

Delgado speaks at SUNY New Paltz as climate-change protestors stage die-in and get arrested



Antonio Delgado and KT Tobin at SUNY New Paltz last Thursday evening. (Photos by Lauren Thomas)

Representative Antonio Delgado was the featured guest at the Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz on October 10, and spent some time answering questions and some time interacting with environmental activists protesting his positions, an interaction that seemed to annoy most audience members and resulted in three trespassing arrests.

He spent most of the session explaining the challenges of finding solutions to environmental and other urgent problems that balance the needs of many stakeholders. He also deftly used the interruptions of the protestors to speak about the effectiveness of disruptive tactics.

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Disruption was central to the protest, which was staged by members of the New Paltz branch of Extinction Rebellion. Founder Margaret Human said that “disrupting [the] business as usual” that, in her estimation, has caused an extinction-level crisis, is necessary. When a number of protestors rose to interrupt the congressman to convey a sense of urgency about climate change that they do not feel he shares, Human was the first to be arrested by university police officers.



Activist Margaret Human was the first activist to be arrested

If disruption was the metric, this protest was a success. Participants first held a mock funeral followed by a die-in outside the student union building to highlight environmental issues they feel Delgado is not taking seriously. They then joined the crowd at the event, a conversation between the freshman representative and KT Tobin, deputy mayor of the village of New Paltz and associate director of the Benjamin Center. Tobin and Delgado both reacted with grace as Extinction Rebellion members, one after another, rose to point out how they feel the congressman has fallen short in addressing climate change. After several interruptions, audience members began to grumble audibly, and when they started raising their voices an aide to university president Donald Christian began trying to defuse the situation by calming them and trying to convince protestors to stop speaking.



Steve Greenfield, a former New Paltz School Board trustee and a congressional candidate, was soon to follow

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It was when protestors continued to shout over Delgado even after Tobin opted to pivot to the topic of climate change that Christian reached his limit. He took to the stage and, after his request for decorum was ignored, cited the school's code of conduct and right to "regulate the time, place and manner" of protest as he directed officers to remove Human. Steve Greenfield, who was one of the candidates Delgado beat to secure the Democratic nomination last June, and another man, Marvin Warren, were also arrested. It's not clear how many Extinction Rebellion members were in the audience of about 150, but roughly 40 had participated in the mock funeral outside.

Demands of the protestors included setting net-zero-energy goals for 2025, signing on to the "Green New Deal" legislation and adopting a greater sense of urgency around climate change. Delgado said he does not support the Green New Deal legislation and is seeking a middle path to address environmental and economic concerns. He'd rather tax the "front end" of energy production for carbon and "invest that back in communities" in some way. Asked about a local issue, the proposed Danskammer generating station in Newburgh, he explained that this plant

isn't as bad as building a new fossil-fuel plant, because it's more efficient than the one it's replacing. The congressman also would like to see programs to encourage carbon sequestration by farmers.

Other questions included were about his experience as the first black representative for the 19th congressional district in a time of increasing racial tensions, his thoughts on rape culture and pay inequality.

Delgado said that Americans have "failed to confront . . . the original sin of this country" by finding ways to collectively address the wounds of slavery and racism. Looking for a positive, he noted that more and more people are feeling marginalized at this time, and this might actually be a way to find common ground. He said he could bring "urgency" to these issues by virtue of his own experience.

Delgado said he would like to see the more support for abortion rights, including reopening the door to federal funding and outright banning state laws regulating the topic. He'd like to roll back the standard of evidence used in sexual harassment cases, as it's been tightened to "clear and convincing" in recent years.

Wealth inequity makes this country vulnerable to extreme thinking, Delgado believes, and he would address it by cutting corporate tax loopholes and expanding tax credits. He'd also like to see the president's infrastructure plan put into place because it would create jobs. Unions, too, need to be protected. Asked about universal basic income, he suggested that more could be done to prevent that being a necessity.



The congressman also spoke about how the president asked foreign leaders "in essence to meddle in our elections," and that he supported the checks and balances intended to guard against that.

Some protestors did stay past the arrests, either asking questions when the opportunity arose or interrupting at other points. No more were arrested, but some chose to leave after having said their piece. The three who were arrested were nearby when the event broke up, having been charged and processed. Neither Greenfield nor Warren had planned on being arrested going in, they said, but each reached a point at which they found the congressman's comments unacceptable. Greenfield took exception with Delgado claiming no donations from "fossil fuel," because he worked for Akin Gump which, Greenfield said, is the largest fossil-fuel lobbying firm. Warren felt the congressman mischaracterized the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by saying that we have until 2050 to resolve these issues, rather than 2025; Warren said that 2030 is the projected year of "irreversible calamity."

This is the problem with Democrats, grumbled one attendee during the height of the protest: they find more ways to disagree than agree with one another.

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