

March 18, 2014

Topic: Open and Transparent Government

I'd like to bring up an issue tonight that may not initially appear to be important, but is an issue of concern to many residents. It's an issue that effects every resident, and, in a democracy, is an issue that needs to be brought out into the open and discussed.

I'm talking about the growing lack of openness and transparency associated with some of the Town Board's procedures.

Two procedures that have become increasing common are especially troubling:

- voting on resolutions at work session meetings instead of regular meetings, and
- voting for resolutions on the spur of the moment

Both procedures keep voters in the dark when it comes to knowing what our elected officials are doing and how they're spending our tax dollars.

Let me give you some examples.

At your February 25 work session, you voted on 30 resolutions. Yes, 30, 25 of which involved the expenditure of town funds. None of the resolutions appeared to be so time sensitive that they had to be passed that night and couldn't have waited seven days until the next regular board meeting.

Let me be clear. I'm not questioning the legality of voting for resolutions at work sessions. What you're doing is legal. State law makes no distinction between work sessions and regular meetings. The issue is that Yorktown has very different procedures for these two types of meetings.

Regular meetings are televised, work sessions aren't.

When board meetings are televised, voters can watch the meeting and follow what you're discussing and voting on. And believe me, these meetings are being watched.

But, if residents want to follow what's happening at a work session, they have to attend the meeting — and have good hearing — as the board has chosen not to use the room's PA system and it's often difficult to hear what you're saying. And sometimes, because voting on the resolutions is often done in such a hurry, it's even difficult to know which resolutions have been voted on.

At regular meetings, voters have access to the full text of the resolutions before the meeting begins. This enables us to know, in advance, what resolutions you'll be voting on, and equally important, we have an opportunity at courtesy of the floor to ask questions or comment on the resolutions BEFORE you vote.

This doesn't happen at work sessions when we're given only a brief description of the resolution and we don't have an opportunity to ask for more information, like how much money is involved in a bid or contract.

Again, to be clear about the law: state law doesn't require the Town Board to provide an opportunity for the public to speak at its meetings — but — state law does require the town to make the text of the resolutions available prior to the meeting.

The second troublesome board practice concerns your growing tendency to vote on spur of the moment resolutions, that is, resolutions that haven't been thought through and written down in advance so that you know exactly what you're voting for.

For example, at the very end of the televised February 4 meeting, a board member verbally suggested some language for a resolution and the resolution was approved. But, if you watch the video of the meeting and compare the verbal resolution with the official written version, you'll see that the two are very different — and in substantive ways.

As residents and taxpayers, we accept the fact that you control how you run your meetings. All we're asking is that you run those meetings according to the law, and in ways that let in the sunshine so that we're not kept in the dark about what you're doing— and how you're spending our money.

And of course, there's one additional procedural change that would immediately add sunshine to your meetings — and that's to televise your work sessions.

Thank you.