

LOCAL NEWS

Fiery, vocal crowd rejects Lowell-Cambodia sister-city motions

Mayor Chau, Councilor Yem withdraw motions

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LOWELL — The city's Cambodian diaspora came out in force to Tuesday's City Council meeting to speak out against two motions seeking to establish possible sister-city agreements between Lowell and the Cambodian cities of Battambang and Phnom Penh.

Both motions were withdrawn when it became clear that a second from another councilor to move the motion to the floor for vote would not be forthcoming. Councilor Vesna Nuon requested that the speakers be allowed to address the body regardless.

“I know that the motion has failed, Mr. Mayor,” he said addressing the city’s first mayor of color and the nation’s first Cambodian-American mayor, Sokhary Chau. “However, to be fair, there are people here who wish to speak.”

Both motions were submitted by Cambodian-American councilors, who appeared to misjudge the depth of feeling toward the government of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who assumed power nearly 40 years ago.

The first motion, co-sponsored by Chau and Councilor Paul Ratha Yem, asked the city manager to have the Law Department provide a report regarding the establishment of a sister-city agreement with Phnom Penh, referencing a memorandum of understanding signed on Jan. 14, 2015.

The second motion, by Chau, asked the city manager and/or the appropriate department to begin the process to establish a sister-city agreement with Battambang.

Eng Chhai Eang came to the podium with Mu Sochua. He previously was a member of the Cambodian Parliament and is a vice president of the Cambodian National Rescue Party, a major opposition party to the Hun Sen regime. He remains exiled from his homeland, and lives in Lowell.

Sochua, who acted as his interpreter, was also a member of the Cambodian Parliament from Battambang and is second vice president of the CNRP. She is a former minister of women’s and veterans’ affairs.

“I lost my seat because the Hun Sen government took it away,” Chhai Eang said in Khmer to a hushed crowd. “I am here as a victim of regime of Hun Sen. I am here to speak against the establishment of agreement of Battambang and Phnom Penh as Lowell sister city.”

He described a political system in Cambodia in which mayors are not elected directly by the people, but are chosen and appointed by Hun Sen.

“The government in Cambodia do not work according of the people,” he said through Sochua. “Therefore, if you in Lowell agree to establish sister city with any city in Cambodia, you are then serving the regime in Cambodia. The Cambodian regime considers me as a terrorist, but America accepts me as a free man. I thank you for not considering this motion.”

Thunderous applause greeted his remarks.

Several other speakers, including School Committee member Susie Chhoun; community activist Tara Hong, a program coordinator with Project LEARN; Justin Ford, a civic engagement coordinator at the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association; Coalition for a Better Acre CEO Yun-Ju Choi; and supporters from the social justice organization Solidarity Lowell all spoke out against sister-city agreements with Cambodia.

Chhoun’s voice boomed throughout the council chambers as she took a stand against the motions, which she said would give legitimacy to the “brutally repressive” Hun Sen regime, and specifically called out abuses in Battambang.

“Battambang is a city where critics of the government have been killed notoriously in broad daylight with complete immunity,” the South Lowell resident said. “In Lowell, as elsewhere in the United States, Cambodians are still being watched by regime including myself. Many are afraid to criticize the government in private conversations because they know that their families or businesses interests in Cambodia are at risk.”

She closed by urging the council to only consider sister-city agreements with cities that “share (Lowell’s) values of freedom and democracy.”

Her fiery speech was followed by Hong, who told Chau he was “deeply disappointed” in the motions, which he said if passed would confer legitimacy on the Hun Sen regime.

“In Cambodia, you only have one-system rule,” Hong said in a speech that was interrupted by vigorous applause several times. “We live in one of the most powerful countries in the world, with freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly and the right to petition. People in Cambodia do not have that. If (the motions) were passed, it would accept what happens in Cambodia as OK.”

Chau, who leaves for an extended trip to Cambodia next Tuesday, said the motions were symbolic and ceremonial, meant to foster goodwill and diplomacy and not create a political divide.

“(Battambang) is the city where I was born, and the land of my parents, grandparents, and ancestors,” he said, offering a personal perspective before framing the issue in political terms.

“I understand that there are citizens living in Lowell that belong to different political parties in Cambodia,” Chau said. “I admit that I did not think about Cambodian political parties or any appearance of political ties when putting these motions forward — I was only thinking of good things for the people.”

His comments were roundly booed, and he gaveled the meeting back to order.

Chau’s co-sponsor on the initial motion offered a more conciliatory tone, saying his purpose was to create unity in the community.

“After many conversations and with much consideration, I now realize this motion achieves the complete opposite of what a sister-city agreement is intended to do, create a partnership and solidify unity,” Yem said. “The last thing I would ever want to do is divide my community. With each conversation I had, it became very clear just how troubling this motion had become to so many.”

Both Chau and Yem asked City Clerk Michael Geary to withdraw the motions.

Councilor Wayne Jenness picked up on Councilor Kim Scott’s statement to build in some policy and procedures around the sister-city process, and his motion to request the Rules Subcommittee meet and begin discussions around sister-city agreements going forward unanimously passed.

Nuon had the final word, tying American values to sister-city status.

“Countries that do not respect American values — respect human rights, the rule of law and free and fair elections — we should not be sister city with,” he said.

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