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October 12, 2026

To: Members of the City of Ridgecrest City Council
Ridgecrest City Manager
100 W. California Avenue
Ridgecrest, CA 93555

From: Cynthia Zimmer, Kern County District Attorney

Re: Investigation of Advocacy Relating to AB 1413 and AB 1466

Dear Councilmembers and City Manager,

The Kern County District Attorney's Office has concluded its investigation into complaints raised by a citizen regarding activities of the former Ridgecrest City Manager and members of the Ridgecrest City Council. The complaints were related to the handling of advocacy activities on behalf of the City of Ridgecrest in support of proposed legislation in Assembly Bills 1413 and 1466 in 2025. The investigation into this issue included the review of documents, video recordings of appearances before the Board of Supervisors, the Assembly Committees written to and attended, and interviews of parties involved. In summary, the investigation determined the following:

- The Ridgecrest City Council Did Not Conduct a Lawful Vote to Support AB 1413 or AB 1466.
- Councilmember Kyle Blades and former City Manager Ron Strand, in creating, signing, and submitting a letter to a State Assembly Committee, asserting the support of the *City of Ridgecrest* for passage of AB 1466 without any lawful hearing or vote, deprived the citizens of Ridgecrest of input in the political process, and misrepresented the position of the City of Ridgecrest.
- The oral advocacy of Councilmember Blades at the April 8, 2025, Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife, and the final remarks of Councilmember Blades and Ron Strand at the May 5, 2025, Kern County Board of Supervisors meeting, which asserted official City of Ridgecrest support of pending legislation, without lawful hearing or vote, deprived the citizens of Ridgecrest from input in the political process, and misrepresented the position of the City of Ridgecrest.

The investigation included review of the following public events:

Advocacy Letter in Support of AB 1466 Addressed to Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife dated April 2025

Concerns were raised about a letter dated April 2025, which was produced on City of Ridgecrest letterhead, bearing the city's seal and names of City officials. The letter was addressed to Diane Papan, the Chairperson of the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife. The letter reflected the support of Assembly Bill 1466, crucially, not by merely the author and signatory of the letter, Councilmember Kyle Blades, but also asserted that "The City of Ridgecrest supports Assembly Bill 1466."

The investigation determined that the April 2025 letter was initially drafted by then-City Manager Ron Strand, transmitted to City Clerk Ricca Charlon with instructions to include the language on City of Ridgecrest letterhead. Ricca Charlon complied with the request and emailed the reformatted letter on City letterhead to Ron Strand and Councilmember Blades, as Councilmember Blades had been identified as the proposed signatory for the letter. Councilmember Blades signed the letter and relied upon Ron Strand to submit the letter, as addressed and intended, to the Chair of the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife.

Advocacy Before the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife on April 8, 2025

A review of Councilmember Blades' appearances before the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife on April 8, 2025, establishes that Councilmember Blades' statements to the committee occurred at two points; once for AB 1466 and once for AB 1413. When registering support for the passage of AB 1413, Councilmember Blades, consistent with the practice in the state legislature and its committees, was limited to orally registering his name, the organization which he represented, and whether his appearance was in support or opposition of the legislation. Councilmember Blades during the hearing registered his support as: "Kyle Blades. City of Ridgecrest. Strongly support."

Councilmember Blades also registered oral support for AB 1466. In doing so, he introduced himself as the Mayor Pro Tem for the City of Ridgecrest and began addressing the Committee in more detail than Committee accepts for oral support, and so he was interrupted by the committee and asked to register either support or opposition, which Councilmember Blades complied with by asserting "strong support" for the legislation. As a result of the interruption, Councilmember Blades did not specially identify what organization, if any, he represented when he registered his support. The letter that Councilmember Blades offered, however, was addressed to this committee and was regarding this bill AB 1466.

Advocacy before the Assembly Judiciary Committee on April 29, 2025

A review of Councilmember Blades' appearances before the Assembly Judiciary Committee on April 29, 2025, determined that Councilmember Blades offered testimony in support of AB 1413, but that such testimony asserted Councilmember Blades' personal support of passage of AB 1413, and Councilmember Blades' comments during that hearing did *not* assert a position on behalf of the City of Ridgecrest. There was no evidence that a letter like that submitted to the Water, Parks, and Wildlife Committee was submitted to the Judiciary Committee.

