McClintock town hall draws large, divided crowd

By Alex MacLean, The Union Democrat
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There was patriotic singing, chanting and sign waving inside the packed 569-seat Sonora High School auditorium Wednesday night — and that was before Congressman Tom McClintock even took the stage.

As one woman yelled out, “What does democracy look like?” Many in the crowd responded with, “This is what democracy looks like!”

The passion and emotion displayed by the raucous audience throughout the nearly three hours that the Republican lawmaker fielded questions from his constituents in California’s Congressional District 4 matched descriptions of previous town-hall meetings he hosted Feb. 4 in Roseville and Tuesday night in Mariposa.

McClintock kicked off the evening by calling out the “sniveling coward” who slashed tires on four vehicles outside Tuesday night’s event at the Mariposa County Fairgrounds. The Sierra Star reported at least two of the vehicles belonged to people there to express their opposition toward the congressman and President Donald Trump.

“When we catch you we are going to throw the book at you because your crime is not only directed at the victims whose property you damaged, it is aimed at every one of us who are seeking to exercise our constitutional rights to assemble and seek redress of grievances,” McClintock said to a round of applause.

Hundreds of people on both sides of the political aisle were gathered outside the auditorium before the doors opened about 5:10 p.m. McClintock said in his opening remarks that another 300 to 400 were still waiting outside.

Such meetings hosted by McClintock in Sonora over the past four-plus years he’s represented the district have typically struggled to fill the roughly 70-seat Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors chambers on the fourth floor of the County Administration Center.

However, that was before Trump got elected.

Numerous reports have depicted similar scenes at town halls across the country this month hosted by both Democratic and Republican lawmakers, many of whom have faced tough questions from people fearful of the current administration’s policies on hot-button issues like health care, immigration, and civil rights.

McClintock Press Secretary Bill George said they chose the auditorium because it was the biggest venue they could find in town.

At the Feb. 4 meeting in Roseville, McClintock was escorted by police out of the Tower Theater. He claimed his staffers told him the security was required due to the situation becoming dangerous outside the venue where hundreds of protesters were gathered, but police have said it was merely a precaution, and none of the demonstrators got out of hand.

Sonora Police Lt. Turu Vanderwiel said there were 25 safety personnel assigned to provide security for Wednesday’s event from the Sonora Police Department, Tuolumne County Sheriff’s Office, Sonora Fire Department, Cal Fire, California Highway Patrol and Tuolumne County District Attorney’s Office.

Vanderwiel said undercover police officers wearing plain clothes were assigned to escort McClintock in and out of the event to avoid creating a scene.

Many questions directed at McClintock throughout the meeting asked by people opposed to the policy direction under Trump and the GOP-controlled Congress centered around the president’s alleged ties to Russia, the Affordable Care Act, women’s rights, and climate change.

Laura Lowell, of Vallecito, told McClintock she was a concerned mother and didn’t appreciate being called an anarchist. McClintock was quoted by multiple news outlets after the meeting in Roseville saying he felt there was an “anarchist element” to the protesters who attended.

McClintock responded: “One of the great frustrations in public life is you don’t always get quoted completely accurately,” which was met by a chorus of boos that drowned out the rest of what he said.
Lowell and others throughout the night also called upon McClintock to support a bipartisan investigation of the many ties the Trump administration has to the Russian government, but he repeatedly declined to commit absent a “specific allegation.”

When some in the crowd got especially animated and stood up to yell things at the veteran politician who was first elected to Congress in 2008, McClintock lectured them about the need for civil discussion instead of shouting at each other.

“I understand there are lot of people here concerned about the election,” McClintock said. “There were just as many people concerned about the Obama administration as there are about the Trump administration.”

McClintock repeatedly referred to Republicans having a “clear mandate to revive our economy, repair our healthcare system, and restore the integrity of our borders.”

On climate change, McClintock held his ground that he doesn’t believe there is enough scientific evidence to support the link between rising global temperatures and man-made carbon emissions.

“If it’s going to say human activity is the cause, it must explain why there were periods of warming and cooling” prior to the invention of the combustion engine, he said. “Until it does, I’m not going to support policies that are going to destroy our economy.”

Shirley Campbell, of Sonora, said McClintock and others in Congress receive health care on the taxpayers’ dime and criticized GOP moves to defund Planned Parenthood, which she felt is an attack on women.

“I’m 82 years old and I’m one of millions of women in this country who will not be pushed back, sir,” Campbell said, to which McClintock responded that he’s heard from women who felt they were pressured by the clinic into having an abortion.

Rod Hollingsworth, who lives in Sonora, asked how Congress will be able to work together to craft bipartisan legislation without the president having to issue executive orders.

McClintock talked about the need for a minority party in Congress to act as a check against the majority in power, but certain rules make it easier to obstruct legislation from moving forward.

Hollingsworth, who identified himself as a socialist, said he wasn’t comforted by the answer. “We just went through four years of Republicans not working with Democrats, and now we’re going to have Democrats not working with Republicans,” Hollingsworth said in an interview. “I see another four years of stagnation.”

While many signs held by those in the crowd featured messages like “Dump McTrump,” “Lies,” and “I am not fake news,” there were many others supportive of McClintock, the State of Jefferson movement, and small government.

Bob and Nancy Ide, of Columbia, were sitting in the front row prior to McClintock’s arrival donned in State of Jefferson apparel. They said they are volunteers at Railtown 1897 State Historic Park in Jamestown and typically go to see McClintock speak whenever he’s in town, though they had never seen a turnout like the one on Wednesday night.

