

Opinion

EDITORIAL

The public has a right to know

Yorktown Town Supervisor Michael Grace is leading the town board with what seems to be a cavalier attitude towards rules and regulations.

Case in point: the Open Meetings Law. According to New York state law, town board meetings must be conducted in public, and the public must be given notice of meetings. The law states, “It is essential to the maintenance of a democratic society that the public business be performed in an open and public manner and that the citizens of this state be fully aware of and able to observe the performance of public officials and attend and listen to the deliberations and decisions that go into the making of public policy. The people must be able to remain informed if they are to retain control over those who are their public servants. It is the only climate under which the commonwealth will prosper and enable the governmental process to operate for the benefit of those who created it.”

We have two recent examples of the town board ignoring these rules. The first is the emergency meeting called by the town board in order to address a roof collapse at Holland Sporting Club.

Neighbors of the club have been raising red flags about this site for years, so it should come as no surprise that there were problems. Be that as it may, demolition plans have been under way to tear down the unsafe structures on the site, located in Mohegan Lake.

When a roof collapsed, spreading asbestos particles into the atmosphere on the property, the town board needed to act quickly. They called a meeting to hire Excel Insulation to address the situation.

There is no good reason why this meeting was not posted on the website and notification was not e-mailed to the numerous Yorktown media outlets, both online and print publications. Instead, the town board opted not to publicize the meeting.

Where did the town board hold their emergency meeting? At the ribbon-cutting for the new Yorktown Senior Center at the Yorktown Community Cultural Center. We were there; other news outlets were there. They held the meeting while eating catered Italian food donated from local restaurants. But even though we even snapped a photo of the members huddling together, they didn’t inform anyone they were holding an emergency meeting. We thought they were just having a chat — because why wouldn’t they inform the public and the press about a meeting that concerns public health?

We don’t believe they were trying to get away with something at this meeting. We don’t object to calling an emergency meeting and holding it in the most convenient location and time possible. What we object to is that the town didn’t bother informing the public.

Another complaint we’ve heard from resi-

dents concerns the last-minute changes to the Town Board agenda. It is not unusual for items to be added to the agenda at the last minute. One example is the Landmark Preservation Board. A discussion regarding appointments to the board was added to the agenda of the April 17 meeting just a few hours before the meeting began. This has traditionally been a hot-button issue in Town and the public should have been given ample notice.

Also, there are very specific reasons to vote to hold a meeting in executive session, and discussing taking a department or office of the town government in a new direction is not one of them. There is a temptation to discuss business in private before airing it in public, but this is impermissible by state law. As a matter of fact, three or more town board members gathered together discussing a topic constitutes a public meeting — and the public must be notified and have access to it. That includes three board members talking town business over a cup of coffee, or a beer.

Public business should be conducted in public. That being said, almost all town business — except for extremely sensitive issues, which do not include issues that may embarrass a town board member — is public business. Taxpayers have a right to know what is going on in their towns. That’s not just some silly ideal; it’s the law.