KZGN News Talking Points Editorial: Tuesday, December 16, 2014

By: Tom Wiknich

Today’s topic will be: Council Town Hall and Committee Meetings

Let’s discuss some Facebook comments about last Friday’s Ridgecrest Talk interview with Pastor Randy Jenkins. I filled in as the host for this particular show.

Skip wrote, “You conducted an interesting interview under the limitations of the circumstances. You steered things a bit with regard to monthly city council meetings. Just allowing your guest to ramble a bit was most effective. Congratulations.” Thanks, Skip. Sometimes the best way to get info from people is to allow them to speak what is on their mind freely.

Icey was not quite as happy with my interview. Icey wrote, “No offense, but I thought it was going to be more than a meet and greet. Come on.” Larry wrote, “No hard questions asked. It was more of a public introduction.”

From these and other Facebook comments, some had hoped that I would ask other questions that may embarrass him on TV. All I can say is that I believe guests should be treated with respect. And in no circumstance would I ever criticize minors.

And finally Mary was OK with the interview. She wrote, “Wiknich’s interview was OK. It’s a talk show, not a news show, and those two things are different.” Thanks, Mary. I will not treat anyone rudely as some would like.

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Today’s editorial topic: Council Town Hall and Committee Meetings

Last week, I reported that Mayor Breeden made a few suggestions for the council to consider. I supported all but one of her suggestions: reducing the amount of council meetings from twice per month to once per month. I completely disagree. Public service is about access to our elected officials. Cutting meetings in half reduces that access. It is ok to cancel a meeting from time to time due to no agenda items, but to flat do away with half of the meetings is not good.

Now about town hall meetings, Peggy has suggested they be held quarterly. While I did mine monthly when I was on the council, quarterly is better than none. She has also hoped that people would send in ideas or topics that they would like discussed. That is a good idea. However, when I did them, lacking anyone’s suggestion or request of topic, I would announce what the topic would be presented. At every town hall, a staff person would provide a presentation about a particular topic. After that, I would open up the meeting to any topic. This part is key to town halls. They should be open to anyone and any topic and not restricted to what the elected official wants to talk about. And everyone should not be restricted by time limits. A maximum time for the meeting can be established at the beginning, but no one should be cut off, unless by some chance it would get disrespectful or violent. We usually had them go 2 hours, or until everyone was done commenting. Again, remember the reason for town halls: To improve openness and transparency, to make public officials available to those they serve, to allow an actual back and forth discussion of topics in an informal environment. Elected officials should answer as many questions as they can at the meeting, not defer them to staff for some other time. That never happens. Yes, some questions can result in having to delay for more information. But the mayor should make sure that it is followed up on, and the unanswered questions answered as soon as practical.

Now about bringing back council committee meetings, this is also a good idea. When I was on the council, we had committee meetings. They were often attended by 2 to 10 people regularly. The purpose of committee meetings was to discuss certain items with staff in detail, to provide staff with some input on how to proceed. More importantly than that, interaction between the council and staff was including the public in the discussion. The back and forth discussion between all 3 sides was invaluable. Often, someone from the public offered an idea or comment that no one had thought of until then. Many great suggestions from the public were received and accepted by the committee and staff.

In conclusion, yes mayor, bring back the town halls and committee meetings. They are valuable tools in the goal of openness and transparency.

In closing, tell me what you think! I encourage your email comments. Whether you agree with me or don’t, I’d like to read your comments. I may read some email comments on my next editorial. If you have a suggestion of an issue you’d like me to discuss, email that to me, as well. Please email them to info@kzgn.net.