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Lafayette switches back to live audio public comments following residents' complaints

By Pippa Fisher

The city of Lafayette is going back to using a virtual platform for meetings that allows remote live audio public comment, using a webinar format with safeguards in place to prevent "Zoom-bombing," starting June 8.

It is in response to an outcry from residents who found the previous system of emailing comments to be read by a staff member to be less than fair. Residents complained their comments were sometimes missed, not always read clearly and that it favored anyone from anywhere making a comment without having to sit through the meeting or even leave a name/address.

In particular many objected to the two hours of public comments read at the almost-seven hour May 18 planning commission hearing of the Terraces application. During that time residents complained no one was reached for questions on their comments.

Lafayette resident Paul Melmed Ph.D. says that outside pro-development groups infiltrated city virtual meetings and some are not even being asked to identify themselves. "This is even more dangerous than being Zoom-bombed," he says. "At live city meetings speakers are always asked to tell who they are and where they live."

Melmed, who has over 50 years experience specializing in speech and language development and learning, points out that human communication involves an instantaneous decoding of complex and intricate cues that are simultaneously delivered and understood with gestures, facial and body expressions as well as with rapid words, pitch and tone changes. "Online meetings still restrict this essential interpretive experience," he says.

"The last planning commission meeting, May 18th, was online and lasted nearly seven-hours. No interaction with the public was encouraged. No effort was given to have a resident's face appear on the monitor," says Melmed, calling for further discussion of one of the largest housing developments in Lafayette history to be postponed until after the pandemic.

At the May 26 city council meeting Lafayette Vice Mayor Susan Candell described the amount of emails she has received from people unhappy with the old format as "not getting deluged, but getting avalanched."

Lafayette Communications Analyst Jeff Heyman gave a brief recap in his staff presentation of the background, noting the problems the city had in its first meeting as cities across the state pivoted to virtual platforms made necessary by the shelter-in-place. In that first meeting, open to the public for full participation, Zoom "bombers" twice interrupted with crude and graphic content. To prevent a repeat, subsequent Zoom meetings were restricted to the participants but broadcast live, with the public encouraged to email their comments to be read out by staff.

Recognizing the city has some big meetings coming up, especially the planning commission's June 15 meeting regarding the Terraces, Mayor Mike Anderson stressed the need to get a better system in place quickly.

The council voted unanimously to allow live comment, at first settling on using a remote operator to host via a contract with PrimeGov or a similar vendor. However following the meeting, upon further examination the format seemed more complicated and, said Heyman, "was not a good fit for the city." Instead the city will be using Zoom with staff running the meeting and screening participants prior to comment. Video will not be allowed.

"The city listened to residents' frustration and is taking action to remedy the situation by allowing live comment," said Heyman after the meeting.

Full details of how to participate in public meetings can be found on the city website www.lovelafayette.org and links can be found on the agenda prior to the meeting in question.

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