

Take-aways from President Waldron's responses to criticism about his gavel philosophy

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 Latest in a series of posts on City Government 

Waldron applause lines:

Gadfly finds a lot to applaud. For Gadfly, President Waldron frames his gavel theory in precisely the right terms. He is open to participation, acknowledges different points of view, believes in dialog, doesn't believe in censoring.

"I think that people should have the ability to speak their mind as long as they are doing it in a respectful way, and I think that disagreement is good because it shows different points of view and perspectives."

"we should be able to have a positive conversation in which we respectfully disagree with each other."

"I think that a healthy dialog starts with the ability to express yourself, and if you don't like what someone else is saying, I don't think censoring their speech is the right thing. I think topping it with better speech, more accurate, or a different point of view is a fine thing to do."

"I think everyone has a right to be heard, and I think they have a right to speak, from members of the public to members of Council. . . . I don't think silencing people's thoughts and opinions is a productive way to continue a conversation."

"I don't think limiting ideas that you are not in agreement with or unpopular is not the way to a healthy dialog. I think that you combat unpopular ideas with better ideas."

"More conversation is always a good thing, whether you agree with those ideas or not, I think knowing what someone else thinks and having the ability to understand and allowing them to articulate is a positive thing whether you like those ideas or you think they are terrible. I think everybody should have an opportunity to be heard."

” . . . to see how we can allow for an even more productive dialog that would make people feel as included as possible, open up City Hall to as many residents as we can get here, and to hear their input as well.”

Applying the theory:

While applauding President Waldron’s gavel-theory, Gadfly feels that, early on anyway, he fell far short in practice, in the application of that theory — and is certainly pollyannish in his assessment of what had happened on the ground. For instance, President Waldron apparently did not see what was plainly visible to the majority of us in the cheap seats in last year’s ragged personal interaction between two Council members. And Gadfly believes he can say with certainty that President Waldron totally misread the outcome of the interaction with Mr. Antalics he references.

“I went back and did some research on some of the minutes and some of the things that were said by members of council and by members of the public, and I just don’t see a lot there as far as violation of Robert’s Rules. Personal attacks, I think, is a term getting thrown around for political reasons. I think there’s a healthy debate, and I think there’s respect for each another on Council. We may not agree with each other, and that’s fine, and that comes down to the vote some times, and I like to think that we can move forward professionally. But I think there is a decorum here, and I don’t think that there has been a lack of professionalism.”

“if you don’t like what someone else is saying, I don’t think censoring their speech is the right thing. I think topping it with better speech, more accurate, or a different point of view is a fine thing to do, just like Mr. Antalics and I did this evening.”

Homage to the First Amendment:

Gadfly thinks that President Waldron’s invocation of the First Amendment as the basic engine of his gavel theory/philosophy creates problems, since, in Gadfly’s mind, he seems to use it to justify all kinds of speech in any kind of way. Gadfly wished President Waldron hadn’t gone “there” at all. Gadfly feels the sentiment in the room is that, yes, Roberts’ Rules should be followed, even if applied a bit flexibly, and

especially in terms of decorum. Lack of “decorum” seems more the problem than unpopular ideas, and Roberts’ Rules speaks to that. At first, President Waldron seems to confuse the issues of content and conduct.

“I think that the First Amendment is strong and well in this room, and I have great respect for it to the point that I respect it over Robert’s Rules.”

“you might think that we should follow Robert’s Rules to the ‘T,’ but my view is . . . ”

“I give great respect to Robert’s Rules, but I think the First Amendment . . . will trump Robert’s Rules any day of the week. So if you want to point to Robert’s Rules and say these are the rules we are supposed to be following, I do respect those, however . . . ”

“the First Amendment is wide-ranging and it supersedes Roberts’ Rules of Order.”

Evolution of practice:

That said, President Waldron evolved over the year, later admitting Roberts’ Rules were violated, recognizing problems with decorum more, describing those problems vividly, calling for improvement, and even seeming to find some improvement.

“I don’t think silencing people’s thoughts and opinions is a productive way to continue a conversation. With that being said, I do think there should be a level of decorum and respect for each other in the room. And I think at times at the last Council meeting that was not there. I did not get any feedback publicly that that was a positive conversation. In fact, many people reached out to me that I saw and said that it was cringe-worthy and it was embarrassing. I think the tone of that conversation wasn’t helpful, and it’s my opinion that I think we can do better and we must do better when we get in to the dangerous territory of accusing people of things on Council.”

“Whether it’s warranted that people think the rules are being violated — Roberts’ Rules — which I think they are — I’m going to enforce them

pretty liberally because I think the conversation should be open and fair.”

“I hear a lot different kind of tone than I did last week, Mr. Callahan, and I appreciate that you were reflective on that.”

“I think moving forward taking a little time to consider how our words are affecting other people in the room, it’s going to be beneficial.”

Involvement of Council colleagues:

President Waldron is open (and will continue to be) to “counseling” and suggestions for change from his colleagues, but so far, contrary to some strong voices among the residents, the message is that he’s doing a “fine job.”

“I’m going to take remarks from members of Council if they want to give a little course correction and think that I should enforce the rules a little differently. I’ll listen to the majority of Council if they have a strong opinion that the rules should be enforced differently. Although I’m currently president of Council, I would welcome feedback from members of Council if they think I should have a different approach. And I’ll try to balance those in the future as we continue these conversations under new business.”

“I did reach out to members of Council, and I did speak to everyone about their views. . . . During my conversations with everybody on Council, I didn’t receive any negative feedback about my style or my management of running the meetings, which I took to heart, and I took that advice to mean that I was doing a fine job running the meetings.”

“I have asked members of Council publicly and privately whether they did have any feedback for me in the management of the meetings, and I have received a little bit of feedback but nothing to the point where anybody felt that I should take a different approach to the way that I manage and I try to keep order in the room. It is an imperfect science. It is an imperfect science, and it is a difficult balancing act from moment to moment, but I am willing to continue those conversations with members of Council if I am elected to serve as president to see how we can allow for an even more productive dialog.”

What did you see in President Waldron's "defense" of his soft-gavel style?

to be continued . . .