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OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

January 31, 2001

To the City Council:

The City Council and its Rules committee (in the current and previous terms) have spent considerable effort improving the operation of the council. There is always room for improvement particularly in the area of how the public interacts with the council. This past council meeting brought to mind several procedural changes which if practiced would likely to speed up overall council process and more importantly help draw the public, which is one of your goals.

Present the Substance of Order: For Orders, the public would best be served by a brief summary of the substance of an order by its author prior to any discussion. Consider how the public would view this past week's discussion on Order #3 (change to the method for electing the mayor). For TV viewers it would be pretty bizarre.

For this topic, the first thing that happened at this meeting was that there was public comment about the order. It would be difficult for viewers of this meeting to understand what was being discussed by listening to the commentary without having seen the order. You should know that in spite of a quite complete agenda on the city web site, neither the text of the order nor the letter to the editor were present. People who didn't have the packet and who hadn't read the Chronicle would be completely in the dark during most of public comment and during some of the council debate.

Later when the topic came to the floor, the councilor who had removed the order was recognized first. As a result the discussion opened with a criticism of the order and its authors, an explanation of what the order wasn't about, and the possibility of having a Charter Commission. A heated discussion followed; it was quite a while before what was actually proposed in the order was described. Thus the order of the discussion obscured its substance.

Refer Orders to Committee First: I think the Council should consider a Rules change for Policy Orders by referring them to committee before discussing them on the floor and hearing public comment. That would be more in line with the way other legislative bodies work and should result in more focused work, less grandstanding and more meaningful public comment. Since these orders get sent to committee before action, no delay in action should occur.

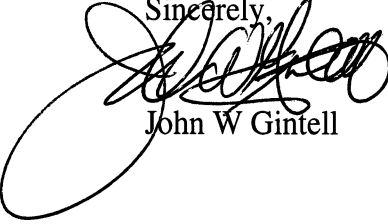
Adhere to the Schedule for Meetings: The call for this council meeting was for 5:30. It started at about 6:20. After public comment, there was a call for a five minute recess which lasted at least 15 minutes, perhaps more. To those of us who were there it isn't very enjoyable sitting in those seats with nothing to eat or drink while you all are in the back room. TV viewers would have long since turned to other channels. The late start and long recess produced about one hour of down-time out of four hours - a big disincentive for participation or attendance. I request that the Mayor and Committee chairs try to stick to schedule for starting meetings.

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Councilor Activities during Public Comment: During the public comment by several people on this topic it *appeared* that only one councilor was listening. The Mayor was conferring with the Clerk; one councilor was reading a document; several councilors were talking with each other; one councilor was talking to a member of the audience, and I believe two were out of the room. Perhaps everyone was listening but it sure didn't look that way. Such appearance doesn't support getting people to come to the meeting when they think they aren't going to be heard. If the cameras were aimed at people other than the speaker, what do you think the TV viewers would think?

I am sorry to appear critical. I do think that this council is working more effectively than the previous one (especially with the emphasis on committees) in so many ways and I commend all of you for this. I just believe that there is room for some improvement that would help draw the public into the process - a very important goal for the council. I hope you will take these as constructive comments (because that is their intent) and give them full consideration.

Sincerely,



John W Gintell

Consent Communication #6

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Communication was received from
John W. Gintell, transmitting
suggestions on improving the City
Council meetings.

In City Council February 5, 2001

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