City Council Meetings Decorum

17th KZGN News Talking Points Editorial

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In last Tuesday’s editorial, I encouraged everyone to attend council and committee meetings and to get involved in the city government. The council needs to hear your thoughts on issues. If you’re a regular watcher of my editorials, in the past, I have criticized past city councils in the way they conduct meetings. This was usually due to the mayor’s decision on how the meeting should be run.

I want to say that there has been a significant improvement with the new council. It has to do with interaction between the council and the people during the meetings. In the past, the process allowed for very little dialog between the council and people. It was always council speaks, people speak, then the council speaks and makes a decision. Seldom was there discussion directly between the two parties. It was really bad during the generic public comment segment of the meeting. People would get up, make comments or ask questions, and rarely the council would answer the question then. The council would just listen and give the speaker a blank stare, with no verbal comment. The person would leave the podium wondering if anyone was even listening. This also fed the perception, that many people share, why go to meetings and speak? They never listen anyway.

Thomas Jefferson wrote on January 16, 1787, “Cherish, therefore, the spirit of our people, and keep alive their attention. Do not be too severe upon their errors, but reclaim them by enlightening them. If once they become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I shall become wolves.” That was written almost exactly 228 years ago. Our forefathers recognized how important it was to involve the people in government.

Once in a while, if a member of the public said something a council member didn’t agree with, the council member would wait until the end of the meeting and then make a comment about what was said hours before by someone during public comment. Often it was a council member criticizing what was said by a member of the public. Since it was the council comment segment, the person that made the original comment had no opportunity to address what was being said.

After the last elections, I met with Mayor Breeden and recommended that she change this one-sided communication process. We discussed the Brown Act and how it applied to this concern. The Brown Act does restrict what action the council can take with an item that was not on the agenda. But it does not restrict a dialog and discussion of a topic. They just cannot decide anything concerning an issue brought up that was not properly on the agenda. The mayor said she would look into what could be done to improve dialog between them and the people. Well, I’m here to say that at the last meeting this seemed to change. If this is the new way meetings will be run, I want to thank Mayor Breeden for this change.

At the last meeting, people got up during public comment, made comments or asked questions, and the council actually answered these people. A good example was their reaction to one of my suggestions. I brought up a topic of concern as far as handicap access to city hall and the police department. They all showed a real interest in what I was suggesting, and the mayor even said they agreed that something needs to be done and will be done soon. The topic was sent to the newly formed infrastructure committee to be taken up as soon as possible. I was elated. I wasn’t the only one they had dialog with. Another person questioned a possible overstep in authority that might have happened. Well, the mayor had the city manager give a detailed answer to the question, and no abuse of power was done at all.

There were others that had a good dialog during the meeting. Anyway, I hope it wasn’t an accidental change, but a real change that will continue. Like I’ve said in the past, when I think the mayor or council is doing something wrong, I’ll be commenting. In fairness, when I feel they are doing something right, I will also express those sentiments as well.

In conclusion, again, I hope this is the new way of running the council meetings. There is no more important thing in representative government where the people and the elected officials actually have a dialog where they are able to discuss the issues.

And that’s today editorial. Tell me what you think! Whether you agree with me or not, I’d like to read your comments. I encourage your email comments. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.

This has been a KZGN Talking Points Editorial seen right here on KZGN TV. Join me next Tuesday for my next editorial. I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think!