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## In board and council meetings, the public's representatives shouldn't stonewall the public

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When Hugh Bassette stepped up to the microphone at the Hampton City Council meeting last week, he knew there wasn't going to be any dialogue about his perennial issue — when his neighborhood is going to get sidewalks and gutters. And he knew he wasn't going to get an answer to his question — is his neighborhood included in the work plan for the next year — at least not while the cameras were rolling and the audience was present.

It's a straightforward question. Surely someone in the room knew the answer — or should have, since every city council or board of supervisors should have present, during their meetings, the department heads who can handle the questions that are likely to come up.

Bassette talked to the Hampton council, but the situation he encountered seems to be common: governing bodies that don't engage the public during the public input parts of their meetings. There are exceptions, but generally neither council members nor staff respond. It can feel like an audience at Versailles, minus the elegance: Ordinary people beseech the powerful, who don't deign to explain themselves. It can feel cold.

Citizens ask questions, report problems and make appeals, and they're met with a polite "Thank you." Sometimes they don't even get polite. There have been recent incidents, in [Newport News](#) and Hampton, when council members felt the need to dress down citizens who spoke.

Obviously, members of city councils and boards of supervisors don't want to get into debates with citizens at their regular meetings. That can get out of hand. But between a running debate and a refusal to engage is a lot of fruitful territory.

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•Territory where questions can be answered. Bassette was asked to talk to officials after the meeting. But surely he isn't the only person interested in the answer. Everyone who watches or attends Hampton's meetings is familiar with the issue, since Bassette brings it up on a regular basis, complete with props in the form of correspondence with the city going back three decades. His neighbors want to know, and residents of other areas would be interested in what light the handling of this sheds on the city's priorities and spending practices.

•Territory where information can be provided on how government works. For example, when some residents begged the city for help with their leaky, new homes, it would have been helpful to review the inspection and permitting process to clarify for citizens why it doesn't catch all structural defects.

•Territory where erroneous assertions by speakers can be corrected with information.

•And territory where representatives can demonstrate that they grasp that what's transacted in that room is the citizens' business, and that citizens have a right — really, an obligation — to know what's going on. Sometimes, and not just in Hampton, the elected seem to think they have some proprietary claim to the business at hand, forgetting that it's entrusted to them.

There are, in other words, teachable moments.

This is not to say that every citizen has to get a response. Some show up to badger or harangue, and no council should get sucked into rehashing running disputes. But many deserve answers, even if meetings take a little longer.

Representative democracy isn't intended to be fast, but responsive.

**Postscript**  
Bassette should keep his props handy. Because if the city spends any taxpayer money on a \$250,000 monument to multiculturalism or a \$20,000 table/sculpture, both in observance of its 400th anniversary, there will need to be some convincing explanations as to how that trumps the basic needs that citizens, in budget hearings, told the city they think are a higher priority. That's why both items should be funded entirely by private money.

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Right on target. At a meeting two months ago the city manager responded to a couple questions from the month before. Yes the citizens had to wait one month and most were not in the room the next meeting. The mayor calls a number then waits for the person to speak till the buzzer cuts them off and says thank you and calls the next number. Half the time I don't even think they are listening. Soon they will require the public to go to another building , because of safety issues, to speak through a teleconferencing system so you can not even see if they are there. Of course that is a joke but I bet there are some of council who will now look into that. --- It is so sad. However, good for Mr. Bassette. He may have been going for years, been told for years they don't care about his neighborhood but he keeps coming back. I hope his neighborhood appreciates all he takes on their behalf because the council really does dismiss him.  
*watchingHampton (04/21/2010, 12:41 PM )*

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Great point. It applies also to post-Army Fort Monroe deciders. No politician, no official, no member of the Fort Monroe Authority has ever openly and thoroughly discussed and defended the basic planning presumptions in a back-and-forth with the public, Fort Monroe's actual owners. In fact, decision makers have worked hard to avoid accountability for their presumptions, sometimes by outright suppressing discussion. (Please ask me for suppression examples. A few are outright shocking.) Gov. Kaine was the worst offender. Never once did he actually discuss (as opposed to dodge) questions like the following: Should development be done just for the sake of development (and for the sake of developers), or should it be done only for the sake of Fort Monroe's self-sustenance? Why should Hampton taxpayers subsidize developers' ambitions at a national treasure that morally belongs to all Americans? As a planning criterion, isn't access to waterfront green space all across Fort Monroe just as important as Fort Monroe's history? If Virginia came to possess Monticello and Mount Vernon, would anybody -- even the most salivating developer -- suggest smothering either with the 800 new homes reportedly planned for Fort Monroe? Why are Virginia's leaders refusing to consider ownership of any Fort Monroe land by the National Park Service -- aren't we part of America? Isn't Fort Monroe? Thanks.  
*Steven\_T\_Corneliusen (04/21/2010, 7:35 AM )*

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