

## Hush and Rush Characterize Davenport's Modus Operandi

Written by

Wednesday, 07 February 2007 02:37

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Here's the question: If eliminating the Davenport City Council's Thursday-afternoon standing-committee meetings is a positive change for Davenport citizens, then why all the hush and rush?

Mayor Ed Winborn, in his politically clumsy manner, gave a hyper-confusing presentation at last Thursday's meeting of the Finance Committee (chaired by Alderman Charlie Brooke, naturally). Winborn proposed eliminating all five committee meetings and moving the respective business to one consolidated Committee of the Whole (COW) meeting on the first and third Wednesday evenings of each month. Regular council meetings would then be held the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month.

The rationale, and I use the word lightly in this case, is that it would: allow more people to contribute earlier in the process; increase time between introduction and final action on an issue; increase productivity by improved efficiency through consolidation; and, according to Alderman Jamie Howard, "urge new aldermen to run for office."

Talk about smoke. Under Winborn's proposal, the public's first notification of pending issues would appear on a "consent agenda" sometime between Monday and Tuesday preceding Wednesday's Committee of the Whole meeting. To move these consent-agenda issues to the discussion agenda requires the specific action of an alderman. Which means that unless one of the 10 council members sees fit to open an item for discussion before it is voted on, the public will have no opportunity whatsoever to speak on the issue until after the vote is

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taken.

Furthermore, even if the item is moved to the discussion agenda and citizens address said issue, the council has no mandate to answer, provide information or clarification, or respond in any way to the public during the proceedings and/or before a vote is taken. Issues could theoretically move to the next Wednesday's consent agenda for final action with no public voice ever being heard on the matter.

Last Monday's Committee of the Whole is a perfect example. Winborn gave the presentation during last Thursday's Finance Committee, on the heels of which Alderman Jamie Howard advanced it to Monday's Committee of the Whole agenda after virtually no discussion, save Alderman Keith Meyer's objections to the reduction of speaking time allocated to individual citizens.

During the Committee of the Whole meeting after citizens asked questions about this issue, the mayor pointed out that council members and staff were not obliged to respond to the public. Ironically, this policy is in keeping with the warning posted in each COW agenda relative to "public comment": *"At this time individuals may address the City Council on any matters of City Business. This is not an opportunity to discuss issues with the council members or get information. The opportunity exists at prior committee meetings or in individual conversations with elected officials."*

Since there is no language in the resolution to adequately account for this COW policy, the council will indemnify itself against citizens trying to seek remedy for being ignored.

At least during committee meetings, composed of five aldermen and considered to be the fact-finding stage of an issue, members and staff must necessarily engage with the public in a less-formal environment to get the particulars of an issue from all participating parties.

The curious aspect of Winborn's proposal is the manner by which issues would be initiated, and then automatically qualify for that week's consent agenda without the public's participation in any capacity.

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The resolution governing this matter boasts that it will "create opportunities for more Council and citizen participation earlier in the review and deliberation of issues."

This claim is completely disingenuous. "Create opportunities" implies new opportunities, and this is total spin. In truth, the opportunities for public participation are greatly degraded. Instead of three formal opportunities to speak to issues, there would now be only two. Affected parties will have three minutes to speak on an issue on two occasions: the Committee of the Whole meeting and the following regular council meeting, versus the additional standing-committee meeting, where there is a far greater focus on individual issues.

In addition, as far as "greater time" for public participation, this is an illusion. Currently, there are potentially six days between initiation and final action on an issue. Eliminating committee meetings altogether would only add one day, leaving seven days for the same.

So let's do the math. Currently we have six days and three opportunities to speak for five minutes on an issue. Proposed are seven days and two opportunities to speak for three minutes. Anyway you slice things, it all amounts to less participation, both in quantity of time and quality of involvement.

Call the aldermen and let them know you object to being further marginalized in the civic process, and that remedy will be sought if such important local legislation is, once again, implemented against the will of the people.

The timing of this proposal reflects the seriousness of the issues slated to come before the council in the near future, making it clear that public scrutiny and relevant participation are the last things it desires.