

Tucson Residents for Responsive Government (TRRG)

A Report on Public Participation at Mayor and Council Meetings

April 2016

Executive Summary

In keeping with its mission of improving the interaction between Tucson citizens and their government, TRRG initiated a short study of the process that Mayor and Council (M&C) uses during their regular meetings for “Call to the Audience” and Public Hearings. This is a report of the findings with some recommendations.

One finding is that despite the fact that such resident participation is viewed by elected officials as a very important symbol of our democratic form of government, the time available for Tucsonans to address Mayor and Council during “Call to the Audience” has been reduced to one quarter of what it was 13 years ago.

In preparing this report, we examined written procedures, interviewed current and past members of City Council, including Mayors, and reviewed how other Arizona cities treat public participation in their meetings. A set of recommendations are put forward to improve Tucson’s open meetings so that they are seen as, and are in fact, more open, fair and responsive to the concerns of the public. We believe this will make for better decisions benefitting all of Tucson.

The principles upon which we based our recommendations include the following:

- Everyone who wants to should be able to address elected officials at designated times during public meetings.
- Members of the public who have concerns about an upcoming decision should be able to express those concerns in a public setting to the decision making body *before* that decision is made.
- All those who wish to attend a public meeting should be able to do so. Thus, the City should provide the space necessary for that to happen, and to ensure that those wishing to speak have an opportunity to do so.
- When a Public Hearing about an issue is called for, all persons who are affected by the issue should have the opportunity to speak to their government about it, and in a timely fashion, i.e., *before* the decision is made.

Our recommendations are based on these principles, and can be found in the section labelled *Recommendations*. We urge you to read the report completely, as that will give you the rationale, context and precedents for what we are recommending. We do understand that, although we would wish that every resident who addresses you would speak concisely, logically and clearly, this is not always the case. We sympathize, but we hope that you will consider this as the small price to pay for a democratic form of government.

A summary of the recommendations is on the following page of this Executive Summary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the rationale and justification for these recommendations, the alternatives from which they were chosen, and the principles involved, please refer to the Task Force Report.

Recommendation 1: Have a very short Call to the Audience (CTA) to bring forward non-agenda concerns only, and allow citizens to speak directly to agenda items at the time they are brought up to be voted on.

Recommendation 2:

- a) The speaker selection should be random or in the order submitted.
- b) The method that is actually used for speaker selection needs to be made public in some detail.

Recommendation 3: Expand the time for Public Hearings so everyone gets to speak, with:

- a) a 3 minute time limit, when a large number wish to participate;
- b) request that speakers not repeat what was previously said, instead, simply stating agreement with previous speakers, and
- c) reduce the time between speakers by announcing the next speaker upcoming.
- d) a description of the method actually used for selection of speakers that is easily available to the public. That selection method should either be randomized or in the order submitted; any personal choice is very likely to be perceived as potentially biasing the commentary. Alternating between pro and con, with a time limit overall, leaves the impression that there are as many in favor as there are against the issue, which may distort the actual situation.

Recommendation 4: We believe it to be good practice, as well as a way to honor the time and effort citizens take to participate, that City Council members and the Mayor should briefly explain their vote on Public Hearing issues.

Recommendation 5: All persons who wish to attend a public meeting of M&C must be accommodated, and if there is a Public Hearing, all those wishing to speak to the issue of the Hearing should have access to be able to do so.

Recommendation 6: A procedure needs to be instituted to assure the public's access to speaker request cards when an overflow crowd is encountered. Fair access to the podium should not be limited because the room capacity has been reached.

Recommendation 7: TRRG recommends that M&C articulate, in public meetings announcements or rules, what they intend to be the difference between a Regular Meeting and a Study Session. Specifically, we suggest the following, adapted from the Boulder, Colorado city website, but also mirrored by several cities in Arizona:

What's the difference between a Regular Meeting and a Study Session?

Study Sessions give City Council the chance to work on a particular issue or set of issues. While Council may give direction to city staff during a Study Session, no votes are cast during these meetings. Both Regular Meetings and Study Sessions are open to the public, but only Regular Meetings have open public comment through Calls to the Audience and Public Hearings.