

State should consider closing loopholes and school safety plans, too

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Two area congressmen say the federal government should look at restricting the availability of assault weapons in the aftermath of the mass shooting in Newtown, Conn.

Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton, whose district includes Lodi and Galt, said in a statement that he will work to find bipartisan solution.

"We should revisit a ban on assault weapons," McNerney said. "I am a gun owner and enjoy sport shooting, but weapons that fall into the assault category, when in the wrong hands, can result in destruction."

On the other hand, McNerney said, Congress needs to preserve freedoms guaranteed to Americans in the Constitution. "It is our duty to provide a safe and secure nation, but to also defend the Constitution," McNerney said. "No change in a single law will accomplish both of those duties, but balance is needed."

Local police officials say that California has some of the strictest assault weapon restrictions in the nation, but some other states are allowed to sell assault weapons.

Dr. Ami Bera, a Democrat who was elected in November to the House seat that includes Herald, says that while the federal assault weapons ban that expired in 2004 should be reinstated, gun control isn't the only answer.

"I think the conversation should be a broader one," Bera said in an interview on Thursday.

One step, he said, is for each community to examine ways to keep residents safe. That includes security, weapons and mental health services.

"Each community is a little bit different," Bera said. "Maybe it's not about spending more money; it's looking at resources we have."

Bera is optimistic that Republicans can get together and reach some kind of agreement on how to make America safer.

"I think the mandate of this election is that people expect us to meet the needs of the country first," he said. "Let's talk about it not as parties, but as Americans. There's an urgency for action now. There are many responsible gun owners who should be part of that conversation."

Push for federal legislation

U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-San Francisco, said she plans to introduce a bill stopping the sale, transfer, importation and manufacturing of assault weapons and large-ammunition magazines, strips and drums that hold more than 10 rounds.

Meanwhile, at the state level, State Sens. Ted Lieu, D-Torrance, and Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, have co-sponsored a bill that would require schools to submit emergency response plans to the state.

"The state does not have accurate figures on how many public schools have established school-safety plans that outline emergency steps that must be taken immediately should something horrible occur," Lieu said in a news release.

The state bill, which hasn't been assigned a number yet, would require annual school financial

audits to include a summary of the school's compliance with having a new safety plan or updates to a current safety plan.

The bill would also require the state superintendent of public instruction to withhold the next principal apportionment to schools that are not in compliance, require the state Department of Education to publish the list of non-complying schools on its website, clarify that the provisions of school-safety plans apply to charter school petitions and require the school safety plan to specifically address active-shooter situations in addition to general crime scenarios.

California's gun regulations

Lodi Police Chief Mark Helms and Galt Police Lt. Jim Uptegrove said that California has some of the most stringent gun regulations in the nation.

According to the California Department of Justice, a gun buyer must present a valid, non-expired California Driver's License or identification card issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles to verify the customer's age.

Military identification accompanied by permanent duty station orders indicating a posting in California is also acceptable, according to the Department of Justice.

Purchasers of handguns are required to provide proof of California residency, such as a utility bill, residential lease, property deed or government-issued identification other than a driver's license or other DMV-issued identification.

A person must be at least 18 years old to purchase a rifle or shotgun. To buy a handgun, a person must be at least 21 years old and either possess a handgun safety certificate and complete a safety demonstration with the handgun being purchased, or qualify for a handgun safety certificate exemption.

Assault weapons are permitted in California provided that they were lawfully obtained no later than Dec. 31, 1999 and registered no later than Dec. 31, 2000, according to the California Attorney General's Office. State legislation essentially phases out assault weapons.

While gun ownership needs to be better regulated, the issue isn't limited to assault weapons, Helms said. Many tragic shootings are with handguns, he said. One example he cited is the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech University, which resulted in 32 deaths and 17 injuries.

Helms added that limiting the sale of firearms isn't the only solution, since many guns are stolen in residential burglaries.

"I strongly encourage people to invest in gun safes," he said.

Helms also has issues with lax regulations regarding weapon sales at gun shows. Uptegrove said that gun shows in other states, such as Nevada, can sell assault rifles. However, they can't sell them to residents of California, Uptegrove said.

"I've been to gun shows in Reno, and I know if you're a California resident, they will not sell certain guns. If a gun is not legal in California, they will not sell it to you in Nevada," Uptegrove said.

In other states, some gun shops won't sell to Californians because they're not familiar with California's laws, Uptegrove said.

However, Helms said that sellers at gun shows don't always pay attention to where a customer lives and whether the weapon is legal in that state.

