



Under proposal, public comments won't be broadcast

Policy would be for Roselle council meetings

By Elliot Caroom
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

In Roselle, borough council meetings regularly run until midnight, 1 a.m. or even 2 a.m.

Councilwoman Cecilia Dallis-Ricks now wants to stop broadcasting the public comment portion, which she said leads to verbal abuse of the council by residents and makes meetings stretch into the wee hours.

"When the lights and cameras are on, we use it as a venue to act up and not do the business of the borough," said Dallis-Ricks, who proposed a council resolution to take the public comments off the air while continuing the cable coverage of the rest of the meetings.

Residents at Wednesday night's council meeting argued against the measure.

"If there's debate on an issue and somebody at home sees it, they may be energized to come out to the next meeting," said Rahaman Muhammad, a union president and regular speaker at council meetings. "Like it or not, you cannot take away the public's right to challenge you on policy."

The borough isn't legally obligated to broadcast meetings, which are formally recorded

in transcripts and minutes, but the meetings have been aired twice daily for six years on Comcast Channel 34, according to Mayor Garrett Smith.

Public comments are allowed at the end of each meeting, but if the proceedings stretch past 10 p.m., the council will stop and allow residents three minutes each to speak.

The new resolution states that long meetings make it difficult for the public to watch the council's business and also says the broadcasts should be shortened to reduce costs.

But Dallis-Ricks said Friday that conduct by residents who address the council is more of a concern than videotaping costs.

Councilwoman Christine Dansereau said several residents had complained to her that the public portion of the meeting makes Roselle look bad. Dallis-Ricks blamed the mayor for not cutting off members of the public who make abusive comments.

Smith said Friday that council members should be prepared to take the heat from residents and disagreed with the idea that the public is to blame

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for long meetings.

"The council takes up way more time than the public portion," Smith said. "Very rarely have I seen more than 15 people come to the mic, and that's 45 minutes of public speaking."

A lawyer for the Open Governance Project at the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey said Friday that the proposal is troubling.

"Generally, this sends a very bad message to the public," said attorney Bobby Conner. "Frankly, the message that it sends is that the council doesn't value the public's comments as much as their own."

Conner said that interactions between officials and residents can be a valuable source of information and noted that videotaping is a unique method of recording public meetings since they show facial expressions and demeanor.

The resolution will be up for discussion and a council vote at the next meeting, Wednesday.

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