

CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE

City Council
City Hall • P.O. Box 911
Charlottesville, Virginia 22902
Telephone (434) 970-3113
Fax (434) 970-3890



An Open Letter from City Council February 2016

The job of City Council is to make decisions for the common good and to be as open and transparent as possible about it. To help us do that job in a more efficient and inviting way, City Council adopted some new procedures and policies to govern our own meetings. They are the result of considerable research and discussion with our City Attorney, our Clerk, the City Manager, among members of Council, and with members of other City Councils and Mayors, and were developed at an open work session held at City Hall. These new governing procedures are intended to create more transparency, broader engagement and a more efficient Council; less talk and more action means more tangible results that affect people's lives. That's what builds trust in government. Here are the major points:

#1: Written rules. It might surprise many to know that unlike many other Virginia cities, we previously had no public manual for procedures, meaning the public didn't know what rules we are using. Many of the new procedures simply restate current practice in a more accessible, unified fashion. For example, the ability of the Mayor to maintain order, the guidelines for public comment, and the fact that we proceed under Robert's Rules of Order are all existing procedures.

#2: Agenda time limits. Not many working families can arrange to watch meetings that go late into the night. This is why other councils and boards in Virginia have adopted time limits for agenda items. To try and end our meetings by a reasonable time, we will now allocate up to 20 minutes for an agenda item and up to 10 minutes for presentations. However, the Mayor and City Manager may still give more time for items, and Council will also be able to take more time when deliberating on motions if they need it.

#3: Robert's Rules. The purpose of Robert's Rules of Order is to ensure that minority opinions are heard and to focus debate on actions and issues rather than on personalities. While we have long used Robert's Rules of Order, we are now returning to following them more closely, including discussing matters only after a motion has been introduced. We also will place a great emphasis on collegiality in our deliberations.

#4: "Business" and "Working" meetings. In the past few years, much of the work of Council has been done in "work sessions" (informal public meetings where Council discusses an issue), none of which are televised. Our new changes will now move most work sessions into the public eye by creating two types of meetings: a "business meeting" and a "working meeting." Our business meeting will be the first meeting of each month and will focus on information, education, public engagement, and votes on ordinances. Our working meeting will include City Manager reports and work sessions. When necessary, a shorter regular business meeting may be held before the working meeting to vote on time-sensitive matters and to keep ordinances moving.

#5: Councilor time limits. It will come as no surprise to anyone that Councilors can have a lot to say. Taken together, this can lead to meetings that go so late people cannot actually watch them. For that very reason, Councilors previously used a timer when they were speaking. Our capital city, Richmond, gives their

Councilors a total of five minutes during agenda items. We are going to return to prior practice by imposing on ourselves the same three-minute limit we ask for speakers, with a longer time of five minutes when introducing a motion, which will lead us to make more focused comments and will make meetings more efficient. Councilors may speak more than once on a matter if needed, after everyone else has had a chance to speak, and will have a new three-minute limit each time.

#6: Responses to Matters by the Public. Today, each Councilor often feels the need to respond to many, if not all, of the comments made during Matters by the Public. However, this can create the expectation that it is Council's job, rather than that of our City Manager and our full-time staff, to address many of the issues raised by speakers. For that reason, few other boards and councils in Virginia allow such responses. Under the new policy, Councilors may sometimes respond to specific matters directed to them, but we will begin to defer the general response to Matters by the Public to our City Manager.

#7: Speaking for Council. Individual Councilors should always be able to state their disagreement with Council decisions as a personal opinion. However, confusion can result when Councilors speak against settled Council decisions, creating the impression that our decisions are never actually settled. For that reason, our new procedures require each Councilor to state that they are speaking only for themselves and not for Council unless they are representing an approved Council position. This will help lead to clarity for the public about our policy-making.

#8: Public comment pilot project. For many years, we have offered 12 slots during Matters by the Public at the beginning of our meetings and unlimited public comment after. But the only way to get one of the 12 slots was to come early and wait in line before a meeting. Our new six-month pilot project will now enable members of the public to sign up for slots by telephone, e-mail, or in person until 9 a.m. the day of a meeting.

In the event that more than 12 people want to speak, 12 speakers will be chosen randomly by an automated system, and a list will be posted by noon on the day of the meeting, along with a waiting list (in case selected speakers don't come). If 12 or fewer people want to speak, the situation will stay exactly the same as before, except people will now be able to plan ahead, as the list will be published on our website by noon on the day of a meeting. We believe the new system will be fairer and more accessible than the current first-come, first-served process, which simply cuts anyone off who is not in line before the slots are filled. The current system may benefit people who can afford to wait for a slot before the meeting, but we believe it discriminates against people who cannot afford to wait in line without knowing if they will get a spot – for instance, the single mother who has to put her kids to bed; the worker with three jobs; or the student with an evening class. We hear from a lot of folks who can't afford to take the extra hour to come early, not knowing if they'll get to speak or not. This way, they know by noon if they'll be speaking.

The advance sign-up only applies to speaking at the beginning of the meeting. The second Matters by the Public period, which will hopefully come earlier in the evening now, is still open to anyone who comes.

It's important to note that we will still have public hearings on ordinances during meetings, we will still have an unlimited public comment period at the end of our meetings, and we will still read every letter and e-mail we get from members of the public, and we will continue to hold Town Hall meetings, which invite unlimited public comment. While no process will be perfect, we believe this new system will be fairer and more accessible than the current one—and we can always reevaluate and improve on it after the six-month pilot is over.

We all want schoolchildren who watch Charlottesville City Council's meetings to say, "I want to be on City Council someday." These new governing procedures are intended to do just that by creating more transparent, engaging, enfranchising, and efficient meetings. We hope the thought and care that has gone into these new procedures is evident, and we hope you will let us know how we're doing. Please contact us at council@charlottesville.org with any questions, concerns, or ideas.