

Some recent decision-making by the Winneshiek County Board of Supervisors has been characterized by serious lapses in both state protocol and governing principles. Agendas have not always provided fair notice to the public of important matters under active consideration by the board. Board actions have sometimes been made abruptly, inviting the impression that the underlying decisions were made in advance of the board meeting, out of public view. Agenda items appear to take some board members by surprise, suggesting that the process of setting the agenda does not involve the full board. These lapses have been of considerable public concern, as has been reflected in greater attendance at recent meetings. We believe the following changes in the conduct of board meetings would serve to improve board decision-making and encourage public confidence in the board's actions.

– The full board should be involved in establishing each meeting's agenda. Each board member's wishes cannot always be accommodated when there is disagreement over whether to include a particular agenda item, of course, but each member's input should be sought before an agenda is published. This will permit more effective meeting preparation by all board members and the public. In addition, participation by all board members in setting the agenda should help avoid situations in which agendas do not adequately notify the public of the scope and nature of board actions under consideration.

– Board members should commit to a full public airing of the rationale for each significant board decision, in public and at properly-noticed board meetings. (Section 21.1 of the Iowa's Open Meetings Law provides: "This chapter seeks to assure, through a requirement of open meetings of governmental bodies, that the basis and rationale of governmental decisions, as well as those decisions themselves, are easily accessible to the people.")

– Each board meeting should include at least a brief opportunity for public comment, subject to appropriate time constraints, like the board meetings in most nearby counties and our local Decorah City Council as well. Our board evidently regards this as unnecessary, because a member of the public wishing to be heard at one of its meetings may contact the board in advance and be placed on the agenda. While being placed on the agenda in this way does serve to provide notice of what issues will be addressed, it would also be valuable to provide an opportunity each meeting to let members of the public briefly identify matters of interest or concern to them which might then warrant inclusion on a future agenda.

– Each board meeting should be recorded on video and made accessible to the public online. Many members of the public have work, school, or other commitments that prevent attending meetings on Monday mornings. Online access would permit them to view a meeting as their schedules permit. In addition, a more detailed record would be created of board deliberations on important issues over time, well beyond what meeting minutes provide. Some recent meetings have been video-recorded and put online by members of the public, which has demonstrated the value of this practice. But having such recordings available to all should not be a matter of whether particular volunteers happen to be available to perform this service. The board should undertake this responsibility to make its proceedings readily accessible in the public interest.

In summary, enacting these items will help serve the public's interest in the long term, while strengthening the trust they are due from their elected officials. This ultimately leads to better governing.

## BOS LETTER

Let me start by saying that I sympathize with the Boards present Budget difficulties; due entirely to restrictions by our Legislature; the same folks who scream the loudest about the Federal Govt. pre-empting their own decision making. You have difficult decisions to make, but I hope you will give strong consideration to the suggestions made by the authors of this letter.

When I first came on the Board, I was fortunate to be acquainted with many of our fine County employees and my colleagues on the Board. **Because we valued the diversity of each others' abilities, life experiences and perspectives, we were able to work well together as a team.**

With new, or more complex issues, we extended that same trust and respect to the public. By asking for their input, we not only arrived at better solutions but gained trust and understanding. I believe we were able to improve not only day to day services to the public, but to build a spirit of cooperation and innovation that went beyond County Government.

At a time when public cynicism about government is at a disturbingly high level, it is in **everyone's** interest to model our best behavior and expect it from our elected officials. In conversations with former and present County Supervisor colleagues about the actions taken by our present Boards majority. I have heard: "they panicked", "didn't do their homework". But the word most commonly used was "**unprofessional**". In sharp contrast to Engineer Bjerkes' very strong justification for the Roadside Management Program, (available on the County website) the rationale given for their action is mere bumper sticker sloganeering. Spending must be balanced with revenue but **the most important currency in government is the public trust.**