

ALERT: Your Ability to Address the Town Board Is in Danger

Supervisor Grace appears poised to change the long standing Town Board tradition of allowing residents to speak on any topic at the initial Courtesy of the Floor segment at board meetings. (Earlier, he unilaterally eliminated the long standing tradition of a second Courtesy at the end of the meeting.)

At the March 17th meeting, Supervisor Grace said that once his fellow Republicans, Greg Bernard and Tom Diana, were sworn in, he would propose that at the first Courtesy, residents would only be allowed to speak on issues that were on the agenda. If residents wanted to speak on any other topic, they would have to wait until the reinstated second Courtesy at the very end of the meeting.

(Since this plan sounds very much like what Tom Diana proposed at a candidates' debate last month, one is left to wonder if the supervisor had already discussed and planned this change with his fellow Republicans.)

I've asked that the procedures for Courtesy of the Floor be placed on the board's agenda for the March 24th work session -- which won't be televised. And if the supervisor or Councilmen Bernard or Diana propose such a change, I will strenuously object to it. I suspect Councilman Pate will also object to such a change.

YOU CAN OBJECT ALSO by emailing Supervisor Grace at mgrace@yorktownny.org. Let him know -- before the March 24th meeting -- that you don't want to be silenced. (Email addresses aren't available yet for Councilmen Bernard and Diana.)

Most comments made during Courtesy are not related to agenda items and it is unconscionable to make residents wait an indeterminate amount of time to speak at the end of the meeting. Anyone who has attended even a few board meetings knows that there's no way to know in advance when a meeting might end. It could 9pm, 10pm or 11pm and sometimes later.

Make no mistake about it, making residents wait until the end of the meeting to address the board is a thinly disguised way of discouraging residents from addressing the board. How very convenient. It's also a sign of disrespect for residents.

As I've said on many occasions, I agree that over the past three years Courtesy of the Floor has gotten out of control. But it's the supervisor who has created the problem by letting people speak for as long as they want and for carrying on a back-and-forth dialogue with the speaker.

The way to "fix" Courtesy is simple. Restore the old rules. The rules that worked.

1. Bring back -- and adhere to -- the 3-minute rule.
2. Don't allow back-and-forth dialogue between the speaker and a board member.
3. Wait until all the speakers have had their time at the podium before the supervisor and councilmen respond to any of the comments.
4. Comments from the supervisor and councilmen should be short and to the point. It's up to board members to move the meeting along. Don't try to shift the blame to residents.