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NEWS

SK school board public comments protected in approved policy amendments

By Elisha Meyer Port Orchard Independent • February 27, 2024 1:30 am



An amended governance culture policy unanimously passed by the South Kitsap School District Board of Directors reaffirmed the offering of public comment opportunities at future school board meetings.

The document, passed with additional amendments proposed by Director Megan Higgins at the Feb. 21 meeting, was changed to clarify policy language on both written and oral public comment opportunities.

The new language of the policy states, “Each regular meeting agenda will include a section for the Written Public Comment Topic Summary (comprised of public comments received since the last regular meeting and prepared by the Board Secretary) for discussion by the board.”

The document also notes the establishment of a “24/7 email address (publiccomment@skschools.org) for written public comments, which are then immediately forwarded to the entire board upon receipt. This is the fastest, most effective way for the public to share thoughts with the Board.”

Director and Board President Jeffrey Wilson said the intent behind this new language was to further recognize and respond to public comment from those writing their comments in along with those giving it in person or through Zoom.

“What happens today is people send a public comment to a board member, it goes to one or two or it goes to the superintendent. We don’t always get them, and because the ways the rules work, all of our discussions must be public,” Wilson said. “I’m trying to broaden public comment and also balance the written comment, which includes everyone who can send us a comment, with the ones we here in the room.”

Discussions of how to address public comments in meetings due to off-topic ramblings and debates among other concerns went public in the board’s January retreat meeting. Public feedback had ranged from highly in favor to fear of losing the opportunity to speak in front of the board.

“I’m going to say this very clearly for the record,” Wilson said. “We are not eliminating public comment.”

Despite Wilson’s insistence of these intentions, it was the added motion of the recently elected Higgins that would offer further reassurance to the matter of oral public comment. “We don’t have any intention of taking away oral public comment, but I think there was some wording in there that made it seem like we could.”

The draft document offered from the meeting’s agenda contained language that read, “Additionally, an optional Oral Public Comment section may be added to the agenda where needed to gather public input on specific agenda items. Higgins suggested the language be changed to “an oral public comments section will be on the agenda.”

Newly elected Director Jay Villars was quick to agree absolutely with the change, adding he could not have supported the original draft’s wording. “It seemed vague to me when I read it before, almost as if I think I understood the intent, but it was almost like, ‘Well, we’re not really going to have public comment, but we’ll do it if we have to,’” he said. “I want it to be something all the time, and I’m glad you clarified that for me.”

Wilson followed Villar’s comments with a brief agreement, and the change in wording was passed unanimously.



The district will also continue to offer recordings of its meetings alongside its published agendas and minutes. The policy states, “Effective June 30, 2024, all regular and special meetings of the board at which a final action is taken, or formal public testimony is accepted, except executive sessions or emergency meetings, will be audio recorded.”

Communications director Amy Miller further clarified that the recordings specified in the document will remain video recordings.