“Sometimes when we’ve attended there are issues that are very contentious, but people are always polite and well mannered,” Nancy Ide said. “We’re hoping it will be the same tonight.”

Kelly Campagna, 25, of Sonora, didn’t ask a question but let McClintock know that she was a millennial who supported him and thanked him for hosting such events despite the possibility of confronting hostile crowds.

Jo Anna Savage, of Twain Harte, scolded those in attendance who called for the investigation on Trump and Russia, asking where their outrage was for those who died in the 2012 attack on U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya.

“Your president didn’t get out of bed to make a single phone call,” Savage said.

Despite the crowd’s boisterous behavior throughout the event that included cheering, booing and shouting at times, Sonora Interim Police Chief Mike Harden said he hadn’t been made aware of any incidents inside or outside the venue by the time McClintock walked off the stage about 9 p.m.

“There was just a lot of passionate people on both sides of the issue, but no policing problems,” Harden said.
Hundreds came to hold up signs, wave flags, and to question or show support for the congressman for Tuolumne and Calaveras counties and the rest of the 4th District.

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They came with signs and flags and at least one mask, expressing views from across the political spectrum, to a town hall meeting hosted by Republican Congressman Tom McClintock.

Hundreds gathered before 6 p.m. to get inside the Sonora High School auditorium, and hundreds more stood outside when authorities decided there was no more room left inside.

Mickey Williamson, 70, a resident of Murphys, said she came to share her concerns as an engaged citizen about the state of the Affordable Care Act, President Donald Trump’s month-old administration’s ties with Russia, especially as it relates to Trump’s election in November, and climate change.

“We don’t want to roll back protections like the EPA,” Williamson said. She was out front of the high school auditorium by 4:15 p.m. and there were about a hundred other people there, too. She wore a paper card pinned to her jacket that said “Engaged Citizen, Murphys, Calaveras County.”

Joe Bick, 44, of Tuolumne, wore a green, hooded sweatshirt emblazoned with the seal of the State of Jefferson and the words “Don’t Tread on Me.”

“The reason I’m here is to participate. I want to hear what people have to offer,” Bick said. “And I want to hear what the representative has to say about what he’s been doing.”

Scores of people came with State of Jefferson shirts, hats and flags. Others came with signs scrawled with messages, like “Respect Peaceful Assembly, Rule of Law, Freedom of Speech,” “This is Democracy! Resist,” “I Disagree,” “Resign President Bannon,” “Impeach Comrade Trump,” “We Like Leaders Who Aren’t Owned,” “Investigate Trump and Russia,” “Deplorable and Proud Of It!” and “Democracy not Dictatorship.”

Donna Hanford, 65, of Sonora, a former teacher at Summerville Elementary and school psychologist for Tuolumne County Office of Education, came with a sign that said “Answer the Question,” a message she hoped would resonate inside the venue when McClintock began taking queries from the audience.

“When a person asks a question, McClintock answers the question he wants to answer, instead of answering my question,” Hanford said. “Others have these signs, too. We hope to get answers.”

A man wearing a George W. Bush mask sat on a bench between two signs, one saying “Reagan Country” and the other “Paid Protesters Go Home.” He identified himself as Richard T. Todd, 74, of Sonora.

“I’m here protesting the protesters,” Todd said, as another man stepped forward to shake his hand and thank the 43rd president Todd was portraying for his service. “We’re out here for the U.S. of A., and the red, white and blue, and free minds and free markets.”

Patricia Elliott, 80, of Groveland, said she came to speak about a recent petition she said was signed by psychologists and psychiatrists who are concerned about Trump’s mental health. Elliott said she was told there were no more seats left inside the high school auditorium.

By 5:30 p.m., more than 250 people were outside the auditorium as the doors opened. More people kept arriving, and many formed a line to wait and see if they would get in.

At least one person was turned away at the high school auditorium entrance. He had with him a guitar neck detached from the instrument’s body. When asked to set the guitar neck aside before he entered, he said he would wait outside.

Lt. Turu Vanderweil of the Sonora Police Department was among about a dozen law enforcement and Cal Fire personnel who monitored the crowd outside and inside the venue. Vanderweil said the gathering was peaceful with no incidents, injuries or arrests.
The line to get in the auditorium slowed to a crawl, and about 250 people were still outside as the announced start time for the town hall meeting approached.

Just before 6 p.m., McClintock came outside, stood on the auditorium steps and cupped his hands to holler. He said he appreciated all the people who came to take part in the meeting. He said he’d been advised by a fire marshal there was no more room inside. He said he hoped to accommodate everyone, perhaps spending time with the people inside, then spend time with the people waiting outside, or schedule another town hall.

A woman yelled “We love you Tom McClintock!” and some people cheered. Other people near McClintock held their thumbs down while the congressman spoke, and a man called out, “We’re the silent majority!”

Wendy Archer, 71, of Columbia, was among those who stood outside. She said she’s a former school teacher and she held a sign that showed planet Earth and the words, “Fragile, Handle With Care!!!”

Across the street from the high school auditorium out front of Vic’s Towing and Auto Care, Trent Rudolf of Trent Rudolf Inc., Sonora, parked a yellow big rig with a log hauling trailer stacked on the back, adorned with two American flags and a sign that said, “We Support Tom McClintock District 4.”