Written by Kathleen McCarthy
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I am constantly frustrated at the lack of due diligence when it comes to the Davenport city council's proceedings protocol. As I understand it, the council is given green sheets that are brief overviews, item by item, of the coming week's city business. The green sheets comprise the draft agenda for the following week's Committee of the Whole and Council Meetings. Because the agenda items are categorized by city department, the green sheets are authored and published by city staff (usually department heads), and are available on Tuesday, two days before the committee meetings (of which there are five—Public Safety, Public Works, Quality Assurance, Finance and Community Development), where the discussions, queries, investigation, and debate are to initiate relative to the agenda items within the respective committees.

Various aldermen make up the individual committees, so it is up to them, as the responsible committee, to discern and disseminate as much information on each agenda item as possible to present to the entire council for further debate once such items have passed through to the merged agenda for the following week's council meetings.

If in the process of dealing with an agenda item, there are questions or concerns that are unable to be resolved at the committee level, then the appropriate procedure is to table the item until it is clarified, or issues are satisfactorily resolved. The inappropriate action is to send it on to the Committee of the Whole. If issues are still pending relative to an agenda item, it should be the responsibility of the individual committees to come to a conclusion before it goes before the entire council for consideration. Not only is this common sense, it is good and efficient business.

My impression is that the individual council members are somewhat intimidated by the public process. Whether they truly understand the issues is unclear because they seldom ask probing, empirical questions, and there is so little substantive dialogue about many of the issues they face, especially those of a more complex nature, such as TIF, economic development as it relates to the bigger picture of sprawl and sustainable growth, urban revitalization, job development and retention, incremental investment by large and small businesses, and living wages, to name a few.

I believe it is fair to say that aldermen need a wider range of competencies to govern a city as large as Davenport, than perhaps was once required. Cities, especially within the unique construct of an even larger metropolitan area bordering two states, have challenges that are often multi-faceted in their scope of relevance and impact. The bigger picture is no longer confined within the boundaries of their own city or county, but reaches beyond those of the state, even the nation, to the entire globe. Job development can now surpass the singular strengths of traditional local markets and resources, opening the door to an array of possibilities within the new economy that creates competition on a vastly larger playing field.

As a result, local officials need a deeper understanding of economics, both macro and micro, of technology as it relates to economic progress, of amenities as essential for increased migration to our communities, and long-term vision for a future of sustainable growth that embraces quality of life. But most important of all is the ability for critical thinking. Aldermen need to identify and clarify the issues, large and small, even when they are not so apparent.

They need to insist on accountability, while establishing trust with staff that translates into public trust with city government. This demands that they have the courage to learn, to ask the questions even if it means vulnerability.

Who's Representing the Taxpayers, Really?

In present times, in nearly all factions of government, there are so few left who truly represent the taxpayers. At the federal and state levels, highly educated lobbyists are the true law and policy makers. They arm themselves with all the pertinent information, then spin it to favor their client's interests. They are hired guns whose purpose it is to influence our elected officials by informing them enough so that their vote will be defensible. Meanwhile, the taxpayers languish, unempowered, footing the bill.

It is no different at the local level—except that here, the taxpayers can make a difference because the elected body is accessible. If the media is doing their job by keeping the public truthfully informed, or if citizens take it upon themselves to educate and inform themselves, then network with their neighbors, communicate with their representatives, make their voices heard, and hold local government accountable, then change can, and will, occur.

There were many items that appeared for the first time on the various committee agendas on Thursday, December 14, that received little, if any, discussion or attention during any of the meetings from committee to council the following Wednesday, December 20. Some items were actually listed on the discussion agenda but received no discussion, while others were on the consent agenda and deserved discussion of some kind but none was forthcoming. Examples of such discussion and consent items include an extension of VandeWalle & Associates contract for development of the Vision Iowa Program. The VIP is of critical importance and not one question was asked about the progress of the application, what has been done so far, what are its components, to name a few of the more than dozen questions that should have been asked but weren't. Two additional items: a resolution spending $168,000 for a schematic design of Phase I for the parking ramp, and approval of Expenditure Responsibility Grant Agreements (ERGA) with the Bechtel Trust, didn't raise any questions, such as who is doing the schematic design, what is the justification for the cost, were other bids entertained, when will it be completed, etc.? There was absolutely nothing discussed about the ERGA, either. Nor were there explanations to the public regarding the approval of a three-year management service contract with First Transit, Inc.; nothing about the cost or framework of the new contract, why it is a better deal than the previous one, what is different, and so on. All these questions should be asked and answered long before it ever comes before the council for consideration. Discussion need not be combative or defensive, either. By bringing up the context of the issue, the council can give credit where it is due, and engage each other, staff and the public to assist where needed.

Raise the Bar For Our Elected Officials

So how do we hold these aldermen to a higher and more accountable standard? The amount of time, energy and focus, let alone resources, on councilmen's parts is tremendous for a city of this size. Yet in Davenport the positions of aldermen and mayor are considered part-time. This

is ludicrous. To serve in these capacities, those elected (and their families) must devote their lives to it. It is way beyond part-time, certainly even beyond what we consider full-time for most employment. Council positions penetrate their private lives, their homes, their places of work, their recreational activities, even their vacation time. The mayor and aldermen are 24-hour jobs come rain or shine, yet the last time those positions were evaluated for a raise was in 1985. Since then, not a penny has been added for inflation, cost of living increases above inflation, or competitive or living wage adjustments. Aldermen currently make $11,500 and the mayor $36,000. This is woefully insufficient when you consider the responsibility involved (managing a $100 million plus budget), the enormous time, the amount and range of information to be absorbed, all within the confines of hours outside of their regular jobs (most of them work other full-time jobs because they must survive). With this in mind, it is unreasonable to expect the aldermen to be on top of every item of city business in such a limited amount of time. It is humanly impossible to deal with the magnitude of information in a fully disclosed, fully informed manner under such conditions. Yet that is what they must do to the best of their ability.

Which brings us to the issue of ability. We get what we pay for. Most of the qualified people for these positions will not be had for such a paltry amount of money. The fact that we have anyone willing to serve is amazing, and for that alone, those who do serve should be commended. But if we increased the pay, we could then attract more qualified candidates who could truly raise the bar for Davenport because we will make it worth their time and expertise. Much of the learning curve could be absorbed in shorter periods of time because of such expertise. It is simply unreasonable to expect excellence under the present deprived conditions of such a meager return on the council's investment of time and resources.

To that end, it is imperative that we secure a higher wage for our elected officials. If we base such a raise strictly on an annual inflation of 3% since 1985, the new pay for aldermen would be between $18,000-$20,000, and for the mayor between $58,000-$60,000. For a full-time council, it should be even higher, but if left to part-time parameters, at least we give committed people some incentive to pay close attention and do the due diligence. After fifteen years, it is high time to do the right thing by those not just willing, but able to effectively serve.