

**CAMBRIDGE CIVIC ASSOCIATION**

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Tuesday, November 15, 1994

RULES COMMITTEE
Cambridge City Council
City Hall
Cambridge, MA 02139

Attn: Vice-mayor Sheila Russell, Chair of Committee
Re: New Rules for Public Participation at City Council Meetings

Dear Vice-mayor Russell:

We've been observing the efforts of the City Council and its Rules Committee to modify the procedures of public participation at Council meetings. The current permanent rules for public participation — which sometimes but not always permit any citizen to speak for up to ten minutes on any matter before the Council — offer some unusually generous opportunities for the public to address the meeting. In general, we support these opportunities. But we also share your concerns that the current rules: (1) favor that exceptional minority of people who can manage to wait at Council for hours and hours, far into the night; (2) sometimes impede Council business; and (3) are occasionally administered arbitrarily.

Consequently, we commend your experiments with temporary rules allowing citizens to address the Council on any agenda item at the beginning of each meeting. We think this approach can help provide better opportunities for a greater diversity of people to address the Council, and can improve public dialogue generally. We also note that this new approach gives Councilors a chance to hear and think more before they commit in public to a position.

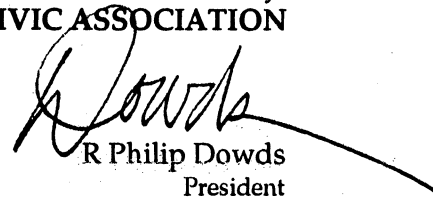
Even so, we note that some people (including members of our Board) still believe that the best time for citizens to address the Council is at the moment the matter reaches the floor. Furthermore, some people (especially parents) may have difficulty getting to Council much before 7:00pm or so, by which time the public speaking period may be complete. Accordingly, we're inclined to think that the best approach for public participation might be a combination of the current and the experimental rules: Let people address the Council either at the beginning of the meeting, or as soon as the matter comes as business later.

In order to ensure that everyone (citizens and Councilors alike) gets to communicate his/her views, and to help discourage persons or groups from dominating the proceedings, you may want to consider some further limitations on public participation, even as you create more opportunities. For instance, you might want to:

- Limit individuals to one speaking opportunity per meeting. Thus an individual could speak to any combination of matters at the front of the meeting, or speak to a specific matter later on, but not both. Or as a variation...
- Limit individuals to a total of "x" minutes per meeting. Thus if $x = 10$, and somebody speaks for 6 minutes at the front of the meeting, then he/she has 4 minutes left to speak on particular matters later. Or...
- Reconsider the time allotment for speaking. Perhaps better allotments are a maximum of 5 minutes at the beginning, and/or 3 minutes on a particular matter later. (Our own experience suggests that most people speak better when encouraged to speak succinctly.) And finally...
- Adhere more rigorously to Robert's Rules of Orders as applied to the Councilors themselves. Robert's Rules require or recommend that (1) no Councilor speaks more than twice to the same matter; (2) speeches be limited to a maximum of 10 minutes; and (3) no Councilor speaks a second time if another who wants the floor has yet to speak for a first time.

Please note that we do not seek to constrain dialogue or participation. Instead, all our suggestions are intended to help accomplish what you've already set out to do: Serve the public interest by increasing public participation without unduly delaying the proceedings. We trust that the Rules Committee and Council will eventually arrive at an optimum combination of new practices, and we encourage you to continue your efforts. Please feel free to give us a call if you have questions or requests of your own.

Sincerely,
THE CAMBRIDGE CIVIC ASSOCIATION


R Philip Dowds
President

Enclosures:

None

cc:

City Council, via the City Clerk

S-550

Consent Communicaiton #6

A comm. was received from the Cambridge Civic Associastion regarding new rules for public participation in City Council Meetings.

In City Council November 21, 1994