

Remote comment at City Council meetings debated

Mayor says it's unnecessary, but two councilors disagree

By STEVE BUCHIERE

sbuchiere@fltimes.com

GENEVA — The days of the “Hollywood Squares” virtual City Council meetings during the height of the covid pandemic are over. However, one aspect of those sessions — virtual public comment — is something one city resident thinks should return.

In a recent letter to the *Finger Lakes Times*, Heather May asked that remote participation be reinstated by Council.

“This decision makes it functionally impossible for many members of our community to be a part of Council meetings,” she wrote. “People with autoimmune disorders cannot risk attending meetings in small spaces during a triplademic; disabled community members who cannot drive struggle to make it to the Public Safety Building; parents without childcare options have to stay home; and people who had unsafe interactions with the criminal justice system feel uncomfortable attending meetings in spaces where they were traumatized.

“These absences limit

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the voices heard during public comment,” May continued. “Given that some councilors have stated that they do not read emails sent by certain constituents, this silencing is especially egregious. It makes invisible (and easier to ignore) people impacted by the decisions Council makes. While these absences might make Council meetings more comfortable for those in the room, they make Geneva itself less hospitable.”

The *Times* asked Mayor Steve Valentino and councilors their thoughts on remote participation. Valentino, Ward 3 Councilor Jan Regan and Ward 5 Councilor Laura Salamendra responded.



Valentino

Valentino said he didn't see the need for remote participation by community members, but noted that the city live-streams and posts its meetings on the city's YouTube channel. He pointed out that remote public comment is not included in Council's rules of order, nor in a local law it passed pertaining to virtual participation by the city's government bodies.

“Remote attendance is for members of Council and other boards and commissions,” he said. “Constituents and other public members have various paths available outside the



Regan

council meeting to communicate any issues of concern.”

He doubted there was support on Council for reinstating virtual community input.

“I can't imagine it changing anytime in the near future,” he said.

Regan and Laura Salamendra support a remote option.

“Covid gave us a few positive changes that actually improved established practices, and increasing access to public commentary was one of them,” Regan said. “Although I prefer seeing people face-to-face, I see no downside to allowing people to speak from where they are



Salamendra

comfortable, as long as all the same rules apply.

“It's true that there are many ways to communicate with city councilors, but this is the one way that allows a wider audience of interested people to hear your thoughts,” she continued. “These comments become part of the record and can be accessed even after they are spoken by anyone who would like to hear them. For me, the more involvement of the public the better.”

Salamendra agreed while also taking aim at Valentino, whom she has been at odds with often.

“During covid, after the murder of George Floyd, our community was inspired to get involved in local government,” she said. “For the first time I can remember we had massive participation in City Council meetings and were hearing regularly from people who typically go unheard, people too busy or too afraid to come to the public ‘safety’ building. These voices demanded change — a change that would make things more fair, more equitable by blunting the power of cops and landlords to take advantage of vulnerable communities.”

“It is no surprise to me that the mayor has done his best to limit and roll back this kind of participation because he opposes the kinds of change we are asking for.”