Advocacy Before the Kern County Board of Supervisors on May 5, 2025

On May 5, 2025, the Kern County Board of Supervisors considered whether it would, on behalf of Kern County, register a public position on the pending legislation in Assembly Bill 1413 and Assembly Bill

1466. A review of the extensive public comments made during this hearing included public comments by Ridgecrest Councilmember Scott Hayman. Councilmember Hayman's comments at no point purported to register a position on behalf of the City of Ridgecrest, and his conclusion, urging the board to "support AB 1466 and AB 1413..." is consistent with his conveying his *personal* support of the legislation.

Councilmember Kyle Blades also offered public comment before the Board, where, similar to Councilmember Hayman, he expressed his personal support for the pending legislation. Councilmember Blades' *initial* public comments did not purport to register a position on behalf of the City of Ridgecrest, and his conclusion, "I respectfully urge your support" is consistent with his personal comments in support of the legislation.

At the conclusion of public comments, Supervisor Couch requested that representatives from the City of Ridgecrest, if still present, return to the podium to answer inquiries he had before the Board's vote was held. Supervisor Couch inquired directly to those present, which included Councilmembers Hayman and Blades, as well as then-city manager Ron Strand, whether the City of Ridgecrest had decided to support the bills. Supervisor Couch referenced an opinion letter from Scott O'Neill, published in the local newspaper, which had noted other appearances of Councilmember Blades appearing in support of the bills, and directed concerns regarding Councilmember Blades' representation of the *City* as supporting the legislation, particularly in the absence of a publicly agendized item or vote that would form a legitimate basis of the support.

Councilmember Blades responded to the inquiries posed by Supervisor Couch and stated that "the City of Ridgecrest supports these bills" and that the support was determined in closed session relating to legal strategy. Ron Strand accepted an opportunity to provide further information, and he too intimated that legal strategy determined in closed session provided justification for the claim that the city council was in support of the legislation. Mr. Strand did acknowledge that no public hearing resulted in an affirmative vote in support of the pending legislation, a fact that was confirmed by the District Attorney's investigation.

I. The First Amendment Permits a Councilmember to Advocate on Behalf of Proposed State Legislation

Supporting or opposing proposed legislation is well within the rights of all citizens, including city council members who may have heightened interest in seeking what are perceived to be positive outcomes for their city. The ability and appropriateness of elected officials to speak and support legislation, including before the State Legislature or County Board of Supervisors is a hallmark of American democracy. To the extent that Councilmember Blades exercised his right to register his personal support and offer testimony before committees of the State Legislature in support of AB 1413 and AB 1466, such speech and advocacy fall well within his first amendment rights. Not all residents of Ridgecrest may agree with the position taken or supported, but there is no liability or violation of rule or policy for a Councilmember to advocate his *personal* views in support or opposition of legislation.

II. The Ralph M. Brown Act Does Not Permit a Legislative Body to Take a Position on Pending Legislation in Closed Session

The Ralph M. Brown Act for decades has stood for the principle that the public's business should and must be conducted in public, and that members of the public must have opportunity to follow and provide input on the actions of a legislative body, including a City Council. While the Brown Act effectively

makes open and public meetings the norm, it also makes exception for closed session, understanding that legislative bodies must consider issues that are inappropriate for public discourse due to competing, equally valid interests. One such exemption is the “litigation” privilege. The Brown Act recognizes that legislative bodies will have to receive advice from attorneys retained or employed by the legislative body in areas where the legislative body may be subject to existing or potential litigation. Advice from counsel on legal strategy, the Brown Act recognizes, would be highly curtailed if attorneys advising the legislative body lacked the confidentiality of communications to which all other litigants enjoy with their attorneys. But the litigation exception – like all exceptions that permit closed hearings under the Brown Act – are very limited and narrowly construed. The courts have noted that “statutory exceptions authorizing closed sessions of legislative bodies are construed narrowly and the Brown Act’s ‘sunshine law’ is construed liberally in favor of openness in conducting public business.”¹ Never has a court held that a position in support or opposition to specified pieces of legislation fall within any of these exceptions. On the contrary, courts have limited the application of the litigation exception, and construed the litigation exception narrowly, even in situations where a matter of public concern might have some ancillary impact on existing or potential litigation.

