

My Turn

Reader doubts town council's commitment to community collaboration

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Well, it sure didn't take long for the skeptics' worst fears to be confirmed. Following the launch of the Taos Council's much ballyhooed Strong at Heart initiative, a scant 24-hours had passed when the Council proceeded to break its promises to the community. Hoping against hope for a new day in town governance, the community was led to believe that the Council had finally seen the light and had committed itself to a collaborative era in town governance. The Council had begun speaking the very words that the community longed to hear: openness, transparency, and meaningful community involvement.

Nevertheless, the Council's first official act on the afternoon immediately following its Strong at Heart launch was to significantly decrease the amount of time citizens are granted in addressing the Council. Strong at Heart had instantly become "broken heart." To make matters much worse, the council initially attempted to hide the ball by burying these rule changes in the so-called consent agenda. If this is what Mayor Barrone and his allies and enablers, councilmembers Hahn and Evans and town manager Bellis, have in mind with their newly professed commitment to meaningful community collaboration, it sure doesn't fit what most would understand as consistent with that promise. It's more a case of when you don't like the message members of the community bring before you, simply silence the messengers. It's yet another crippling, self-inflicted blow to damaged community trust. Clearly, v a mpire tactics that cannot bear the light of day and zombie policies that will not die no matter how discredited they may be, are still in ascendance.

History is instructive in gauging the risk assumed placing one's trust in this outfit. The council's conduct of community business is a continuing case in point. Looking back, we find that ordinary citizens daring to claim their right to speak up at Taos council meetings endure interminable delays. Mayor Barrone, manager Bellis and councilmember Hahn, routinely run out the clock on the public's patience. Relegated to the status of silent observers, members of the community are subjected to lengthy, whispered, rambling monologues by Bellis and arguably equally long, labored, impromptu, often self-congratulatory orations by Barrone.

This unrestrained rhetoric is often accompanied by the mayor's display of unbidden generosity, granting unlimited time to favored planned positive public relations presentations. Though published agendas limit these scheduled presentations to five minutes, the mayor routinely squanders the public's time at his sole discretion and without protest by the council members.

But why would we expect that rules made to constrain ordinary citizens would apply to those in power? The simple explanation seems to be that rank has its privilege. It's probably just one more instance of the feeling of entitlement and permanent ownership of authority to

which Taos political figures often seem prone. More disturbingly, it suggests that our mayor has overstayed his time. He has now become more of the problem than the solution.

Councilmember Evans' rationale for time allowed for citizen comment reduced to three-minutes from the already meager five-minutes is troublingly inconsistent. Drawing on his years of teaching experience, he earnestly expresses deep concern with inevitable council inattention accompanying a five-minute citizen comment. Yet he voices no such alarm when in violation of the published agenda, planned presentations extend to 45 minutes, an hour, and far longer. Though many times lengthier than any permitted public comment, this very real threat to both the council's and the community's attention span fails to evoke Evans' alarm.

But the Taos council may yet have one final opportunity to foster community faith and trust. This last chance comes in the form of the council's final action on the deeply divisive proposed four-story Holiday Inn Express. Having demonstrated stunning capacity to turn on a dime, the council could theoretically reverse course and redeem itself by acting consistent with the strongly expressed will of the people. Absent demonstrably broad advocacy for this construction, a council committed to building community trust could act counter to expectations that the skids are greased and that the political machinery is hard-wired to permit the creation of this hotel, Taos' architectural design standards notwithstanding. Nevertheless, the smart money is with the skeptics on this one. But alas, vampire tactics and zombie policies still thrive in Taos.

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