



CITY OF LAKE FOREST PARK

CITY COUNCIL

AGENDA COVER SHEET

Meeting Date	January 18, 2024
Originating Department	City Clerk
Contact Person	Matt McLean, City Clerk
Title	Options for receiving Public Comments at Public Meetings

Legislative History

- First Presentation November 30, 2023
 - Second Presentation January 18, 2024
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Attachments

1. None
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Executive Summary

After implementing the new public comment policy, the Council still received disruptive hate speech at the January 11th Regular Meeting. Since this continues to be happening, it may be beneficial to adjust the policy further.

Background

In recent months, there has been a disturbing trend where public comment sections on city council agendas have been taken over by people making antisemitic and racist statements. This occurred at the Council's November 9th Regular Meeting and January 11th Regular Meeting. All of the comments were made remotely, and the commenters appear to be physically located outside the city limits.

It is important to remember that the public comment period is considered a limited public forum for free speech purposes. The Council can regulate the time, place, and manner of speech, provided the regulations are reasonable. It is listed on the agenda as Public Comments, and persons are allowed three minutes to address the Council on agenda items or any other topic the Council might have purview or control over. Under the Open Public Meetings Act, public comment must be allowed under RCW 42.30.240 at regular Council meetings where final action will be taken. The City may allow oral and/or written public comment. In the event a person has difficulty physically attending a meeting, state

statute requires the Council to provide them an opportunity to provide oral comments remotely if oral comments from other members of the public are accepted.

Currently, the Council is using the following policy:

“This portion of the agenda is set aside for the public to address the Council on agenda items or any topic the Council might have purview or control over. If the comments are of a nature that the Council does not have influence or control over, then the Mayor may request the speaker to suspend their comments. The Council may direct staff to follow up on items brought up by the public. Comments are limited to a three (3) minute time limit.”

At the January 11th Meeting, the City Clerk quickly shut down hateful or disruptive speech.

In order to limit the further disruption caused by malicious actors during public comment, the Council may want to consider the following options:

1. Limit public comment to in-person only, provided that the Council allows an option for people to make comments remotely if they contact the City Clerk.
 - a. Staff will set up a system for such persons to speak remotely at the meeting.
2. Require people to sign up to speak at the meeting online prior to the meeting.
 - a. Staff will set up a system where people can sign up to speak on the city’s website (which already exists but is hardly used).
3. Verify the speakers
 - a. Previously, the disruptive remote commenters used aliases when they entered the meeting. While the Council could require a signup process, this still does not verify that they are real or that the speaker has given their real name. It might be burdensome for staff to verify all the speakers who wish to speak.

Almost every neighboring city has required that those people wishing to make comments online be signed up prior to the meeting.

Policy Implications

Public participation at Council meetings could be limited depending on the policy decision. The public has numerous options to reach out to the City Council, but it might miss out on information it would otherwise receive if public comment is limited at the meeting.

Staff Recommendation

Review and discuss the options for public comment.