

Rules Are Needed for Courtesy of the Floor

By Susan Siegel

It's time the Town Board adopted some written ground rules for Courtesy of the Floor — and stuck to them.

The May 7 and May 21 Town Board meetings are just the latest examples that Courtesy of the Floor has gotten out of hand and that something needs to be done to bring order back to the process.

- Residents have no idea how to plan their comments: how long will they be allowed to speak?
- Residents aren't sure how to react when the supervisor interrupts them: should they be polite and let him continue talking, or should they, in turn, interrupt him and ask that they be allowed to complete their remarks?

For many, many years, until January, 2012, Courtesy of the Floor functioned smoothly. There was no need for written rules. A succession of supervisors and councilmen honored this long standing Yorktown tradition. The public knew what the guidelines were. They knew that regardless of what they had to say, all speakers would be treated equally — and courteously.

- Speakers were limited to three minutes — and were timed. Typically, they were allowed to finish a sentence when the buzzer sounded, but not much more. If they had more to say, they waited until the second Courtesy at the end of the meeting.
- Speakers could comment on any topic they wanted.
- Board members waited until all the speakers had completed their comments before responding to any or all speakers.
- If speakers wanted to respond to a Board member's comments, they waited until the second Courtesy.

All that changed in January, 2012 when Michael Grace became supervisor and made a unilateral decision to change these long established guidelines.

- He eliminated the three minute time limit and let speakers talk for as long as they wanted.
- He frequently interrupted speakers and engaged in a back and forth dialogue with them.

When it became apparent that the unlimited, open ended Courtesy of the Floor was getting out of hand (one Courtesy session lasted 1½ hours), Supervisor Grace returned to the three minute rule — sort of — when it suited him. And at one point, he unilaterally cancelled the second Courtesy of the Floor, even when members of the public were present. (He later stated that this was never his intention and that his comments had been “misinterpreted.”)

Before the political season begins in earnest (all five Board members are up for election), it's clear that this Board needs to adopt a written set of Courtesy ground rules — and agree that the rules are to be enforced — uniformly and fairly.

At a minimum, the rules should cover:

1. Will there be a time limit, and if so what?
2. If there is a time limit, how much beyond the buzzer will the person be able to continue?

3. Will Board members be able to interrupt speakers before their time is up?
4. Will Board members be able to respond to a speaker immediately after the person has spoken? If so, will the speaker be able to respond? Will there be any limits on a back and forth dialogue?
5. Will there continue to be two guaranteed Courtesy of the Floor segments, one at the beginning of the meeting and one at the end?
6. Will speakers continue to be able to say anything they want (other than personal attacks) regardless of whether someone considers the comment “political”?
7. And finally, who will enforce the rules?

Two final thoughts that residents should keep in mind.

- Courtesy of the Floor exists only at “regular” Board meetings, not work sessions.
- Courtesy of the Floor is totally at the discretion of the Town Board. Other than at advertised public hearings, the public has no inherent right to be allowed to speak at a Town Board meeting.

Please. Let’s return fairness, civility and predictability to this time honored, and valuable, Yorktown tradition.

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