

When They Speak, Do You Listen?

by Elaine Cogan

I know you hear me, but are you listening?" Nearly shouting with exasperation, a frustrated citizen confronted her community's planning commission after a particularly heated public meeting on a controversial zone change.

The chair of the commission took exception to her question. "Of course we're listening. What do you think we've been doing the last four hours?" They may have thought they were listening, but the decision made by the planning commissioners soon after the meeting did nothing to convince a skeptical public. The commissioners voted unanimously to endorse their previous stand on the issue without any acknowledgment of the public comments they had ostensibly been "listening to" the previous four hours.

It is possible that no amount of public discussion would have changed the opinions — and the votes — of the planning commissioners, and it is entirely within their rights to reaffirm their original opinion. But once they opened up the discussion to the citizens, they should have showed by their questions and other responses that they considered the public's input seriously before they took another vote. "Why did we bother to come? They didn't even hear what we were saying," is a reasonable public evaluation of the proceedings that occurred. The seeds of an apathetic or militant citizenry are nurtured in such unfertile ground.

Whenever you are holding a meeting where the public is invited to give comments or testimony, it is important to be aware of any nonverbal clues, behavior or habits that may seem to indicate inattentiveness. You send a negative message to the public when you slouch in your chair or lean back so far your eyes appear to be closed. Likewise, if you take profuse notes with your nose close to your notebook. Though you may be able to write

and listen at one time, citizens would trust you more if you put your pencil aside and look up at them when they speak.

Another nonverbal behavior pattern that annoys citizens is seeing commissioners chat with each other or staff when the public is speaking. While you may be discussing the subject at hand, or have another legitimate purpose, you appear to be disinterested in the public comment or just rude. Still another habit to avoid is drumming your fingers or a pencil on the table as if you are impatient to get this all over with.

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In addition to nonverbal behavior, be aware of what you say and how you say it. When you answer or respond to a public comment, do you engage in a dialogue or in a monologue? In other words, do you have your set speech or point-of-view no matter what the citizens say, or do your responses show you were listening? One effective approach is to respond to each individual by name. If you are not personally acquainted, give your memory a boost by jotting down their names as they introduce themselves. Then, take care to couch your response or comments in terms the

citizen has raised. "Yes, Mrs. Jones, I can understand your concern that widening the street will take out those two old oak trees. Several of your neighbors have also raised that issue. Let's ask staff to respond. I know they've looked into the matter."

Staff may tell you and Mrs. Jones that after reviewing all the alternatives, they think the old oaks have to go. But, after you make it clear that citizen concern is important, they may also be willing to take another look. Whatever the final decision, you have shown by your comments that you were listening, and are not closed to considering new information.

During the commissioners' discussion after the public comment period is over, look for ways to give further evidence you were listening. "According to what we've heard today, several citizens seem to think that it is better to save the trees than widen the street. I would like to explore this further before we make a decision." Or, even if you think the citizens are off track, you should acknowledge what you heard, and then go on to state why you disagree.

Most citizens are reasonable, and understand you cannot always give them what they want. But they do want — and deserve — to have their points-of-view listened to and acknowledged. Nod affirmatively when citizens talk. Look them in the eye when you respond. Refer to them by name. Show respect. Do these seemingly small things, and you will have gone a long way toward becoming an effective and respected planning commissioner.

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