

Open Forum

Public Forum 8/16/16  
Council mtg

8/16/16 - Nancy Parker

Re: Reflections from under the bus - Council Corner *Daily Tidings*, Michael Morris

For the record, nobody is throwing anybody under a bus.

Re Normal Neighborhood - A year ago, I was part of a Citizen Action Group organized to address citizen concerns that had not been directly or indirectly addressed by decision-makers.

While it's true that several "public" meetings were held, the public's actual input had been highly restricted, both in terms of time allowed and real interactive dialogue. Citizens were allowed just a few minutes to comment in hours-long meetings and were prevented from asking questions directly of staff, council, and developers. Later on in the process, 92 citizens showed up at the council meeting last Sept. for the first reading. Most had to leave due to crowded chambers and were led to a room where the closed-circuit television was non-functional. Unfortunately, by this time the whole decision on the NNP was a done deal anyway. The point is, there was never an occasion early in the process when the public had an open, wide-ranging dialog with city staff and council.

I feel this morning's article kind of misses the point. We have a problem in Ashland with the *process* under which controversial proposals are addressed and decided. Part of that process seems to involve too much behind-the-scenes, informal discussion by decision-makers to which the public is not privy. By the time an issue surfaces in public awareness, sides have already been chosen, votes have been aligned, and little meaningful discussion ensues. It's true that, when the public, after banding together and presenting themselves in great numbers, expressed their disapproval of the Normal Neighborhood Plan, their concerns were finally heard and it did result in changes to the Master Plan. But it had been preceded by months and months of stonewalling and resistance. The only council member who actively and consistently listened to the concerns of our citizen action group was Councilor Voisin.

Democracy's messy. Yes, we need to build consensus, but consensus that refuses to consider all points of view is not true consensus: it is "group-think", where a majority of decision-makers pre-agree on their stand, don't listen with open minds to different points of view, and resist finding ways to accommodate those perspectives.

During the founding of our country, Alexander Hamilton, writing to Thomas Jefferson, expressed concern about the potential in any democratic body for a “tyranny of the majority,” by which was meant:

a scenario in which a majority places its own interests above those of a minority, constituting active oppression comparable to that of a tyrant.

The danger of this occurring is real when there is a strong and consistent majority within any democratic body, one that always votes for or against issues as a united front, against a minority. This is why the question of “process” matters. Elected officials must work hard to ensure openness and transparency in decision-making. True, the public’s obligation is to become informed, and elected officials must go the extra mile to assist in that informational process. Then, when citizens express concerns and ask to be heard, they should be listened to and heard *before* the issue has been decided behind closed doors, even if it means it takes a little more time. That listening must occur early enough in the process so that “group-think” can be replaced by the collective wisdom arising from inclusion of all points of view. And just because people disagree about something, and express that disagreement, doesn’t mean anybody’s being thrown under the bus.