

Planning Committee needs to take public-trust-building steps

The Bethlehem Gadfly Armory, City government, Serious Issues November 17, 2019

 Latest in a series of posts on City Government 

Gadfly earlier this week reported the desire to have last Thursday's Planning Commission meeting on the Armory moved from 4PM to a later time to accommodate the work schedules of more residents who wanted to attend. That didn't happen, though residents were afforded the opportunity to make appointments to view planning documents in City Hall. At the meeting, moreover, residents were thwarted by and complained about inability to see the plans proposed, which were displayed on easels in front of the Head Table and visible only to the Commission members. Resident spectators could not see what the developer was showing the Commission. Beginning January the PC will move its meeting time to 5PM, which, though not perfect, is a step in the right direction. But, as Armory neighbor Jeff Pooley points out in the audio clip from the meeting and this email below, there are additional steps needed to make PC meetings resident friendly. Jeff describes that the effect if not the intent of PC practice is to "exclude" the neighbors, of creating a feeling of "not encouraging public comment."

AUDIO FILES NOT AVAILABLE IN THIS ARCHIVE

November 15, 2019

To: Darlene Heller, Director of Planning; Tracy Samuelson, Assistant Director of Planning; Rob Melosky, Planning Commission Chair

Dear Darlene, Tracy and Rob (if I may),

I am writing a quick follow up to the Planning Commission meeting last night—not about the substance, but about the public-input issues I raised in my comments. (I was one of the members of the public who spoke about the Armory application.)

Let me first say that I was, and remain, very grateful for your kind help, Tracy, when you showed me through the plans and answered my questions. Rob, I want to commend you for running a humane and fair meeting, with real empathy for residents and their concerns. It was noticed, and appreciated.

If I left with a bad taste in my mouth, it was entirely about the process up to and including the meeting—and that's why I'm writing. (I am cc'ing Ed Gallagher, who I know shares some of these concerns.)

The news about the shift to 6pm meetings is genuinely thrilling, and answers one of my concerns. The City and Planning Commission could make additional, small moves in the same spirit—to encourage public input.

The first would be to post all application materials, including the City's reply letter, as one or more PDF downloads on the City's website.

The second would be to project those plans/PDF on the existing projection system during meetings, so the public is not shut out (as happened last night).

Every document in any application—even the large architectural renderings—now exists as a digital document. It would be a trivial matter to collect them into one or more PDFs for (1) download prior to a meeting and (2) digital display during the meeting. If materials are now delivered in paper form, the City could require digital copies too.

(Just to be clear, the PDF download that *was* posted prior to the meeting was a tiny, and completely uninformative, subset of the

application that the public is entitled to. That is not what I am referring to.)

In the meantime—while a system like this is being implemented—my strong recommendation is that members of the public be permitted to take photographs, and or make copies (at a reasonable fee), of these public documents. I honestly wonder whether that restriction is even legal.

These seem, from the outside, like legitimacy- and public-trust-building steps that are nearly cost-free. There's certainly no justification, in 2019, for not sharing digital copies, nor for relying exclusively on unidirectional easels that, in effect, exclude the public.

I would love to work with you, and help in any way (including technical advice, given my day job :), to make these small changes happen. I was pretty frustrated, and want to channel that feeling into helping to make a change—one that seems utterly feasible.

Thanks for reading.

Sincerely

Jeff

Needless to say, Jeff's points apply to other City agencies as well using Town Hall. We need to keep pushing for the means for effective public participation in all areas of City government.