

Orange County Perspective

Happy 20th to a Valuable Panel

■ Human Relations Commission Has Done Well and Deserves Support

In the 20 years since the Orange County Human Relations Commission was established, the county has changed from a nearly all-white suburban enclave to a multicultural urban center. The commission has tried to confront and anticipate the immense problems of melding a diverse and growing population, with commendable success. As it looks toward its third decade, the commission should build on those accomplishments and look to see how it can expand its influence. For its part, the Board of Supervisors should protect the commission's budget in these fiscally distressing times to show its strong commitment to helping county residents live in harmony.

The commission is a child of the 1960s, when anti-war demonstrations sparked national unrest over many issues, including racial discrimination, employment and housing. In Orange County, the commission's first agenda was to deal with housing and

police-relations problems. In recent years, as immigration has changed the face of the county, it has developed many noteworthy programs to foster understanding between ethnic groups.

It took many years for the commission to become firmly established and for its motives to be accepted as constructive, especially by the law enforcement community. For that, much of the credit can go to Rusty Kennedy, who has ably served as executive director for 10 years. For the last several years, a police chief has sat as a commissioner, and one of the panel's most innovative projects has been the production of three police-training videos. These have not only sensitized local police departments to Latino and Vietnamese communities and disabled persons, but have been widely used throughout California. The beating of Rodney King by police in Los Angeles shows the importance of such efforts. If something like that should happen in

Orange County, the commission is in a position to work with the community to help alleviate racial tension. That's significant.

Now the commission is so much a part of the community that some say its wide acceptance is its greatest flaw. A former commissioner worried that it has become so Establishment that it is afraid to rock the boat. Other people fear the commission has gotten out of touch with the community, a charge that Kennedy denies. Of greater concern is that the commission occasionally pulls its punches when it comes to important health or housing issues that might nettle the Board of Supervisors.

Kennedy is the first to admit the Human Relations Commission cannot be all things to all people. But it has shown it can do many important things, not the least of which is to provide Orange County with a moral compass during changing times. Its 20th anniversary is an occasion to celebrate.