III. The April 2025 Letter Signed by Councilmember Blades, Councilmember Blades’ Comments at the April 8, 2025 Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife, and the Comments by Councilmember Blades at the Kern County Board of Supervisors Meeting on May 5, 2025 Inappropriately Asserted the Position of the City of Ridgecrest

While a Councilmember enjoys a first amendment right to advocate and support proposed legislation, and while the oral advocacy of Councilmember Blades before the *Judiciary Committee* fell within established protections and norms, the April 2025 letter signed by Blades went one step further. The letter, though signed only by Blades, was presented on City of Ridgecrest letterhead, and asserted and in no uncertain terms that “The City of Ridgecrest supports Assembly Bill 1466 (Hart)” and that “The City of Ridgecrest respectfully urges your passage of AB 1466.” In this manner, the letter both opens and concludes with an assertion that—not only Councilmember Blades – but “*the City of Ridgecrest*” supports and requests passage of the legislation. In this manner, the letter extends beyond mere personal advocacy for passage of legislation, and asserts what is presented as a fact by Councilmember Blades – that the “City of Ridgecrest” supports the legislation’s passage.

The fact asserted in Councilmember Blades’ April 2025 letter to the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife – that the *City of Ridgecrest* is in support of and urges passage of AB 1466 – was investigated by the Kern County District Attorney’s Public Integrity Unit. The investigation was unable to find credible evidence that the City of Ridgecrest lawfully adopted any such position that would support Councilmember Blades’ assertion in the letter and repeated in his oral comments at the Water, Parks, and Wildlife Committee and before the Kern County Board of Supervisors.

If a formal position on the pending legislation was taken in closed session, as was suggested by Councilmember Blades in his response to Supervisor Couch on May 5, 2025, and intimated by then City-manager Ron Strand moments later, the Brown Act *requires* that such position be publicly reported immediately after the closed session where such action was taken. The Brown act requires that “the legislative body of any local agency shall publicly report any action taken in closed session and the vote or abstention on that action of every member present,”² and further requires that “after any closed

¹ *Shapiro v. San Diego City Council* (2002) 36 Al.App.4th 904 at 917.

² Cal. Government Code §54957.1

session, the legislative body shall reconvene into open session prior to adjournment and shall make any disclosures required by Section 54957.1 of action taken in the closed session.”³

A vote to support or oppose specified legislation is inappropriate for closed session, because it is not one of the few, limited areas where closed sessions are permitted by the Brown Act⁴, but even were the City Council to have inappropriately voted in closed session to support the bills, that vote would qualify as an “action taken” in closed session –which is defined as “a collective decision made by a majority of the members of a legislative body, a collective commitment or promise by the majority of the members of a legislative body to make a positive or negative decision, or an actual vote by a majority of the members of a legislative body when sitting as a body or entity, upon a motion, proposal, resolution, order, or ordinance.”⁵

There was no disclosure of any vote being held in closed session, and no reporting of any vote counts. Though Councilmember Blades, in his response to Supervisor Couch, asserted that the City of Ridgecrest’s support of the bills was established in closed session, there is no public reporting of such a position being taken – reporting that is *required* under the Brown Act had the City Council actually taken the position that Councilmember Blades asserted they had –both in his response to Supervisor Couch on May 5, and by implication of his April 2025 letter to the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife, and in his representation to that same committee on April 8, 2025, each of which asserted not merely his *personal* support but the *City’s* support of the legislation.

The investigation was unable to substantiate that any action was taken by the Ridgecrest City Council in support of the pending legislation. *If*, as the lack of evidence suggesting that any action was taken suggests, the city did *not* formally take action to support the pending legislation, then the Brown Act may not be implicated. If the city council did not take a vote at closed session on pending legislation, they of course there would be no vote to report in open hearings. The issue is that Councilmember Blades and Ron Strand have asserted publicly that there *was* some action taken in closed session that authorized their subsequent statements, including the April 2025 letter the Assembly Committee which justified their representation to the state Assembly, and the Board of Supervisors. These assertions, however, are not supported by evidence.

Because the investigation has determined that there is no evidence that the City of Ridgecrest voted to support the pending legislation, the assertions by Ron Strand, who drafted the April 2025 letter and was entrusted with its delivery, and the assertions of Councilmember Blades, who signed the letter proclaiming the support of the City of Ridgecrest of AB 1466, each of whom have asserted that they were acting under authority of the city council’s closed session determination, are unfounded. This amounts, in short, to Councilmember Blades speaking out of turn, representing his *personal* views as the views of the *City of Ridgecrest*.

