

Silicon Valley debate over Twitter divides county leaders in the heart of it

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The thorny national debate about Twitter's future skidded into Silicon Valley's largest local government this month as Santa Clara County grappled over whether it should abandon the increasingly contentious social media platform or ride it out with new owner Elon Musk.

The county has over 40,000 followers on the platform and considers it a powerful tool to get information to its roughly 2 million residents. But District Attorney Jeff Rosen—who oversees the largest prosecutor's office in Northern California—was fuming, noting there had been an "explosion" in hate speech on the platform after Musk's October takeover.

The county decided to stay. The D.A. decided to go.

The debate raises serious questions about how [local governments](#) weigh the merits of a platform that has rebranded itself a bastion of [free speech](#) while constraining some of its previous policing of controversial content and returning users previously banned for supporting white supremacy, antisemitism and disinformation about elections and COVID-19.

"Every American has a moral obligation to fight against hate speech. There are many ways to do that, large and small. Here's one way: Quit Twitter. My office—the largest prosecutor's office in Northern California—is quitting Twitter," Rosen wrote in his Dec. 5 goodbye.

But in Santa Clara County, Twitter is an important part of people's daily lives, and it gets more engagement than other [social media sites](#), even Facebook, county spokesperson Maria Leticia Gomez said Wednesday.

"These are all the factors that went into our decision," Gomez said. "People look to the County as a reliable source of news when misinformation is disseminated. Without our presence, that reliable source goes away, and we leave a void in the space, potentially costing

lives."

When Rosen deactivated his Twitter account, he joined a cohort of Twitter's users who have criticized Musk's new direction for the San Francisco-based company, claiming that his push for more free speech will lead to more hateful rhetoric spreading on the platform. Some early studies have suggested that is indeed occurring. But Musk's supporters say the strategy will allow for a broader set of voices to express [political views](#) on a platform that has been accused of censorship.

On Tuesday, amid controversy for that and other moves, Musk announced he would step down as CEO once he finds a replacement.

After the District Attorney's move, Santa Clara County Executive Jeff Smith contemplated following suit, said Gomez, the county's spokesperson. The decision would have impacted not only the county's main account, but also its library, probation, office of emergency management and health department accounts, the last of which regularly broadcasts information about best practices related to the pandemic.

But after internal conversations—mainly around the platform's ability to quickly convey crucial information in the face of disasters like earthquakes and wildfires—a decision was made to remain, Gomez said. She was among those who advocated for its continued use. In a [text message](#), Smith said the county doesn't support "the way Elon Musk's running Twitter," but recognizes departments rely upon it for communication.

In response, several of the county's Twitter accounts posted a message over the last week: "The County is aware of the issues that have arisen on Twitter and shares concerns about the increasing hateful rhetoric. However, as a [government agency](#), we need to maintain our presence to share information with the public, especially if it can save lives during an

emergency."

As for the District Attorney's move, Gomez said the county "does not have a say in what elected officials choose to do."

In a statement, Rosen said he "carefully weighed the utility of Twitter against the fact that its guardrails have come off and it has become a platform for [hate speech](#)."

He added, "I cannot stand with victims of criminal hatred and—at the same time—support a for-profit app used too often to denigrate their faiths, their ethnicities, their genders, their sexuality. Technology should uplift humanity, not feed its most craven impulses."

In his departure from the platform, Rosen urged other district attorneys to leave Twitter too. Spokesperson Sean Webby said his office is not aware of any other D.A.'s exiting the site, but said one, whom he didn't identify, has inquired.

"As Americans, we have the freedom to loudly express our political opinions and strongly disagree with each other," Rosen wrote in a Dec. 5 statement. "However, when that speech crosses the line into hatred, racism and anti-Semitism, all of our precious and hard fought freedoms are undermined and our democracy is weakened."

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