

PUP 301: Introduction to Urban Planning
October 27, 2014
John Smith

Phoenix City Council Meeting

On Wednesday, November 7, the Phoenix City Council meeting stood packed with attendees ranging from lawyers, (largely elderly) concerned citizens, neighborhood representatives, business owners, and many others insistent on playing a direct role in the due process of local government. The meeting began with a formal opening, including a prayer by the pastor of a local church, and the presentation of the flag, performed specially this time by the members of a nearby ROTC group.

This series of formalities set the tone for the structure and flow of the meeting as a whole. Things maneuvered quickly and efficiently thanks to the concise language of both the City Clerk and the Mayor, who guided the agenda of the meeting. In general, each agenda item was introduced by the Clerk, then led through the Council by the Mayor, who asked for each item's approval by the Council. The official order of the agenda acted largely as a general guideline, as the meeting diverged from the stated order with relative frequency. Instead of a strict order, the items seemed to be processed first in terms of how easily they might be approved. Entire swaths of proposals were approved if the Council did not receive any requests for speaking relating to the item, and if the Council was expected to approve the item unanimously. In theory, most of these items had already been hashed out in the various other committees through which any agenda item must pass before reaching the City Council.

Following the passage of the "quick" measures, the Clerk maneuvered back to the agenda items skipped in the prior mass approval. In a few cases, such as one particular liquor license approval, the agenda item was simply continued to another Council meeting a month later,

allowing the Council and Mayor to research the item more, and for the applicants to address any problems brought up through the various hearings. Otherwise, the remainder of the agenda items required discussion. In these cases, before going up for a vote there was distinctive debate between questioning council members, registered speakers, and defendants of the proposed item. At this point the Mayor called up the applicants (or defendants) for the item, and they all sat at a table facing the City Manager, City Clerk, and City Attorney, and the Mayor and City Council. Firstly, the defendants presented their case to the city employees as well as the public, laying out their plans, and any changes that had taken place thus far through the various other hearings and meetings which they have been forced to work through. Then, in response, the Mayor began calling up those who had submitted formal cards, either in support of, or in opposition to the agenda item. At the podium, these members of the public voiced their positions and reasoning to both the Council and the applicants, often ending with concerns or questions to be addressed further.

In order to speak formally, concerned citizens had to submit comment cards either before the meeting or at its beginning, detailing their name and organization, and whether they were for or against the item in question, often with comments to support their position. According to general policy, each speaker was given two minutes to make their contribution, though many were given more time if they were leading toward a specific point, or a dialogue needed to happen between him or her and either the Council or the applicant/defendant. Once the comment cards were finished, the Mayor also made a call for public comment, allowing anyone with thoughts on the given item the chance to approach the podium unannounced and make their point to the audience. Then, once no further discussion was presented, the Mayor closed the public

comment time, and asked the Council to propose a vote on the subject, gathering two lead votes before a full roll-call of votes was taken by the Clerk.

In regard to the specific people who spoke at the meeting, variety was certainly the key term. Depending on the specific agenda item being addressed, the speakers and defendants varied. For instance, when discussing the privatization of the meal program at a senior center, the defendants were members of the City of Phoenix staff, speaking on the changes being proposed and their potential effects. Questioning the decision were concerned members of the community being served and a representative of the union whose employees were used in the prior publicly-administered meal program. Then, in the audience sat a sizable group of probable patrons of the community center and meal program, eagerly waiting to see how their needs would be met going forward. Later, when hearing a zoning proposal for a new commercial development on the edge of a residential area, nearby residents, the developers, and the architect for the project spoke their minds. While some residents spoke in opposition to any sort of commercial development arising so near to their homes, leading to potential disturbances by parking and deliveries, others spoke of the great potential the project had for providing a gathering place in the neighborhood. And during the talk surrounding the Landmark designation for the David and Gladys Wright House, a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home threatened with demolition by developers, members of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, flying in from across the country, spoke passionately on the building's historic value, and its need to be saved.

Interestingly, one man stood apart from the rest of those who arrived to hear and speak at the Council meeting. Rather than being directly affected by any particular item on the agenda, this elderly man was seemingly concerned with anything he could get his hands on. The gruff fellow spoke on as many as four agenda items, going on in long, pessimistic rants which decried

the direction of the city as a whole, rather than the specific item on which he was supposed to be talking. Generally, he would go on for nearly five minutes, before the Mayor cut him off, reminded the man of the agenda item being addressed, and thanking him for his time before getting back to business. The man appeared to have devoted himself entirely to trying to right the supposedly sinking ship that is City Hall, approaching it in any way he could.

As a whole, the meeting ran exceptionally smoothly, moving seamlessly between agenda items. While some were immediately approved, others were dwelt upon for an extended period of time, ensuring that everyone's voice was heard, and any necessary changes were made. At times, as an audience member, I felt impatient at the sheer length of the meeting. However, with 62 items to address, the City staff in charge of running the meeting did a remarkable job of moving through the items at hand, while making sure everyone felt their voice was heard. The many formalities didn't slow down the meeting, but rather worked in its favor, ensuring uniformity of process over the course of the entire evening.

Though dozens of liquor licenses, resolutions, and zoning overlays, three agenda items were clear foci for both the City staff and the many attendees of the meeting. Firstly, there was the so-called "right-sourcing" of Phoenix's senior meal program, specifically as it affected an Asian-American senior center and surrounding community. Clearly, the resolution had been the result of months of talks and compromises between the city, the program's users, advocates, and the union employees who would likely lose their jobs when the meal program was privatized. Though most of the major talking points on the resolution had already been worked through, several representatives still took to the podium to ask that those administering the new senior meal program continue to inquire among the seniors they would be serving to ensure that their

needs were still being met. In the end, with the pledge of city staffers to check in regularly on the success of the new meal program, the changes were adopted.

Next, a new project from the acclaimed developers of Postino Winebar drew controversy from neighbors of the proposed development, stating concerns about lowered property values and disturbances to the order of the neighborhood. After a fairly heated back-and-forth between the developers and some neighbors, and other neighbors, another restaurant integrated with its surrounding neighborhood was brought up: La Grande Orange (completed by the same developers, at that). And with this evidence of a major success story, it became clear that the developers of the project could create an inclusive business that meets the needs of the community, and in fact raises property values.

Finally, arguably the largest portion of the audience arrived to hear the Council's decision on granting Landmark designation to the David and Gladys Wright House, the Arcadia property threatened with demolition for nearly six months by its newest owner. At the time of the meeting, a potential buyer for the property had been confirmed, causing the Council and Mayor to likely vote for a stay on the final decision on designation, pending talks with the property's new owner. But before voting to delay, the Mayor made sure to give time to two members of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, who had traveled from far away to attend the meeting, and ensure that they have their voices heard, especially if they could not return for the final hearing. Following their respective speeches and some questions from a member of the audience, the Council voted to delay a decision one month, to allow the new owner time to establish a relationship with the city and understand the historic designation.

In all, the Phoenix City Council meeting, as expected, covered a massive breadth of topics. From zoning to spending to liquor licenses to historic designations, the meeting directly

addressed planning in nearly all of its forms. Through the meeting, I saw that the decisions of city governments with regard to planning affect a wide variety of constituents, each with varying views, needs, and knowledge bases. Though at times the fast pace was somewhat threatening to an outsider, the openness of the meetings was quite clear, and all perspectives were encouraged and received well.