

NORTH METRO

Observer Group keeps tabs on Anoka County Board, leading to a policy change

After the volunteers raised questions, the county revised its policy so that public comment will now be a formal agenda item at committee meetings.

By **Hannah Covington** (<http://www.startribune.com/hannah-covington/386835701/>) Star Tribune |

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The two-word agenda item tucked at the end of a recent Anoka County committee meeting spoke volumes to the few observers lining the walls, clipboards in hand.

That brief item, which listed “public comment” as the final order of business, tapped into one citizen group’s broader beef with county officials about government transparency.

Known as the Observer Corps, this group, made up of volunteers from the north metro’s League of Women Voters as well as community members, has been keeping tabs on the Anoka County Board for the past year, attending meetings and taking notes. From the get-go, the county’s public comment policy has created confusion, members said.

“We’re getting mixed messages,” said Coon Rapids resident Dee Ann Christensen, the group’s chairwoman.

Anoka County officials say they’ve abided by a long-standing informal policy regarding public comment, which allows public comments during committee meetings rather than regular board meetings. But Observer Corps members say they’ve not always felt welcome to speak.

“They’ve cut people off in the past,” said Mel Aanerud, of Ham Lake, who has attended about 20 county meetings since last year. “I had the feeling it wasn’t proper to ask questions during the meeting.”

After the Observer Corps and the Star Tribune raised questions about the policy, the county revised its policy so that moving forward, public comment will now be a formal agenda item at committee meetings.

Counties across the metro vary in their public comment practices, but most carve out time for residents to chime in.

No law or statute requires local governments to do so, leaving it up to officials to decide how best to field public participation, said Julie Ring, executive director of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

“Counties use a variety of ways to gather public input,” including more “grass roots means,” like forums and workshops, Ring said. “[Public comment] is an important tool, but it’s only one part of how the community connects with their local elected officials.”

Policies vary

Questions over public comment policies often stem from how this time relates to the state’s Open Meeting Law.

This law aims to open up the political process by guaranteeing that members of the public can attend and observe meetings — not necessarily that they can speak.

While public comment is a common part of city, school board and county meetings, it can involve an “awkward and difficult balance” for officials, said Mark Anfinson, an attorney for the Minnesota Newspaper Association with expertise in the state’s public records and meetings laws. The larger the public body, the trickier the balance becomes, Anfinson added.

“The most common friction is the amount of time that citizens can talk,” he said.

Efforts to regulate this time have increased as more local bodies incorporate public comment, said David Schultz, a professor of law and ethics at Hamline University.



Observer Corps, a group focused on

Christensen, shown with citizen rep Bob Thistle after a county meeting, said “mixed signals” have been given on public commenting at

In Ramsey County, officials opt not to allot time for public comment at board meetings, while other counties set careful parameters regarding what can and cannot be addressed — and for how long.

Policies in Scott and Carver counties, for example, limit the formal public comment period to items not already on the agenda.

Not that the board refuses to hear about agenda items as well, said Carver County Administrator Dave Hemze.

“It’s part of open government and an important piece of our meetings — that citizens have a right to be heard,” Hemze said.

Hennepin County residents can voice their concerns for three minutes every other week during an open forum time at committee meetings, rather than at board meetings.

In Anoka County, commissioners vet agenda items at separate meetings within eight major committees before forwarding these items to the full County Board for approval. Public comment, officials say, happens at the committee level because it’s more amenable to discussion.

“It’s a much friendlier and more informal environment,” said Chairwoman Rhonda Sivarajah.

Clarifying the process

When the Observer Corps formed in October 2015, members said it was because they wanted to demystify the decisionmaking process in Anoka County. Despite going to county meetings regularly, some elements of the political process remain unclear, they said. Complicated agendas, resolutions and jargon make even committee meetings difficult to follow, they added.

County officials said questions during these meetings are welcome, as are personal interactions and correspondence.

“We can’t always go in depth on every decision that they act on,” County Administrator Jerry Soma said. “It’s best for the citizens to ask questions about something that they didn’t understand.”

Now that public comment is on the agenda, the 10-member Observer Corps said it intends to outline its concerns in a letter to commissioners moving forward.

“Transparency isn’t about the decision that’s made but how it’s made,” said Jeorgette Knoll, president of the League of Women Voters in the Anoka, Blaine and Coon Rapids area. “It’s the process that we’re interested in.”
