

Rules governing public comment frustrate residents

BY JOSHUA KENNEDY
Bedford Now

William Dukeshire is like any other resident in any other township in any other state in the country.

He's a taxpaying citizen with concerns about how his local government is handling its business. And, like many others in this Democratic society, when he wanted an answer, he decided to attend a Bedford Township Board meeting.

"I'm disappointed by this board," he said, preparing to read a written statement at the lectern during a recent board meeting. "The Bedford School Board should not accept any payments less than what you owe them."

He attended the meeting to discuss with the township board its settlement offer to Bedford Schools regarding the cable franchise fees collected by Buckeye Cable Co.

"The point Bedford Township is missing," Mr. Dukeshire said during the first of two public comment sessions on the board's agenda that day, "is that this is our money. What is Bedford Township doing with these fees?"

"Paying for a new township hall? There are many other things we need, including more police protection, and we definitely need better streets," he said.

But before Mr. Dukeshire had satisfied his concerns, or even read his prepared statement, he ran out of time. Public comment at that point on the agenda is limited to two minutes an individual. The later period is limited to five minutes, and it's all controlled by a series of lights in front of Clerk Robert Schockman's seat.

Mr. Dukeshire — unlike many people attending township government meetings — took his seat again and waited while the board conducted the balance of its agenda.

That night, the board considered waiving Board of Zoning Appeals fees, a cellular tower height waiver, buying a new emergency generator for the new fire hall and a couple con-

tracts with the Monroe County Road Commission among other things.

About an hour after his first comments to the board, Mr. Dukeshire got another crack at asking the board some questions and settling his own concerns about its recent actions with the schools and the cable fees.

But as he approached the lectern, instead of airing his concerns, he was invited by Supervisor Walt Wilburn to visit the supervisor's office the next day for a complete discussion on the issue.

Mr. Dukeshire questioned why he couldn't get the answers he was seeking in public, "out in the open."

"He never tried to discuss it," Mr. Schockman said. "He attacked individual board members and the board as a whole. It is not a public forum for attacking. It's a public forum for conducting the business of the board."

Township — and most other governmental — meetings are conducted under Robert's Rules of Order. They are basic parliamentary procedures for conducting public business.

The procedures provide opportunities during every public meeting for public comment, but comment does not mean discussion. That's a subtle, but important distinction.

"Citizens have the right to attend meetings of governmental bodies and may be permitted to address the (board) on matters that are relevant to the current business of that body," Mr. Schockman said.

"Citizens must observe all of the rules of order that the board members are required to observe themselves. All questions, comments and remarks must always be addressed through the chair and not to an individual member," he said.

That's the rule that's supposed to keep order at meetings when topics become emotional or heated. It came into play during a recent township planning commission meeting at which several residents objected to a

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developer's request to build a small subdivision off Temperance Rd.

"How do you sleep at night?" one woman asked the developer as she stood at the lectern. "You must use Ambien or something. ..."

Planning Commission Chairman Tom Covrett was quick to rectify the situation and informed the woman that her comments must be directed to him if she was to continue speaking.

"You have to be careful about letting things get too far out of control with the personal attacks," Mr. Covrett said. "You also can't have people standing up there facing the crowd. The more you let things like that go the higher the chances of the meeting spiraling out of control. Then you lose the focus of the whole meeting.

"Meetings can very easily turn personal," he said.

That's because people find it so easy to bad mouth each other nowadays, Mr. Schockman said. Comments easily can turn from productive criticism or questioning that may help open the eyes and minds of board members on a given issue into sticks and stones that disrupt the entire process.

"The issue and not the person is the item under discussion, and personalities must be avoided," Mr. Schockman said. "All remarks are made through the chair, and one member may not interrogate another member.

"Profanity and disorderly language or gestures at meetings are prohibited. The rules of decorum that apply to all board members also apply to the public who wishes to speak at a public meeting," he said.

That can be difficult to remember when the field behind one's home is being razed and converted into a subdivision. Emotions charge comments, and anyone who attends board meetings regularly can recall instances when threats have been made.

A woman and her son each recently took turns at the lectern protesting the same cable issues as Mr. Dukeshire. At the end of their collective four minutes of comment, the woman said the issue had prompted her son to register to vote and that the board members should prepare for defeat.

"Persons attending a public meeting who attempt to control that meeting by threats

and intimidation are not to be tolerated by a Democratic constitutionally elected form of government," Mr. Schockman said.

Instead of threatening members of the board during the meeting or shouting obscenities and storming out of the hall slamming doors, there's another option, Mr. Schockman said.

"They're welcome to come into the township hall and talk directly to the people they want to shout and holler at. They are absolutely welcome," he said.

In fact, that's what board members often try to convince citizens such as Mr. Dukeshire to do. But the invitations can seem confusing. After all, Mr. Dukeshire asked, isn't the public meeting a place for citizens to air concerns and get questions answered?

"It's really a balancing act," Mr. Covrett said. "You want people to share their thoughts and concerns, but you don't want the meeting to turn into a personal attack situation."

Mr. Covrett also often recommends that unsatisfied citizens come back the next day and speak with officials in the planning department at township hall.

"That's the best thing to do," he said. "Very, very frequently we recommend they talk with someone in the planning department. They are very knowledgeable. To me, that should always be the first step."

And that's why board members recommend that the public come back and talk one-on-one with township officials outside of the meeting.

"Please speak with someone," Mr. Schockman said. "We can certainly help them find an outlet for their frustration. That is our job — to offer that outlet."

And what about residents who don't think they get the "whole truth and nothing but the truth" behind those closed doors?

"If they come into my office and they don't feel right with the answer, they can go to the supervisor. If they don't like the supervisor's answers, they can go to the trustees," Mr. Schockman said.

Still, at the end of all that, there's one thing that emotionally charged residents often forget.

"People lose track that we're citizens here, too," Mr. Covrett said. "This is our community service. A lot of board members in the township aren't

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“Try to keep that in mind when your emotions are flowing,” he said.
We're all community members, and we all want what's best for the entire community.
elected. We're not all necessarily politicians. ... We're all residents of the same community.

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