
Cooking in a Hot Kitchen: Running a Meeting on a Controversial Topic - A “Planned and Educated Approach”

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The Problem

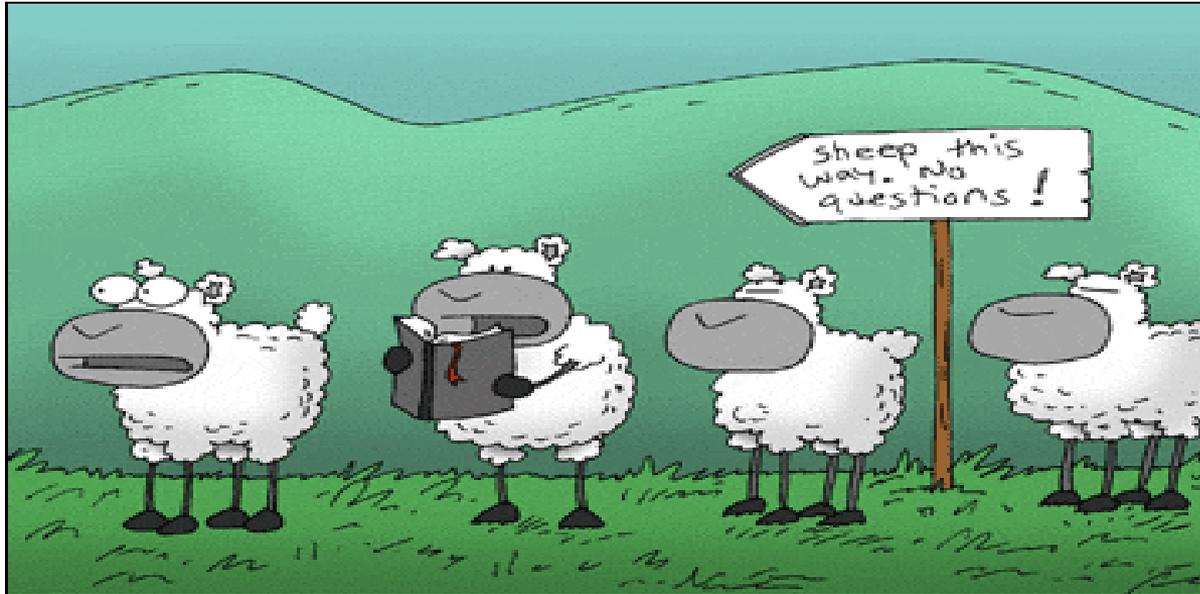
- Public meetings about controversial topics have become increasingly disrupted and divisive

The Reasons

- Live streaming video or broadcast of meetings
- National and state-wide trends in meetings – recently Congressional town hall meetings
- Encouragement for “grass roots” involvement
- A lack of thoughtful planning and education by the governments



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(See Acts 8:32)

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HERE IT IS, "LED LIKE A SHEEP TO THE SLAUGHTER" ... WHAT THE HECK IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?

This meeting was like many of the meetings that I would go to over the course of two years. The only way I can describe it is that, well, the president is like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people. *There is no discernible connection.*

Paul O'Neill

The Central Thesis

With proper planning and commissioner education of the meeting process, a port district can address a controversial topic in a public meeting in the most constructive manner possible

IDENTIFY controversial topics early and plan ahead

- Usually these topics are foreseeable
- Controversial issues need the commissioner's "A" game
 - Educated on the meeting process
 - How to react to large crowds, how to react to ad hominem (personal) attacks and how to react to disruptive citizens
 - Prepared on the meeting topic
 - Ready to listen
- Keep the issue in perspective

EDUCATE commissioners on the commissioner's role in the meeting

- Above all - be polite and engaged
- Keep a sense of perspective
- Recognize that some may have (or just be expressing) an opposing view

WHAT ARE THE VIEWPOINTS that the port commission will have to consider?

- Very Important Step
 - Most “big issues” have many valid interests and viewpoints
 - The commission’s job (at 30,000 feet) is to weigh competing interests and viewpoints
 - Allows the commission to prepare for the meeting
 - Importantly, allows the commission to acknowledge that it is a controversial issue for which the commission will need to weigh different interests and viewpoints

MAKE A PLAN

- Allow all the time needed and all the meetings needed for public comment
 - Build in breaks
- Decide how many meetings before a decision will be made
- Who will run the public comment period?
 - Commission president, executive director or moderator
- Decide who and how will the port explain both the competing viewpoints and the process to the public
- Reach out to the opposing views – invite them to the meeting

GET A ROOM – a large enough room

- Too small a room leads to high emotional energy
 - Create some distance and elevate
 - Consider using a city or county council chambers (interlocal ahead of time)
- ADA compliant room



GET A ROOM – a large enough room

- Get a podium for speakers
- Make sure the PA system is up to the task and loud enough



AT THE FIRST MEETING and each meeting where the topic will be discussed

- Introduce the topic and acknowledge the controversial nature of the topic
 - Let the public know that the commission's job to listen and weigh the various interest and viewpoints
 - Acknowledge that this will be a difficult decision
- Note that public comment is needed to inform the commission
- Provide the timeline and invite oral and written comment
 - When will the commission discuss the issue and make a decision?

PUBLIC COMMENT PROCESS needs to be explained at each meeting

- Public comment not public debate
 - “It is our opportunity to hear from you to help us understand all aspects of this issue”
- Polite and respectful
 - “In the best tradition of the citizens of our community”
 - Do not invoke a commission set of rules
- Note that ad hominem (personal) attacks are not in the tradition of “our community” and ask people to refrain

ALLOW ALL THE PUBLIC COMMENT that is there to be heard

- Have a podium
- Have a per speaker time limit (bell) and gently remind speakers to wrap up comments “in fairness to all the speakers”
- Take public comment on this topic first (after roll call)
 - Polite, respectful and personal
 - Thank each speaker
- Remember, this is sometimes a new experience for most speakers and each speaker is looking to be heard
- Sign up sheets or line up?

DO NOT ENGAGE

- If a commissioner engages one speaker then then others will demand a similar accommodation
- Always be respectful
 - Verbal and non-verbal communication
- Commissioners may ask a speaker to meet another time for more information
- Expect a bit of “street theatre”
 - Walk outs and backs turned

IF A MEETING GETS TOO HEATED take a break

- Better to have scheduled breaks
- Remind the audience of the “community standard” and respect for all who attend
- Keep a sense of perspective – the commission needs competing viewpoints
- Commissioners should never respond to a personal attack directed at them – let another commissioner or executive director invoke the community standard

MAKING THE DECISION

- Set a pre-determined meeting for discussion and decision
- Acknowledge the competing viewpoints
- Restate the role of the commission in balancing community viewpoints and interests
 - Talk about the port's mission
- Thank everyone for their input
- Actually discuss the issue and the viewpoints received
- Decide the issue and take a break

The Central Thesis

With proper planning and commissioner education of the meeting process, a port district can address a controversial topic in a public meeting in the most constructive manner possible and *make a discernable connection with the public*

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