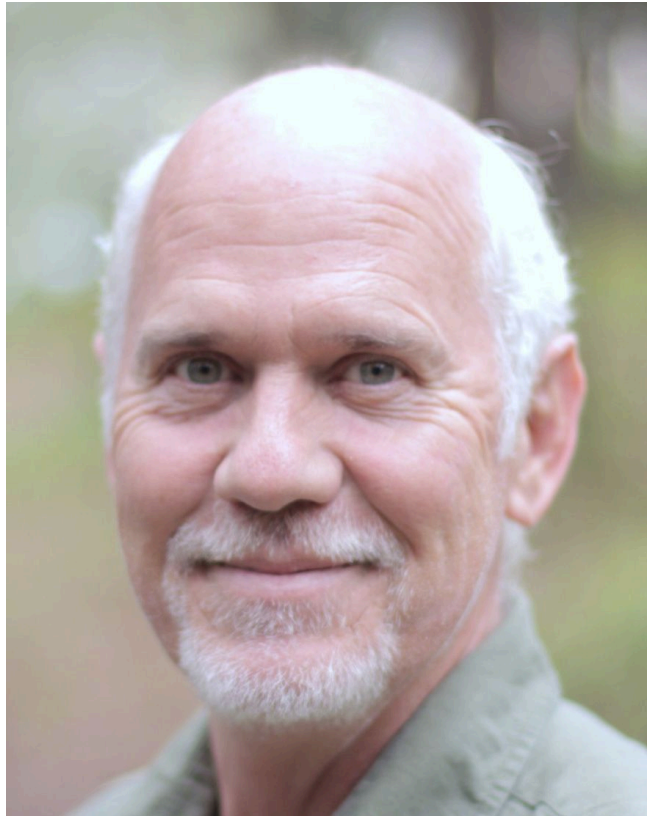

View from the Left: Public Comments and the Consent Calendar

February 1, 2023



I find myself in the uncommon position of almost agreeing with Roger Gitlin on one thing.

Embedded in Gitlin's last column, "A Failure to Communicate" is a salient point. I will get to that in a bit but first I want to comment on his one-sided interpretation of an incident at a recent Board of Supervisors' meeting.

Gitlin criticized the new Chair of the County Board of Supervisors for exercising his authority to have an unruly member of the public ejected after he disrupted that meeting.

What Gitlin neglected to explain is that this same individual had been causing turmoil at prior meetings and this had been tolerated for some time. It is entirely in the discretion of the presiding officer to have a member of the audience removed if they are not following the rules of public participation.

While I support affording members of the public an opportunity to comment on government decisions before votes are taken, there are rules of decorum that must be adhered to. When it is their turn, they can step up to the podium and make their statement. When their time is up, they should sit down and give the next person a chance to speak.

People have a right to provide a 3-minute comment on any item that is listed on the agenda. At the beginning of the meeting there is a time to make general public comments on subjects that are not on the agenda. The Chair of the meeting has the discretion, but not the requirement to allow more time.

Public comment time is not a question-and-answer period. Supervisors may answer questions during public comments, but they have no obligation to do so. It is incumbent on citizens to read the information provided ahead of time. They can ask questions before or after the meeting.

These are the rules and Gitlin should know this. He served two terms as a County Supervisor and the rules have not changed since then. The problem with noncompliance is that one person can dominate a meeting and be a distraction from the business at hand.

I have a few thoughts about public comments and the consent calendar.

On the agenda for the January 10 meeting of the Board of Supervisors there were 13 separate decisions that were listed on the consent calendar. This is done regularly for routine decisions upon which there is most likely a consensus. This includes approval of minutes from prior meetings, resolutions, proclamations, contracts, and employee matters. Even though there may be 13 different decisions, all the items on the consent calendar are approved with one vote.

I believe that this is done as a method for efficiently dispatching decisions and not a conspiracy to intentionally deny the public's right to comment. If any decision requires more discussion, any member of the Board of Supervisors can pull an item from the consent calendar for more scrutiny. A separate vote can be taken.

Unfortunately, this option to pull an item from the consent calendar is not provided to any constituent who wants to provide more specific testimony. Without this accommodation, the public is effectively deprived of their protected right to have 3 minutes to comment on all agenda items.

This is the point where I come close to agreement with Gitlin. Having decisions listed on the consent calendar can shortchange public participation if a person only gets 3 minutes to comment on 13 items. This breaks down to about 14 seconds per topic. This is an unreasonable expectation.

This problem could be ameliorated if any member of the public could request to pull a specific item from the consent calendar to provide more detailed input. Not only would this be fair accommodation, this may be required by law.

The "controversial" decision that was the focus of the kerfuffle on January 10th, was approval of a grant subaward from Del Norte County to the Del Norte County Office of Education. This grant will provide \$2.5

million over the next four years to provide student mental health services. I commend the County for securing these funds.

The source of the grant is the state funded Mental Health Student Services Act which “provides grants for partnerships between county mental health agencies and local education agencies to deliver school-based mental health services to young people and their families. These partnerships support outreach to identify early signs of unmet mental health needs, reduce stigma and discrimination, and prevent unmet mental health needs from becoming severe and disabling.”

These services are needed for students struggling with depression, stress and other mental health issues. There is a dearth of mental health services for all ages in our county. This funding will allow the School District to hire mental health professionals and to engage families in youth mental health services.

This seems like a no brainer to me. I cannot see any reason to object to this program, but I will defend the right for any person to object to any proposed action they disagree with, in three minutes or less.

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