A couple weeks ago, following a City Council meeting I spoke with a resident. He was frustrated at trying to get a concern of his on the meeting agenda and didn't know how to go about it. I explained that his particular concern had been discussed at a couple of City Council meetings previously and that he had been listened to during Citizen Comment periods.

Sometimes working within the environment of public notices and meetings, we can miss the perspective of the average person. His frustration caught my attention. We have reference books for the City Council and several committees to help them in their operations. But a brief overview for the citizen has been missing.

In one-on-one discussions with the Mayor, in strategic planning with the City Council, and in staff meetings, we repeatedly talk about the importance of transparency in city government. We do not see transparency as some mere buzzword but as one of our core values; we strive to be open and clear.

Transparency is essential to fostering trust and credibility. It helps the City Council and staff to know the public's concerns. And it helps the public to understand the City Council's decisions.

After talking with this resident about his frustration, I started drafting a Citizen's Guide to City Meetings. Right now it is still just a draft, but soon it will be a brief overview of public meetings, public input at meetings, public hearings, mechanics such as getting on the agenda, and civility.

Public Meetings

Wisconsin's open meetings law requires that all meetings of the City Council and any city committees 1) be preceded by public notice, 2) be held in places reasonably accessible to the public, and 3) be open to all citizens unless certain exceptions apply allowing the meeting to be closed.

Meeting notices must provide the date, time, place and subject matter of the meeting. Although the notice does not need to contain an overly detailed agenda, it does need to be reasonably specific to inform the public about matters to be considered by the committee.

The legal standard is that the notice be posted in three public places at least twenty-four hours prior to the meeting; we post at City Hall, Eager Free Public Library, and the Police Station. We take this very seriously and have even cancelled and rescheduled meetings when we have had an error in the notice.

We also use an e-mail service to send notices to anyone who signs up; additionally most notices are posted on the city website www.ci.evansville.wi.gov. Meeting minutes are posted on the website and published in the Evansville Review newspaper.

Public Input During Meetings

Generally speaking, the public has a right to attend meetings of any city committee. Although the public has a right to attend, the public does not generally have a right to participate at a meeting, unless the meeting is a public hearing.

However the City Council and most city committees routinely designate a period of public comment in its public notice. With "public comment" properly noticed, the committee may receive information from members of the public, and the committee may also discuss any matter raised by the public.

The city wants to be responsive to public concerns, but the committee cannot take legal action regarding the matter, other than to deal with it procedurally, until the matter has been specifically noticed in compliance with state open meeting laws.

Public Hearings

In general, a public hearing is required only if a state or federal law, agency regulation, or local ordinance mandates that a hearing be held. Of course, the city can decide to hold a public hearing even if there is no law or rule mandating that a hearing be held.

In Wisconsin, state law requires cities to conduct public hearings before taking certain actions. For example, the city must hold a public hearing before adopting or amending a zoning ordinance, acting on an application for a conditional use permit or variance, imposing special assessments, and adopting the annual budget.

When a public hearing must be held, proper notice typically has additional requirements above and beyond the normal open meeting laws. Additional requirements may include publication in the newspaper at least a week prior to the meeting or even mailed notices property owners within a certain geographic area.

At a public hearing, supporters of a particular proposal can explain why the action is necessary and persons opposed to the proposal can testify against the action. Comments received at a public hearing allow the committee to gauge the need for and impact of the proposed action. As a result of comments received at a public hearing, the city may modify or even reject a proposed or requested action.

Getting on the Agenda

The City Council does listen to the public's comments – whether heard during a meeting, solicited in a survey, or informally heard in a phone call or on the street. But sometimes a resident might want to specifically be on a meeting agenda rather than picked up under "citizen appearances."

The committee chair (although maybe delegated to staff) generally prepares the meeting agenda. As discussed above, the meeting notice must be reasonably specific about subjects for discussion and/or action, and the notice must be posted at least twenty-four hours prior to the meeting.

Generally, a phone call or email to the committee chair (or a member of the committee) can be enough to get a specific concern included on an upcoming meeting agenda. Additionally, the City Council may refer a particular matter of concern to a committee for discussion and recommendation.

Civility

In response to recent strife in federal and state governance, the City Council adopted a resolution promoting civil discourse in November 2011. The City Council regularly includes a civility reminder on its meeting agenda to highlight the importance of civility and respect. This expectation of civility applies for all individuals present or participating in the meeting, including the City Council, staff, and members of the public.

Community Thank You

Evansville Police Department's participation in the National Take-Back Day was a great success! We had over twenty people stop and drop off various medications; we took back several sharps and over 21 lbs of various medications on Saturday. Over the past six months, we have taken back 228 lbs of various medications at the 24/7 drop-box. Working with the Wisconsin State Patrol, all this unwanted and/or outdated medication will be collected by the Drug Enforcement Administration to be safely disposed and destroyed.

Particular thanks to Kopecky's Piggly Wiggly, Evansville Home Town Pharmacy, and Evansville Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, and BASE (Building a Safer Evansville) for spreading the word about the Take-Back Day. Also thank you to Jennifer Braun, Jim Brooks, Justin Mahan-Strupp, Ian Reilly, Evan Benedict, and Stefanie Gerberding for coordinating, collecting, and sorting.