

## When people speak, ideally they should say something

I strongly support members of the public having an opportunity to make comments at meetings of township boards and other public bodies. However, when people choose to speak, ideally they should have something substantive to say.

Following my retirement this past November, I for the most part stopped attending public meetings. Having attended meetings in four different counties for 38 years prior to retiring, my plan was to take a break from them for six months and then decide if and what meetings I might resume attending.

Despite that plan, I've attended a couple of Tuscarora Township Board meetings and watched recordings of the board meetings I haven't attended. Pat and Jane McGinnis record the meetings and post them on YouTube under the title **Indian River Flows**. It's a valuable community service that I appreciate.

People have heard about Tuscarora Township board resignations and citizens making comments and have asked me what's going on. My response is, not enough to merit nearly as much commotion as some people would like you to believe.

As of last November, a new clerk, Jay Reidsma, won the election, beating Dawn Webb in the primary and write-in Laura Decker in the general. Webb, who had been appointed clerk when the previous clerk resigned, often voted with Supervisor Mike Ridley and Treasurer Bobbi Balazovic on contentious issues, giving them a 3-2 majority. Reidsma typically votes with Trustees Bob Kramer and Janet Vance, which has changed the majority. Consequently, some things are being done differently. That's to be expected. Some people don't like the changes. That's also to be expected.

At the April 4 meeting, during the public comments portion of the meeting, several citizens from the audience stepped up to the podium. I suspect there will be more public comments at the May 2 township board meeting. While I adamantly support and defend the right of citizens to make comments and voice concerns or complaints and pose questions during a prescribed portion of the meeting and within a defined time limit, I was disappointed with the content of some of the comments, in that I found them to be inaccurate, misguided or shallow.

Specifically:

■ A comment was made that the board illegally went into closed session at their March meeting to discuss a legal opinion from the township lawyer. My position, and I have a fair amount of familiarity with the Open Meetings Act (OMA), is that the board legally went into closed session, in that one of the OMA exemptions allowing closed meetings is for public bodies to review a legal

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opinion from their lawyer. Granted, it's not an exemption that should be used often, and on occasion I've taken boards to task when I felt they used it inappropriately. But it is in the OMA law. Where the board erred, and they've admitted it, is that when they came back into open session they should have explained the legal rationale that led to their decision. The board's action, which involved correcting a previous procedural error made by the Parks and Recreation Commission in appointing a member to fill a vacancy created by a resignation, was correct. The township board, not the Parks and Recreation Commission, should have signed off on the replacement in the first place, but that hadn't happened, so when the mistake was discovered, the board went back and fixed it. That's not something that should cause a big fuss.

In reality, what's causing the fuss with the Parks and Recreation Commission is that the board is updating the township budget process. The township's fiscal year runs from July 1 to June 30. In the past, the township board met once in a mid-June budget hearing and went through a proposed budget, then two weeks later, normally just a few days prior to beginning the new fiscal year, voted on the budget. That left little time for any public review of the proposed budget and minimal time for the board to change the proposed budget. The new majority on the board wants to start the budget process earlier and have more clarity on the goals that Parks and Recreation and other branches of township government are trying to accomplish with their budget requests. As a taxpayer and an advocate of efficient and cost-effective government, I wouldn't characterize that change as a bad thing.

■ Comments were made complaining about the minutes of the March meeting and that board members weren't paying close enough attention to people speaking during public comments. People are welcome to make those kinds of complaints, but I don't think they should be given much weight. As long as minutes accurately reflect actions taken by the board, they pass minimum requirements. Minutes related to public comments are not required to but ideally should reflect the subjects speakers raised. The minutes are by no means required to be word-for-word. That's impractical. The complaint that board members don't pay close enough attention when people are speaking is one I've seen come up at various meetings of various boards over the years. I don't find it compelling. I think it's one of those things people throw out when they're upset, but can't come up with

anything particularly significant to complain about. During public comments, as long as board members don't get up and leave or interrupt or make rude comments, I think they're fine. They're not obligated to hang on every word and offer affirmation.

■ It should be noted that comments and questions that came from three of the citizens at the April 4 meeting were fine and were handled well by the board. One citizen said the trim on the township building needs to be repaired. Ridley said that project is in the works. Another person asked about the status of an audit issue, blight grant and Freedom of Information request. A different person also asked about a Freedom of Information request. Reidsma explained the status of the audit issue and said there will be more information at the next board meeting. Vance provided an update on the blight grant. Ridley said he would respond to FOIA requests. Those are healthy interactions. Issues and questions raised. Issues and questions addressed. That's how it's supposed to work

■ The most problematic and, in my opinion, unproductive comments were vague innuendo, in some cases proffered as though they were profound insight, but in reality offering none; or little catch phrases and allegations that cited no examples or reasoning and consequently boil down to not much more than name calling.

This kind of thing happens in national issues all too frequently. People call those who disagree with them extremists, fascist, or racist. When slinging these names around, the people slinging them seldom if ever give an example of the specific actions or opinions expressed that would logically cause someone to conclude the objects of their derision are extremists, fascist or racist. Without such examples or logic being presented, there's really no way to analyze and debate whether there's so much as a shred of validity to the allegations. We've reached a point where someone saying someone else is an extremist, fascist, or racist has no more intellectual depth or credibility than one kid on the playground saying another kid has “cooties.”

Bad enough that we see that on a national level, now we're seeing similar tactics on a local level. Among the comments made during public comments and resignation speeches at the April 4 meeting and where they fall short were:

■ *Board members need to do their jobs with dignity, honesty and ethics.* - No profound and thought-provoking insights there. Merely an insinuation, without benefit of any

examples of that not being the case. Consequently, there's really nothing of substance being said.

■ *Talk of abuse of positions, personal interests and personal agendas, and a toxic culture.*

- At least rather than thinly veiled insinuations those are accusations. Still no specific examples or logic cited that would support the merit of the accusations.

The toxic culture or toxic environment came up on more than one occasion. That deserves special attention because in this situation, it may well be the most absurd thing being said and the closest to paralleling the national extremist, fascist, racist jabbering. If someone is going to throw the term “toxic environment” around, then please offer a definition of what constitutes a toxic environment and how one has been created in this situation. Once specific issues and actions are cited, then those things can be discussed and debated in an adult manner, and people can decide for themselves whether or not a toxic environment exists. Until that happens, all you have is one group making an effort to glean support for their position by claiming there's a toxic environment, and another group feeling the only toxic environment that exists is some people who are used to doing what they want and getting their own way now finding they aren't able to do what they want and get their own way, getting angry about it and behaving in ways that aren't worthy of sympathy.

Following public comments, Balazovic and Ridley announced their intention to resign. There's nothing wrong with that. If being in a minority on the board and having things done differently doesn't work for them, then stepping aside and letting the board move on without them is an option. Vance and Kramer spent years in the minority, but eventually ended up in the majority, where they can make changes. Also an option. Time will tell whether the changes being made are beneficial or detrimental.

In his resignation comments, Ridley cited a quote, “*Change happens one funeral at a time.*” He attributed it to me. While I like quotes and have heard that one somewhere, it's not a quote I ever recall using. I'm not at all bothered by the quote being attributed to me, but out of curiosity did some research to see who it's normally attributed to. It's most often attributed to German physicist Max Planck who is quoted as having said, “*...science advances one funeral at a time.*”

My comment summarizing the present township fuss is, “The status quo is not an accident. Things are the way they are because it works for someone. If you're not sure who that someone is, start changing things. They'll yell.”