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To: [Council](#); [Todd Donovan](#); [Kaylee Galloway](#); [Barry Buchanan](#); [Carol Frazey](#); [Kathy Kershner](#); [Tyler Byrd](#); [Ben Elenbaas](#)
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Subject: Shutting down community voices should not be the way - and especially not the first and only way - County Council seeks to lighten their meeting workload
Date: Sunday, December 4, 2022 9:48:24 PM

Dear Whatcom County Council:

I understand that at Tuesday's December 6, 2022 Committee of the Whole meeting you all will be having a discussion on the Council's general meeting rules, and according to Council Member Frazey's related December 2, 2022 memo, the discussion may be more specifically related to potentially curtailing the amount of time people are allowed to give open public comment at your regular Council meetings.

I was happy to read the line in the first paragraph of Council Member Frazey's memo that said, "Open session and public hearings are important elements of the council's agenda where members of the public may be heard live and in real time prior to Council action." But I was then very sad to read almost the entire rest of the memo which seemed to imply that there was little enough value to that comment that reducing community members' ability to make it should be the only way being considered by Council to make their meetings less cumbersome.

My feeling of disappointment over the proposed changes is enhanced by the fact that Council Members could be doing so much more to engage their community members in participating in and adding resources, energy, and creativity to their own governance and solution-making. Many times I hear people calling for more engagement from Council Members at County Council meetings. I hear them reflect a desire for more information or express concerns about topics being actively discussed during the County's and cities' many board and commission meetings, and yet I very rarely hear Council Members bring forward these opportunities during their meetings to help satisfy commenters' expressed or unexpressed needs.

I do understand the reasons that Council Members opt to listen and take in what is being said to them, rather than interact with individual commenters during their regular Council meetings. However, those boards and commissions are often suffering due to a need for more members, and could definitely use a much larger audience and degree of interaction from community members. Your frequent, active, enthusiastic, and persistent encouragement to your fellow Whatcom County residents to become involved - along with your help in directing them toward the resources and options to do that - can be a critical link in creating deeper and more pervasive well-being here in Whatcom County. This can also serve to make a more informed and productive community that might be what is needed

to make your own meetings more energizing and productive, as well.

I am copying this email to just a quick few boards and commissions that came to my mind. Please feel free to share this email with all boards and commissions.

I remember a number of years ago, not long after I started following County Council meetings, hearing Carl Weimer, who was a Council Member at that time, expressing regret that more community members were not showing up to attend and give their input at meetings. It's very disheartening now to see public comment seeming to be laid first on the chopping block as a way to reduce meeting or workday length and burden.

I certainly can understand Council wanting to find ways that they and participating staff do not have to endure an overwhelming amount of work in a single day, as it seems they are currently doing. At the same time, I believe there are more and better options for doing that than simply restricting or eliminating open session public comment.

One thing that could also be considered, for example, is the time that Council Members spend giving long or humorous comments, or back and forth exchanges about their positions on topics that are sometimes related, and sometimes unrelated to current agenda items. These types of interactions could have a limit placed on them. These are things that Council Members could take time to communicate through other means to each other and their community members, such as in email or social media.

Meanwhile, I do also recognize the distinct type of value that discussion at meetings in front of fellow Council Members, and members of the public has in comparison to communicating over emails and social media, and it is that same value that community members understand about their time to speak during Council meetings. But if you are thinking of cutting down or cutting out the amount of time community members get to speak at your regular Council meetings, it seems reasonable you should also be thinking of limiting the time you all are taking to speak, as well.

I understand what the laws say about public comment and that you are currently offering more opportunity for public comment than what the law says you have to. But I also think there is a very important reason that more than what is legally required is already being offered. As Council Member Frazey stated, "Open session and public hearings are important elements of the council's agenda where members of the public may be heard live and in real time prior to Council action." Your council meetings are one of the critical places where we learn things from you, learn things from each other, and bring things forward for you to learn.

I call on you all to expand your discussion about your meetings to the many ways you can change their content, operations, and timing to increase and improve community participation in working with government officials to effectively address critical needs and create well-being in Whatcom County.

Sincerely,
Dena Jensen
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