

To the (Courier) Editor:

Frustration over City Hall's ambivalent regard for the public interest seems to have reached a boiling point. A letter to the Courier last week alleged improper influence at the Planning Commission concerning the Oakhurst Drive condominiums project. Another expressed outrage at a surprise Saturday-morning tree-removal operation at Parcels 11 & 12. And a longtime tenant, now evicted, pleaded for protection for renters from predatory developers.

Evidently some residents don't feel that City Hall is working on our behalf. Even the Courier last week wondered why a 30-day comment window for the massive 9900 Wilshire project would open and close over this holiday season.

Is communication the problem? It is clear that city's messaging isn't always effective. Despite our well-resourced (but manager-heavy) communications division, the city's website, long ago crafted for desktop browsing, remains a riot of submenus not easily manipulated on a mobile device. Then there's our 'Ask Bev' portal. It is preferred by officials for resident-initiated contacts but it too presents a poor user experience. Even the frequently-asked-questions feature begs for a re-do. Staffers themselves say they dislike using it.

A cynic would argue that griping about websites and such misses the point: officials don't want 'we-the-people' too involved in 'the people's business' down at City Hall.

Consider how the city sometimes schedules meetings. Take the 9900 Wilshire project for example. Though it portends significant impacts to traffic and congestion, the supplemental environmental review process could hardly be better scheduled to discourage public involvement.

Just last summer, the Southeast Area Task Force convened its own public workshop to solicit input on future development in that area but held it just two days before the federal July 4th holiday. Turnout was light yet that process will move forward as if it had substantial buy-in from the public.

Inconvenient scheduling affects regular city business too. A recent City Council & Planning Commission liaison committee met the Tuesday before this past Thanksgiving Day. We're pretty sure few stakeholders had an eye on the city calendar that week. Did any turn out? We don't know: liaison meetings are neither televised nor synopsized.

One of the most persistent barriers to public participation is the city's noticing policy. That planning liaison meeting was noticed just 24 hours in advance. That's no aberration; it's routine despite California's open meetings law requiring 72-hours notice at a minimum. Is that legal? It is when a meeting is labeled 'special' (as most liaison meetings are). But there is nothing particularly 'special' about meetings in Beverly Hills that are internally-calendared days in advance but noticed to the public just 24 hours beforehand.

Also routine is the practice of posting liaison committee meeting notices without providing a staff report, PowerPoint, or any other material that would help

stakeholders understand the issue in order to offer informed comment at the meeting.

Even worse, sometimes city meetings are neither announced via online calendar nor e-noticed via email. Whether by oversight or design, that's perfectly legal too. You see, the City Hall hasn't designated the city website as an 'official posting place.' To be sure you're seeing all the meeting notices be sure to journey over to the library's bulletin board.

Communication is a two-way street, of course, and we-the-people have to make an effort to keep ourselves informed. But when City Hall makes it such a challenge to participate, the inevitable outcome is declining attendance at city meetings; depressed turnout at the polls; and most dangerous, less attention to the people's business from outside City Hall.

This poses a threat to City Hall legitimacy over the longer term. After all, we want City Hall to work on our behalf and not only for developers and their well-connected representatives; we want our representatives' ear rather than cede it to those who come from the same elite social circles as policymakers.

Until we're included as partners in local governance, we'll continue to feel blindsided when a neighbor's new mini-mansion breaks ground. We'll hear only after-the-fact that a significant city policy change will affect us. We'll learn too late that our apartment building has been sold out from under us with few rights, scant compensation and no recourse under local laws.

That frustration we feel owes largely to the result of communications changes over the last few years that tightened notification requirements for development projects and moved more planning-related decisions from the appropriate commission to the planning director herself (without an opportunity for public comment). Want to appeal the director's decision? Be prepared to fork over \$3,729 for the privilege.

Should popular perception shift from everyday questions about City Hall competence to concerns about policymaker integrity, it will be a long climb back to gain the people's trust. Or has it already slipped away?

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Via electronic delivery 12/7/15