

Late Nights with the Commission

by Ric Stephens

“My great-grandfather used to say to his wife, my great-grandmother, who in turn told her daughter, my grandmother, who repeated it to her daughter, my mother, who used to remind her daughter, my own sister, that to talk well and eloquently was a very great art, but that an equally great one was to know the right moment to stop.”

– Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The length and pace of our hearings has a direct impact on the quality of public participation and decision-making. Both excessively long and short meetings do a disservice to the public and ourselves. Each commission varies greatly in their approach to time management, but I suggest any hearing longer than 3 hours or later than 10:00 pm is too long; and any individual case less than 3 minutes is too brief.

Mine Eyes Glaze Over

How many of you have sat through what seemed like interminable hearings? These “slow waltz” meetings affect public participation and the decision-making process in a variety of ways. Several years ago I attended a planning commission hearing that lasted so long, they took a fifteen minute break at 2:00 am in anticipation of going another two hours! What does this say about that process?

When I was a commissioner in another city, our hearings sometimes lasted more than ten hours! These were true “buns of steel” hearings. At a certain point in a long hearing, the time invested and the lateness of the hour begin to influence the process.

Here are some concerns about lengthy hearing:

- *Physical Considerations.* What affects do lengthy meetings have on the human body? There are measurable changes in the ability to concentrate, communicate, and deliberate after sever-

al hours seated at a hearing. Meetings that last several hours into the night restrict public participation to only the hardest of citizens. No elderly; no youth; no citizens who have family and work responsibilities that do not allow for “all-nighters.” Public participation should not be Darwinian.

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- *Emotional Considerations.* What affects do long meetings have on one’s temperament? Sometimes you can see distinct changes in attitude – what would have been a difficult meeting in an hour or two becomes Dante’s inferno after three hours.

- *Mental Considerations.* What affects do lengthy meetings have on mental acuity? Good decision-making under duress is severely compromised. Commissioners need to give their fullest attention to, and strongest consideration for each case and speaker.

- *Social Considerations.* How does one tell the public after hours of waiting to speak, they must come back another time only to possibly wait again?

Here are some suggestions to overcome these “hearings from hell”:

1. Set hearing time limits that may be extended only if agreed to by a majority of commissioners. Four hours is a good maximum.

2. Set speaker limits. For hearings with extremely large attendance, a limit of three minutes per speaker is a common guideline. The chair can also ask each speaker to be specific and not repetitive. Discourage bloviating, hijacking, obsessing, pontificating, and showboating.

3. Announce timing limits at the outset of the hearing and advise the public of the potential items to be continued as soon as that appears likely.

4. Provide a series of breaks at appropriate times. Commissioners should get up and move about to improve circulation. Ten minutes an hour is a good average

Don’t Blink

At the other end of the spectrum, have you ever been to a hearing that had the tempo and speed of a flamenco dance? The planning commission, public, and you should never wonder “What the heck just happened?” Moving through a hearing too quickly can adversely affect the process in other ways. It is especially destructive if for some reason members of the public missed their opportunity to voice their interests.

Here are some suggestions to avoid these “one-minute wonders”:

1. Clearly explain the decision-making process to the public.
2. If this situation is common maybe this type of case could be delegated to staff.
3. In addition to case numbers, refer to the project by a name that is well-known when calling for public testimony.
4. Provide printed agendas that clearly note which items are for public testimony and any cases that are to be continued.
5. Place quick items first on the agenda.

Timing isn’t just important – it’s everything. ♦

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