

Editorial

What's on The Meeting?

WHAT LOOKED LIKE A TEMPORARY measure last spring seems now like it's here to stay. You could call it part of the new normal except that it's not new and it's anything but normal. Call it digital democracy for lack of a better term.

From the time the first patient with Covid-19 showed up in Westchester County and the virus began to spread through the city, state, country and planet, it was clear that the disease could be spread wherever people gathered. Optional gatherings were forbidden or discouraged.

But the gatherings of municipal governments—meetings—are required by law. And in most cases meetings are also open to the public whenever county, town or village board met to adopt local laws or spend taxpayers' money. So Governor Cuomo issued executive order 202.1, which allows government to conduct business remotely by phone or video conference call as long as members of public can listen to or listen and view the proceedings.

Some governments around Columbia County have moved their meetings online as the pandemic lingered and then flared again. There's no single way to conduct online meetings nor is there a single best online meeting software. That said, Zoom is reportedly the most financially successful video conferencing application and the product's brand name is fast becoming the generic term for online gatherings (think Google). The Zoom company has also had some notable security problems—hackers reportedly interrupted a Hudson Board of Education meeting video meeting with pornography. But whether it's Zoom or a competitor, a transition has taken place: The face of local government in Columbia County is a computer screen.

So? One effect of this forced move from government by people in a room to government by image may be a further widening of the gap in income and opportunity in this county and the nation. This county has pockets with some of the slowest internet service in the state. And even when better service is available, it may be too costly for some residents to afford. So the wealthy are more likely to be able to "attend" digital meetings compared to their less well-off neighbors.

There is some help available. In the Town of Taghkanic the town Broadband Advisory Committee has compiled an online Broadband Financial Help guide. It's online at <https://www.tgazette.com/post/broadband-financial-help>

Every municipality in the country should have a similar list and the county should link to them all.

Before the pandemic people found all sorts of reasons not to attend the meetings of local government. Board members frequently concluded that the public didn't care what their board was doing. Now, with the pandemic options in place, some board members have been surprised when double or triple the regular turnout shows up online for regular meetings. There may be a novelty factor that draws viewers, but even if only a few return on a regular basis, that's a win for open government.

Here are some suggestions about online meetings. Make it easy to attend meetings online. Make it simple to copy and review recordings of previous meetings. Make sure there's an IT (information technology) person to fix glitches that limit access to meetings. Make it work by sharing these services.

Some local government officials may be eager for the day the pandemic will be vanquished and their in-person meetings can resume. And while the need to defeat of Covid-19 is a widely shared priority, there might be less enthusiasm for in-person meetings. The ability to participate through Zoom while sitting at home on the couch is likely to be a powerful incentive.

Local officials should assume that remote governing through online meetings may have crossed over from its temporary status and become our preferred way of monitoring the actions of our elected officials. It's a stretch to think the public will willingly surrender this tool of digital democracy.

Out of line

By Mort Gerberg



"...then I thought to myself, 'What would Trump do?'"

Letters

Shepherd's Run is a sensible project

To the Editor:

The proposed Shepherd's Run Solar Farm Project in Copake has been mischaracterized as a story of a large out-of-town corporation trying to take advantage of the small town of Copake. The real conflict is between a thoughtful, comprehensive New York state law and Copake's thoughtful, comprehensive town plan.

The state law establishes renewable-energy goals to meet global standards designed to limit global warming to 2 degrees Celsius—anything above that level will not sustain human life. Copake encourages small, distributed solar projects, which reduce demand on the power grid. However, these projects, even when implemented on a statewide basis, will not come close to achieving the necessary goals.

Solar is only a part of New York's renewable-energy plan, with significant contributions also coming from hydro and offshore and land-based wind projects. Nonetheless, 57,000 acres of solar panels are required for New York to achieve its renewable energy goal, which means hundreds of grid-scale projects, so it is imperative that every county contributes its share.

Two hundred and eighty acres of solar panels is not enough for Columbia County. We should be proactively seeking at least two more projects of this size in other parts of the

county so that we can achieve renewable-energy independence.

I respect the community leaders and my neighbors who are opposed to Shepherd's Run, because I know them to be good people who genuinely care about the future of Columbia County. But I am disappointed that their advocacy group, Sensible Solar, appears more interested in slick slogans than in engaging in honest discourse regarding a truly existential issue. While Sensible Solar alleges a plethora of "potential" adverse environmental impacts, if any of them were true, the project could not be approved in accordance with this New York law that is administered by a proactive Department of Environmental Conservation.

Shepherd's Run as proposed actually protects wetlands by maintaining appropriate boundaries and improving water quality through plantings of native vegetation and cultivation of pollinator species. It will be far better for the environment than the farming operations that it will replace for a period of time.

We need to hold Hecate Energy accountable to ensure it mitigates, to the extent reasonable, impacts on viewsheds and real-estate values, but on balance, these legitimate concerns are insufficient to justify opposition to this inconvenient but necessary response to the cli-

mate crisis. Sensible Solar cites one study indicating a 10% decline in property values near large solar farms—but other studies show solar farms have minimal impact on property values. The median sales price for houses in Columbia County actually increased by 38.9% in the third quarter of 2020 compared to the prior year, according to the New York State Association of Realtors.

Affordable housing is in fact another issue we need to address if we want to remain a community that finds strength in diversity. The significant incremental revenue the project will bring to this area, whether through taxes or a PILOT, should be used to offset taxes, making home ownership more affordable and providing enhanced community space for everyone's enjoyment while supporting a diverse socioeconomic population.

Finally, all residents of Columbia County should want to be a generator, rather than an importer, of renewable energy. This will make our county more resilient by not being reliant on a power grid that will increasingly be subject to disruption from weather events already occurring at accelerated rates.

Grid-scale solar projects such as Shepherd's Run are not only sensible, they are essential for our very survival.

Gary Lewis
Copake



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