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NEWS

Public comments threatened across Kitsap County

By Elisha Meyer Kitsap News Group • January 30, 2024 1:30 am

Chances are if you've attended a city council or school board meeting in Kitsap County an invitation to speak during public comments has been offered to you.

The chance for residents to speak on matters both on and off the meeting's agenda is one many members of the public expect elected officials to provide as a fundamental tool of free speech.

However, more governing bodies nationwide are exploring potential changes, either temporary or permanent, to limit public comments because of hate speech and debates on off-topic arguments. Such debates are going on in Poulsbo, Bremerton and Bainbridge Island.

"I have concerns about public comment," Director Kate Espy shared in a Jan. 6 meeting of the South Kitsap School District, "and how even though (Director Brian Pickard) gives them a heads up about, you know, basically how to be civil and behave, folks are going against that."

Bremerton's City Council already took steps to temporarily limit Zoom testimony in late October after it too was hit with a round of antisemitic hate speech —comments by multiple "Zoom-bombers"—though exceptions for those unable to attend meetings in person have been granted.

In December, after two hate speech calls regarding the Middle East, the Bainbridge City Council banned online public comments and limited in-person comments to agenda items only. But at its most-recent meeting it decided to reinstate allowing in-person comments to any topic of city interest. To comment online, people must go on-camera and show their names, along with registering as late as 24 hours in advance.

Public comment opportunities generally come with time and topic restrictions to maintain order and keep matters relevant to the business of the meeting while still allowing for a critical outlet of public feedback.

In the North Kitsap School District, commenters must fill out an online form between 4:30 and 4:55 p.m. the day of the meeting. Commenters are asked which agenda topic they would like to comment on, and if online to indicate their Zoom screen name for identification purposes.

For the Poulsbo City Council, comments are allowed in person only. They were previously allowed on Zoom but aren't any longer after hearing about other jurisdictions getting hate speech.

Multiple SKSD directors recounted how SK school board sessions have regularly dissolved into drawn-out shouting matches at board members and between public commenters. Espy said she knows the board “is just going to get ranted and raved at by some folks, totally off topic of what our board agenda is.”

Director Megan Higgins, who was just elected to the board in November, supports the public comment session but recalled having to prepare her son for the “hateful” topics being brought up before bringing him to a board meeting when she was just an attendee.

“I made sure he brought headphones,” she said, “and he fortunately wasn't paying attention, and he really didn't know, but I had to warn him.”

Guidelines are in place to prevent public commenters from spewing such speech or just crossing the line in general at SK's meetings. Guidelines that apply to both in-person and Zoom commenters state, “The chair/president may interrupt or terminate any statement when it exceeds the time limit, or is vulgar, obscene or grossly disruptive to the board process. Any restriction imposed must be viewpoint-neutral. The board as a whole has the final decision in determining the appropriateness of all such rulings.”

Such rules are seemingly not enough for some board directors, and ideas on how the school board will act are still in the air.

Director Jeffrey Wilson suggested that all public comment could be taken in written form aside from when oral testimony is required to be offered at public hearings. “We can represent what the community is saying, but we're not just hearing about something that's happening in Colorado or Florida, and they're yelling at us about it,” he said. “I think it's a way to actually be more responsive instead of just talking past each other, which I feel like it's happening right now quite a bit.”