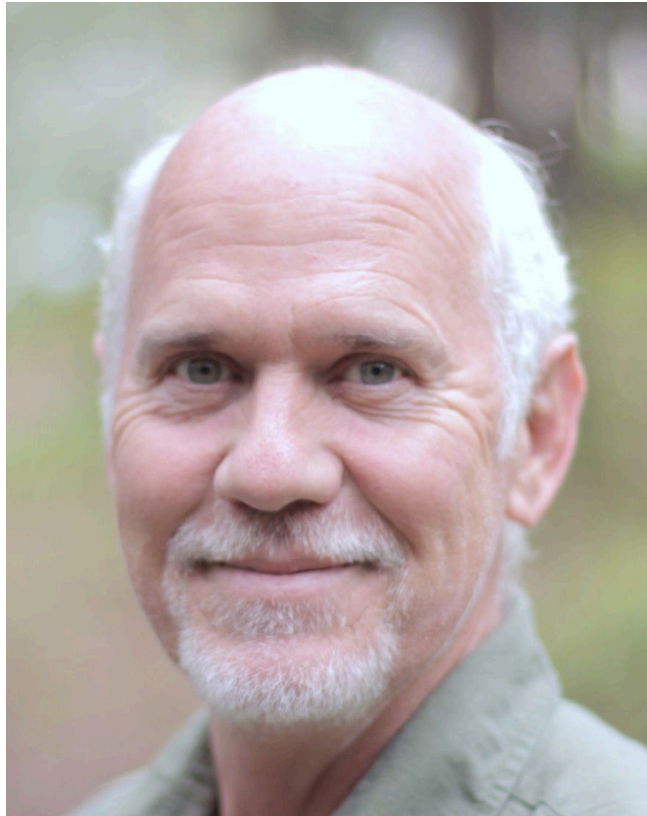

Guest Column: Democracy is not a spectator sport

May 22, 2022



Public participation is a vital component of a functioning democracy. Voting is only the start. We also have an ongoing right and responsibility to participate in our government after the election is over.

After the votes are counted and we have elected our representatives the hard work begins. If we actively engage in decision making, then we can help ensure that our elected officials are representing our interests.

We have a right to hold our elected representatives accountable and expect them to be open and transparent in the decisions that they make. But we also have an obligation to inform ourselves about the policies and programs that are being considered.

Members of the public have a right to request information and public documents from government agencies. But government agencies do not have a legal requirement to reach out to you personally to inform you of actions that may affect you.

With very few exceptions, all decisions must be made in open public meetings. For regular meetings the agenda must be published 72 hours in advance. Then it is the responsibility of the public to look at the agenda to see if there is any cause for concern or praise.

All meeting agendas must be sufficiently detailed so that the average person can understand the action that may be taken. This required advance notification allows citizens to educate themselves on the decision that is proposed and enables them to comment on that action before it is taken.

Most agencies publish their agendas and supporting reports online. The City Council and Board of Supervisors are diligent in providing supporting documentation for important decisions. Some of the smaller agencies are not as consistent in facilitating public participation, but you have a right to request information.

If you choose not to research or read the available information, then it is unfair to accuse any agency of a lack of transparency. Just because there is something you don't know, doesn't mean that it is unknowable. You have a right to an opinion, but you have a responsibility to base it on fact rather than rumors and innuendo.

There is rarely a case for a legitimate complaint about a lack of transparency in our local government agencies. It is more often the case that the complainant did not try very hard or did not know how to get the information they wanted.

While members of the public have a right to participate in decision making, we must follow the protocol of each board meeting that we attend. The City Council and Board of Supervisor meetings follow a very standard process. Members of the public can step up to a microphone and comment on any or every item on the agenda. The presiding officer can limit each person to 3 minutes per agenda item.

What is not acceptable is for members of the public to speak out of turn from the audience or disrupt the business of the meeting in any other way. Disruptors can be removed if their behavior violates acceptable demeanor.

Constructive public participation is an important part of good government. Every elected official can learn from public comments even if they disagree with them. In my experience, open discussions of complicated issues will often result in better public policy. I have advice for anyone who is frustrated or disappointed with the direction that our government is taking.

Step up and exercise your guaranteed right to participate in government decisions. Democracy is not a spectator sport. If you get involved locally, you really can make a difference.

If you would like to participate in our Democracy more actively, send me an email at dndems@gmail.com

Kevin Hendrick is the Chair of the Del Norte County Democratic Central Committee

