

## Board: Public comment policy generous, fair

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Feel free to continue speaking your piece at Middletown supervisors meetings. Just don't wear out the microphone and check the redundancy at the door.

The board voted Tuesday night to continue the practice of holding a public comment period on non-agenda items at the start of meetings, and at the end, after other business has been completed.

Public comment at the start of meetings will continue to be a total of 30 minutes for all speakers combined. The supervisors decided against imposing a per-speaker time limit of three or five minutes. However, they urged Chairman Tom Gallagher to use his discretion to limit speakers who are rambling or being verbose or repetitious.

"I'm not for anything that will limit the public's opportunity to speak," said Supervisor Patrick Mallon. "We have to be sensitive to the needs of the community. But perhaps at times an individual who is going on and on and repeating the same things needs to be encouraged to get to the point."

Added board member Robert McMonagle: "I think it has to be taken case by case. There should be give and take between the board and public. It's been the practice here that we have discourse with and engage with our citizens."

The board solidified its public comment policy Tuesday after criticism from former supervisor Chuck Thompson after the Jan. 4 reorganization meeting, during which the board didn't hold a public comment session on non-agenda items until near the end of the meeting. Thompson said that practice made residents wait too long and had the effect of discouraging public comment.

There are three new faces on the board this year. Republicans Gallagher, Mallon and Drew Kreiling were elected in November and joined Republican George Leonhauser and Democrat McMonagle on the board at the reorganization meeting. Thompson was defeated in the November election.

Gallagher said Thompson's criticism of the new board's public comment practice was premature because Jan. 4 was not a regular meeting and the board had not yet officially established a public comment policy. Gallagher added he was just following the same agenda format used at the two previous reorganization meetings held by previous boards.

In addition to the two public comment sessions at the beginning and end of meetings, the board also will allow public comment on nearly every agenda item. However, Gallagher has ruled twice at the last two meetings that certain agenda items "were not public comment items." For example, he did not call for public comment Tuesday before a vote to have township administrators give quarterly budget reports.

McMonagle said public comment should be allowed on every agenda item.

"Voting for the manager to give a quarterly budget report would be considered an administrative action, and the Sunshine Law does not require public comment on administrative actions," explained township solicitor Joseph Pizzo. "However, the supervisors can allow public comment on any item if, collectively, they are of a mind to."

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