Not all of Councilmember Blades’ statements suffer this issue. For example, his statement to the Assembly Judiciary Committee appropriately reflected his personal views and did not purport to represent them as the City’s. Similarly, Councilmember Blades’ *initial* statement to the Board of Supervisors appropriately expressed his *personal* views; it was only when directly examined by

³ Cal. Government Code §54957.7

⁴ This remains true even where the legislation under consideration *could* or even *would* impact potential or existing litigation involving the legislative body. Were it otherwise, the litigation exception for public hearings would quickly swallow the rule requiring open meetings and hearings, which is why courts narrowly construe exceptions that allow closed session items.

⁵ Cal Government Code §54952.6

Supervisor Couch that Councilmember Blades asserted that *the City* supports the legislation.

Conclusion:

The claim put forward by Councilmember Blades and Ron Strand, both in the letter and in oral advocacy asserting that the *City of Ridgecrest* was in support of passage of the legislation, to be true, should have come with the backing of a lawful vote by the Ridgecrest City Council. This investigation has concluded that no such lawful vote was held. There certainly was no such vote in open session, and if a vote were held in closed session, it would not be lawful, as taking a position in support of pending legislation is not a permitted purpose for a closed session. Such a vote, were it to be held, must have been held in open session, with members of the community permitted to provide input.

Even if a majority of the City Council supported the legislation in a manner similar to Councilmember Blades, without a public vote it is disingenuous to assert that ‘the City’ has registered support of the legislation. The City Council should consider insisting that all members of the City Council refrain from asserting their own personal beliefs as the position of the Council, or indeed *the City of Ridgecrest*, and should consider enforcing restrictions to this effect. This is true even if Councilmember Blades acted on a good faith belief that a majority of the City Council supported the position he put forward. Without a public vote, with public input, the Council could not adopt such a position. Councilmember Blades’ presentation of his personal view supporting the legislation on City letterhead, referring to the position of the city, and orally advocating that the city had adopted his personal views was incorrect, and misrepresented the City’s position. In so doing, these actions deprived the electorate of their ability to participate in the political process on this issue.

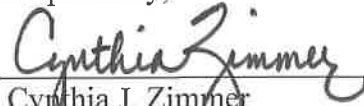
This is not the first time that this issue has arisen in local politics – many legislative bodies have passed explicit rules governing the conduct of local officials to prevent exactly this type of scenario, and they are often contained in policies governing council codes of ethics, council rules, or policies governing conduct with the media. That a member of a council should not present personal viewpoints as the adopted position of the City Council is inherent in rules governing legislative bodies, but some cities have adopted more specific rules covering this issue. The City of Los Angeles, for example, prohibits its officials from engaging in political activity “in any manner that implies the City official...is speaking on behalf of the City or Communicating a City position” with exception for when such activity legally authorized.⁶

While the District Attorney does not contemplate the filing of criminal charges as a result of this investigation, Councilmembers should be wary and be warned that there does exist potential criminal liability in filing false or forged documents with a public agency. California law expects and demands that records presented to and filed in its various tribunals, including the State Legislature, are not forged or are otherwise false. California Penal Code Section 115 attaches felony liability for any person who “knowingly procures or offers any false or forged instrument to be filed, registered, or recorded in any public office within this state, which instrument, if genuine, might be filed, registered, or recorded under any law of this state or the United States.” Even after investigation, it remains unclear whether the Assembly Committee on Water, Parks and Wildlife received, retained, and filed the letter drafted by Ron Strand and signed by Councilmember Blades in the manner required for prosecution under Penal Code Section 115. Criminal liability aside, public officials who purport to speak for the will of a governing body without lawful authority not only deprive residents of their rightful voice in government but also expose themselves to significant political consequences and potential legal liability.

⁶ Los Angeles Municipal Code, Section 49.5.5: Misuse of City Position or Resources

Neither the City Council, nor the community which it serves are without ample options to address the results presented in this investigation, should they choose to do so. The City Council retains authority to censure responsible parties, should it deem the conduct worthy of such action, and the citizens of Ridgecrest always retain the authority to choose their representatives through elections, and replace any the electorate consider not properly and effectively serving the interests of the city and its constituents. Criminal liability is not appropriate in this circumstance – the error identified is a political one; whether and what political consequences follow rests in the hands of the electorate.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Cynthia Zimmer", written over a horizontal line.

Cynthia J. Zimmer
District Attorney, County of Kern