

# opinion

Thursday, March 13, 2008

## Public hearings are for the public

**O**n Tuesday, the public had its first real chance to voice their opinion on the Garden City lands deal. That is to say, it should have.

Presentations from the three partners to the deal lasted for three-and-a-half hours. By that time, many of the people in the standing-room-only crowd were leaving. The public had about 30 minutes to speak to council. Four delegations—from a list of 52—managed to speak.

They included two elementary school kids, who took part in the Terra Nova Schoolyard Project. Obviously they knew this was more important than bedtime.

To the mayor's credit, he's following process. Proponents of any project get first crack at commenting, and further enlightening council, at a public hearing. And to council's credit, it has pledged the public hearing will continue for as long as it needs to.

Everyone will have an equal chance to talk the ears off civic politicians.

But Tuesday didn't seem like a public hearing. Instead of simply listening to delegations and asking questions for clarification, some council members used the opportunity as a soapbox, weaving their opinions around weak questions seemingly meant to enlighten the public. Those questions were more patronizing than informative.

Everyone in those council chambers knew why they were there. Some have a knowledge of the agreements between the three parties that runs deeper than any of the politicians, even perhaps some of the city staff.

If it's new information, put it on the table. But council members should already be well-versed in every other aspect of the agreement. One citizen charged the council with filibustering. The mayor aptly pointed out the irony, that his fellow council members were stalling the process by continuing to ask questions.

We shouldn't be able to predict council's vote during a public hearing. Council members are tasked with keeping an open mind. They must listen to delegations, ask questions for clarification and eventually vote based on what's best for the entire community.

Last night was round two. Hopefully there's more. Deals with native bands is new territory for the city. So is entering agreements that could impact the future livability—and sustainability—of the city.

This council needs to remember what a public hearing is all about: listening to the public.



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