to rest various questions and concerns many citizens have regarding the elections,” Garcia said in his reply. López Askin told the *Sun-News* she refused because CCIA has endorsed a report alleging widespread election fraud in New Mexico, which the clerk characterized as a “fraudit” rife with harmful misinformation. A member of CCIA, Rick Reynaud, asked about facilitating the presentation of the report to the county commission in late October. In an Oct. 18 email, Reynaud, a CCIA vice chair and former Republican Doña Ana County Commission candidate, cited Garcia and himself as points of contact regarding the potential presentation of the report. Reynaud told the *Sun-News* the offer to set up a presentation was his idea, though he said Garcia was aware. Commission Chair Manny Sanchez, Vice Chair Diana Murillo-Trujillo and County Manager Fernando Macias agreed to disallow the report’s presentation to the commission, and a presentation did not happen during public comment at any commission meeting, which would have been the next likeliest option for presenting it. “I have to set boundaries in terms of basically legitimizing what they’re touting, and it was not an easy decision,” the county clerk said in defense of her actions Tuesday. “There is a very real animosity and aggression towards election officials nationwide. And so, with the totality of information I have with the narrative that they’ve created ... It was a decision that I’m going to stand behind.” Garcia said his intention behind inviting the clerk to speak was not to relitigate the 2020 election. “I saw some issues during the (2021) election where I had individuals not knowing what districts they were in, how many candidates were running ... all those basic questions,” Garcia said. “I thought it would be an opportunity (to) bring her in, she can talk to us, give us insights into the election process that maybe we’re missing, (and) can give our team and organization an opportunity to ask her questions.” Some CCIA members wrote emails to the clerk following her refusal asking her to reconsider.

“I think Juan would have enforced the civility,” Reynaud said. Garcia has also said he had questions about mail-in ballot verification, boosting voter turnout and absentee ballot drop box security measures. “It’s also an excellent opportunity, just like (Councilor Gandara) did, to communicate with the citizens,” Garcia said. “As an elected official, I believe that that’s part of (López Askin’s) job.” Garcia said CCIA does not endorse the fraud report and said any promotion of it by CCIA online is the neutral sharing of information. Garcia said the county clerk’s refusal makes it seem like she’s hiding something, though he didn’t make any specific allegations. **López Askin acknowledged her denial potentially fuels conspiratorial thinking further.** “So it was not an easy decision,” the county clerk said. “I don’t take it lightly and it is counterintuitive. It doesn’t feel great, but I also don’t want to cosign on the messages that have been sent out.” López Askin said CCIA members who want answers to election-related questions can attend an upcoming presentation the clerk will make to the county GOP — date and time to be determined — or they can seek out publicly available information on the Secretary of State’s website, information in news reports and information posted online by the clerk’s office.

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