

Attendance at municipal meetings spikes in January, then drops off dramatically

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Few people attend regular meetings in many municipalities from February through December, indicating a public that is either too busy or not interested. Along with voter turnout percentages at all-time lows, that is a concern for elected officials and political analysts.

But the lack of attendance changes in January. The first meeting of the year in a lot of local towns is like church service on Christmas Day. Typically unoccupied seats are suddenly all taken. People who arrive late stand in the back of the room. There are ceremonies, speeches, camera flashes and smiling faces, some unfamiliar.

At Egg Harbor City's meeting Jan. 3, Mayor Joe Kuehner played the role of the pastor who has tired of sermonizing to empty pews.

"There are many meetings where it's just us," he told the packed room, referring to City Council. "We welcome ideas. We welcome people to come in and tell us what they think. ... That's what our democracy is all about."

Elected leaders throughout South Jersey know that feeling well.

In many communities, it is not uncommon for a governing body to open the meeting for public comment, per procedure, with no one from the public present.

At other times, a municipal hall is filled at the start of a meeting by friends and family who have attended to see a police officer get promoted, or watch a good Samaritan get an award. But immediately after the presentation, most of those people shuffle out, leaving the room mostly empty once again.

Knowing that to often be the case, officials will briefly adjourn the meeting so that people chatting as they leave will not be a disruption. Mayors frequently tell the crowd that they would be happy to see them stay, but will understand if they leave.

"Sort of like a commercial break during a football game," said Ocean County Administrator Carl Block, who was a mayor and committeeman in Stafford Township for more than 25 years. "We would give that pause, and, yes, 90 percent of the people would leave."

In some cases, elected leaders have tried to boost public participation by bringing their meetings to the people. Township committees in Weymouth Township and Lower Township decided to hold meetings outside the municipal building last year.

"We're there to represent the people, and the people's input is paramount," said Lower Township Deputy Mayor Kevin Lare, whose governing body held a meeting at a fire hall in December and plans to hold three more "mobile meetings" this year.

Many governments also videotape their meetings and broadcast them on public television or post them on their website, hoping to reach a wider audience.

"That's one of the reasons we started taping our meetings, because they weren't well-attended," said Linwood Mayor Richard DePamphilis, although he said he's never tried to account for how many people watch those videos, imagining the viewership is similarly low.

Without that participation, there are indications that democracy may be suffering, especially on the local level where decisions most directly affect residents.

In the recent general election, voter turnout statewide was only 27 percent, the lowest in at least 85 years and maybe

the lowest ever.

At the same time, few people are stepping up to serve. Of the 54 governments that held local elections in November, 29 failed to attract full slates of candidates to compete for the open seats.

Of the people who did run, several candidates admitted that they had rarely attended meetings in the past themselves.

"I think people live busy lives and politics is not always a priority," said Daniel Douglas, director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College.

But attending meetings throughout the year and getting familiar with candidates' points of view before election season is often the best way to stay informed. On the local level, when candidates may not have much of a political record and media coverage is limited, it is sometimes the only way to make an informed decision.

"We absolutely encourage people to stay informed about their communities all year round," said Kerry Margaret Butch, executive director of the League of Women Voters New Jersey chapter. "Go to town council meetings and participate all year round, not just during election time."

It seems the easiest way to draw a crowd is to stir up a controversial issue. Every government has a few dedicated critics, but public safety layoffs, tax increases and political disputes tend to attract large, vocal audiences.

"If the town is being run properly, or efficiently, then I think people stay home," Lare said. "People are busy today. Unless there's an issue that directly impacts a person, they typically don't take part in the public meetings."

The irony of reorganization meetings is that despite their high attendance rate, they are largely ceremonial, held to appoint professionals and swear in newly elected members. At the regular meetings that follow, when board members actually carry out the government's business, few watch.

"I would love to come and see every seat filled at every meeting," Block said. "I would always say, 'Don't ask the person serving coffee at Wawa what we're doing. Don't ask the guy at the barbershop what we're doing. Come and ask us what we're doing, and we'll explain it.' That's what democracy is supposed to be about."

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