

Suggested Improvements to Public Meeting and Information Procedures

[June 2006 Public Input to County Commissioners]

By Jeffrey Starkweather, Attorney at Law, Chair, Chatham Coalition

Thank you for the recent steps you have taken to enhance citizen engagement in local government decision-making. The Commissioners and county staff should be applauded for the features that have been included on the county website to improve citizen knowledge and encourage their input, including: an application for potential volunteers to serve on advisory boards and commissions and a list of those boards and commissions; providing access to background and supportive information on agenda items attached to the county commissioners' agenda, giving access to all county board minutes back to October 1994, posting the most recent planning board minutes and making land use regulations available, and posting a host of other key documents when they are relevant. I also appreciate the lengthening of the public input session to 30 minutes and giving speakers up to five minutes each.

An informed and involved citizenry is the foundation of our democratic society and helps local governments to arrive at better and more accepted policies, procedures and decisions. I encourage you to continue your efforts to foster constructive citizen input into meetings and deliberations in a way that promotes fairness and efficiency.

To further enhance citizen engagement and government openness, I propose the following additional steps for the commissioners to consider.

1. **Tapes of board meetings for direct copying:** For reasons that no one has yet been able to explain, a citizen or board member cannot obtain a direct copy of the tape of the county commissioners' meetings. According to county officials, the current system scrambles the tapes for some unknown security reason. The only way a citizen can get a copy of the tape of a county board meeting is to sit in the county offices and play the tape at real time speed and copy that audio sound onto another tape. This discourages citizens who cannot attend a meeting from ever hearing what occurred.

Not having this capability makes it difficult for commissioners or citizens who want to challenge the minutes of a meeting to get ready access to what actually occurred. The importance of this became apparent this week when I read the minutes of the February 21 meeting concerning the decision and discussion of Briar Chapel; the minutes are not an accurate or sufficient reflection of what actually happened at that meeting at which I was present.

Finally, I request that citizens be able to make copies of the tapes and that the tapes also be accessible via the county website.

2. **Advance and Post-Meeting Posting of Presentation Documents and Sufficient Copies Available for the Public At Meeting:** County departments, state and federal agency representatives, and non-profit organizations make presentations to the county commissioners and provide them with written statements or documents supporting that presentation on a regular basis. Copies are often not available to the public. This makes it extremely difficult to understand the request and the subsequent discussion.

I request that the manager inform all such presenters that all documents related to their presentations be provided to the county in advance in a format that can be posted to the county's website at the time the agenda is released. If that is not possible, I request that all such presenters be asked to bring an extra dozen or so copies for the public and the press at the meeting, and following the meeting these documents be made available on the website.

3. **First and Second Readings of Ordinances, Resolutions and Other Major Proposals:** County commissioners should not be rushed into voting on items for which they have not had sufficient time to study, research, consult with experts and seek citizen input. Citizens also need additional time to respond to items that are brought up for the first time at a commissioner's meeting, before further action is taken.

Such items should be posted on the website following their initial presentation and reading and no vote should be allowed until a subsequent meeting, with exception of emergency matters [e.g. matters for which it will be too late if the commissioners have to wait until the next meeting]. This should result better decision making and more support and/or acceptance for those decisions by citizens.

4. **All motions and amendments should be read aloud or provided in writing:** Commissioners often get into involved discussions concerning proposals before them and make oral motions or amendments to those motions. Often those motions or amendments are not put into writing, nor are they read back to the other commissioners for approval of the exact language being voted on. Thus, it is sometimes unclear to commissioners (and to citizens) what the commissioners are voting on. This requirement would avoid any later disagreements about what exactly was approved.

5. **County and other local government studies/research used by Commissioners to back up policy proposals should be presented in writing and authors should be available for questioning by fellow commissioners and citizens:** There have been cases in recent months where one or more commissioner has requested a study, research or information from county or

other government officials, used it to back up a proposal, but have not provided it in writing to the other commissioners. If a commissioner asks a staff person or outside expert to conduct a study, provide information or a professional opinion on a pressing policy issue, the results should be provided to each commissioner in writing and made available to the public. Likewise, where possible, the officials that conducted the study, provided the background material, or gave an expert or legal opinion should be identified and asked to attend the commissioners' meeting to answer questions.

6. **List all advisory board members:** Upon request, a list of all advisory and commission memberships and the dates, times and places of their meetings should be available for anyone requesting it. Lists should be posted on the website and include contact information about members, when their term ends and who appointed them. Also, at the top of the membership list for each commission or advisory board there should be a short description of its functions. While there is an application form for volunteers to advisory boards on the county commissioners' section of the website, that application and the advisory board section should be directly accessible to the public from the County's home page. Making this additional information available on the website would allow all citizens and commissioners to have a better picture of who is serving on what boards and provide advance notice of when vacancies will be open. The County should actively encourage citizens from across the county with knowledge, experience or interest in the subject areas involved to apply for appointments to those boards. Likewise, the commissioners should assure citizens they will review those applications before making appointments to these boards to avoid having a small number of people serve on multiple boards.

7. **Post advisory board and commissioner minutes and documents on the website:** All minutes and documents prepared by these advisory boards and commissioners should be available on the county website for easy access and referral by commissioners and citizens. This would help commissioners keep track of issues and deliberations and would help citizens to be better informed and engaged in the decision-making process.

Post all past planning board minutes in a manner similar to the current posting of past commissioner minutes: The planning staff is already posting minutes of the most recent meeting, so it should not be difficult to post minutes of past planning board meetings as well. **This would help planning board members and elected commissioners, as well as citizens, who wish to stay informed on issues coming before these bodies.**

Respectfully submitted, March 21, 2005
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