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Protest over government access in North Port

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

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Concerned by recent changes in city policies, a North Port resident is calling for supporters of open government to protest outside of City Hall before Monday's regular City Commission meeting.

Debbie McDowell, a city resident for close to 25 years, said she's fed up with a series of recent policy changes written by city staff and approved by a majority of city commissioners. She and other critics bemoan those changes as threatening public access to local government.

"The duty of the commissioners is to represent the people," she said. "By shutting us out they're not representing us, and that's the main focus of this protest."

Dowell said it started in September, when commissioners adopted a new policy that could make it more costly and time-consuming for citizens to obtain public records.

Commissioners then voted to make City Hall a non-public forum, meaning non-governmental groups will no longer be able to hold meetings or events in or immediately outside City Hall. Because of that change, McDowell's protest will be held on the City Hall green, an approximately 16,400-square-foot-large circle inside a roundabout in front of City Hall.

At an October workshop, city commissioners backed away from a proposal to place tighter restrictions on when and how long public commentary could take place at their meetings.

But two weeks later, a majority of city commissioners voted to move their regular meetings to Tuesday mornings beginning next year, despite concerns the change would make it more difficult for citizens working nine-to-five jobs to attend and participate. Previously the meeting start times alternated between 1 and 6 p.m. on Mondays.

Commissioners who supported changing the start time to 10 a.m. stated that their afternoon and evening meetings were taking too long and were taxing to city commissioners and staff. The vote passed 3-2, with commissioners Tom Jones and Linda Yates dissenting.

McDowell said she did the math and discovered that the average length of regular City Commission meetings from January through October 2015 has been about three and a half hours. Calculations by the Herald-Tribune confirmed that statement, although three regular commission meetings lasted longer than five hours.

"I don't care about the city staff being accommodated," McDowell said. "We should have the opportunity to come or not come. By removing that you're removing our opportunity (to be heard)."

Changing the meeting times spurred McDowell into organizing a demonstration. She said North Port is moving "backwards" by limiting access to elected government.

McDowell said she and others have spoken at City Commission meetings and

emailed commissioners with their concerns, but those messages have fallen on deaf ears. She sees protesting as her last resort.

McDowell has also picked up the paperwork to run for the commission. She has not filed yet, but she said she is strongly considering running.

She is utilizing social media and contacting local media outlets to notify the public about the protest. She is encouraging attendees to make signs and bring them to the protest, which begins at 5 p.m. on Monday. She asks that protesters also attend the City Commission meeting at 6 p.m. and speak during public comment.

“We are the people, and we need to be heard,” she said. “Why are they silencing us now? That’s what I don’t understand, and that’s what I find scary. What’s the ulterior motive?”

According to Mayor Jacqueline Moore there is no ulterior motive, only a misunderstanding.

“I can see why it would feel like — when you look at the period of time — that it all happened by design,” Moore said of the recent policy changes. “But it was frankly just the flow of how things were coming to us.”

Moore said as North Port continues to grow it was necessary for the city to update its policies and put them in writing.

“In no way is there an intention to exclude, prevent or be inaccessible,” she said.

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