



August 29, 2017

Anoka County Commissioner Ronda Sivarajah
Anoka County Commissioner Jim Kordiak
Anoka County Commissioner Robyn West
Anoka County Commissioner Matt Look
Anoka County Commissioner Julie Braastad
Anoka County Commissioner Scott Schulte
Anoka County Commissioner Mike Gamache
Anoka County Administrator Jerry Soma

Two years ago, the League of Women Voters ABC (Anoka, Blaine and Coon Rapids Area) selected Anoka County Government as a focus of study because we felt it was difficult for citizens to understand where and how decisions are made in Anoka County, how citizens could participate and how information was shared with the public.

Our concerns focused on decision-making procedures and not policy determinations. For the most part, we want to thank you for being welcoming to our Observer Corp members at committee and board meetings and for being responsive to questions and concerns expressed.

We understand that the committee system used by Anoka County for years makes conducting business more efficient. However in many cases, the system makes it more difficult for the public to follow the discussions and understand how decisions are made.

First, thank you for acting upon concerns that we identified as they occurred. These include:

- Availability of complete board packet: A copy of the board agenda was available in the back of the meeting room, but not the complete attachments and resolutions. A complete board packet is now available for use by attendees.
- Added agenda items: Items were often added to agendas after the agendas had been posted to the website. We do want to see business conducted in a timely manner, but the added agenda items did not seem to rise to the level of being unanticipated and/or needing urgent attention. The reduction in these occurrences of added items is noted and allows observers to be better prepared for business to be conducted.
- Time for public comment: We are concerned that public comment time does not exist at board meetings as is common practice at most of the metro area county commission's board meetings. We appreciate the compromise that public comment time is now provided on the agenda at committee meetings.
- Spoken information at committee meetings: The seating arrangement at the table in the committee room was such that the public sat at the backs of commissioners and thus were unable to hear their comments. The willingness of commissioners to speak up so that visitors can hear and to seat themselves on one side of the table provides a welcome access to what is being said.

- Public hearing notifications: There are opportunities for briefly describing the purpose of a public hearing so that the public can better assess its importance. For instance, the first public notice on restoring a tax after the dissolution of the Counties Transit Improvement Board may have met the legal requirement but not sufficient for people to understand. Our concern was received and acknowledged. The second time it was considered, the notice was a bit longer and was more understandable and created less concern on the part of the public.

With that said, we are left with the unresolved area of concern that initiated this study + Where or how the discussions are held that result in the board members' decisions?

Observer Corps members were advised that the Anoka County Board uses a committee system and that by observing committee meetings we would hear decision-making discussions. The committee meetings are not televised and are held during the day when most of the public can not attend, so the public would never know how those decisions are made. Observer Corps members attended committee meetings for over a year and infrequently viewed interactive conversations.

We found that, except for the Parks & Community Services Committee and the Transportation Committee where there are real discussions of issues, it seems that decisions are predetermined. A commissioner pointed out to us that if we were to attend every meeting then we would have a better understanding. But that is not the public's role, and it should be the responsibility of the elected officials to make it as clear to the public as possible. One commissioner, at a candidates' forum, commented that he wasn't versed on an item because he wasn't a member of that pertinent committee and relies on the conclusions of the committee members. It belies the ability of the public to understand if even members of the board do not.

The practice of allowing items from the committees to be referred to the full board without a quorum in attendance at the committee meeting seems to contradict the perception that the items are presented to the full board after full committee discussion. We suggest that maybe an alternate could be appointed to each committee to insure there is full discussion when a member is unable to attend. We are not suggesting that all members be members of all committees, which would defeat the purpose of the committee system, but we do want to make it possible to have quorums when committees take action.

We noted that the county board declares that their actions are transparent because the county board meetings are televised. But very little can be learned from observing these board meetings. Resolutions are stated, moved, and voted upon by resolution number and rarely are discussions held that would establish a commissioner's voting decision.

If the explanation is that such decision-making discussions are held at the committee level, then there should be televised access to those meetings. If not televised, then there should be, at a minimum, a summary presentation at the board meeting of the committee discussion that took place. This might make Board meetings longer, but it would add greatly to public transparency, and likely would be helpful to the board members as well.

When items are added to the agenda after it has been published on the website, the televised coverage of those items is meaningless to the public. If one must be present to obtain a current agenda and resolutions, then televised coverage of a meeting that only states a resolution number and takes a vote is an overstated impression of transparency.

One such example was the televised coverage of the November 22 board meeting. Under the Management Committee Report, it was stated there would be "several additional items" on the agenda. One of the additions was "Resolution 2016 M7," "pertaining to compensation for Anoka County employees and county commissioners...." The resolution wasn't on the published agenda for the preceding Management Committee meeting nor on the agenda for the full board, the resolution wasn't made available on the website, and was referenced in the meeting by a resolution number that still doesn't exist on the website

Watching the televised coverage for this item offered no transparency. Television viewers had no access to the resolution, only the title of the resolution was read in the meeting with no summary of the content, and no supporting information was offered as to how the salary increases were arrived at. None of the commissioners had any questions or comments. A member of our Observer Corps attended the preceding Management Committee meeting and has documentation that there was no discussion of that agenda item at the committee meeting. This exemplifies our concern as to how and where such decisions are made and why it was urgent to place this on the agenda without advance notice to the public.

It is disconcerting that we had members at the meeting and watching via televised coverage, and they did not know that the action taken included a raise in salaries. Again, we are not arguing the policy but rather the procedure that was not transparent.

Additionally, we acknowledge that it is not convenient to the commissioners and staff, but given that many citizens are unable to attend meetings during the day we suggest that some important meetings be held in the evening when more of the working citizens can attend.

We appreciate the above noted modifications made to date, but we hope to be able to observe more open discussions and decision making in our quest to understand where and how discussions are held that result in board members' decisions. LWV ABC would like to meet and discuss where and how the Anoka County Board of Commissioners makes decisions; please let us now of a time that works for members of the board. Thank you for your attention, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

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