

**Commentary: 3/8/2013**

## **Supervisor Restricts Courtesy of the Floor at Town Board Meetings**

By Susan Siegel

Why has Supervisor Grace unilaterally eliminated a time honored Yorktown tradition: giving residents the opportunity to address their elected officials at both the beginning and end of Town Board meetings? The tradition is known as Courtesy of the Floor.

And why have the four councilmen given their silent acquiescence to this change?

For those not familiar with Courtesy of the Floor, it's the time during Board meetings when you can ask questions or make comments about anything that's on your mind, from a problem you or your neighbors may be experiencing, to your opinion about anything, to promote a community event, or to question an item on the Board's agenda. Board members can respond to — or ignore — your questions and comments. The choice is theirs.

If you think about it, it's sort of ironic. When he took office a little more than a year ago, Supervisor Grace went out of his way to commend the people who took the time to attend Board meetings, address the Board during Courtesy of the Floor and, in general, participate in local government. In fact, initially he even abolished the time limit imposed on each speaker — a policy that was subsequently reversed. And now, 14 months later, he's going in the opposite direction. He's making it more difficult — and clearly less convenient — for you to do exactly what he once commended you for doing.

Why the change? Could it be that he doesn't want to answer some of the questions that residents are asking?

So far, it's not clear which Courtesy segment Supervisor Grace (the Supervisor generally controls the meeting agenda) plans to eliminate, the first or the second. For the public, each Courtesy segment serves a different — and important — purpose.

During the first Courtesy at the beginning of the meeting, you can ask a question or make a comment, listen to the Board's response, and then leave without sitting through the entire meeting which sometimes lasts for hours.

The second Courtesy period at the end of the meeting gives you the opportunity to ask for clarifications about something the Board did during the meeting but which wasn't fully explained. For example, the Board might vote to hire a person or a company, but the resolution might not clearly explain for what purpose, at what cost or over what time period, issues that are important to you as a taxpayer.

Let me be clear. Courtesy of the Floor is exactly what the words say: a courtesy. Other than at public hearings, there is no law, federal, state or local, that gives you the right to speak at Town Board meetings. This point was made perfectly clear by Robert Freeman, executive director of the Committee on Open Government at a recent community meeting. You have the right to be notified about meetings and the right to attend and observe meetings, but not the right to speak at meetings.

Your opportunity to address your elected officials at a public meeting is a privilege, a privilege that your elected officials can grant or take away — at their pleasure.

How do you feel about losing that privilege?

For more information about your rights to an open and transparent government, visit [www.yorktownbettergovernment.org](http://www.yorktownbettergovernment.org)