

GUEST COLUMN

Ground control to Major Tom

BY CAROL LALLY METZ

Knock, knock. Who's there? I wish this were a fresh take on an old joke. But, in fact, it appears to be the last opportunity most residents could freely speak with their town board representatives. "When I knocked on doors in my campaign ..." is repeatedly used to justify the Town Board's actions. Door-to-door campaigning is great, but there are two problems with using it as a basis to lead: (1) it's last year's news and doesn't reflect current sentiment, and (2) most candidates only knock on the doors of residents registered in their party, so the other constituents in their wards are not heard.

As a former town board member, I can appreciate the difficulty in maintaining communication with residents. It can take a great deal of time, and there are sometimes not enough hours in the day to follow up on every e-mail or call. But there is one opportunity that people count on as a direct line to their town representatives: the public comment periods at town board meetings.

Traditionally, there are two types of Monday night board meetings, workshops and voting meetings. Workshops offer an opportunity for the board to discuss issues with one another. The public can watch but cannot comment. Regular meetings are when the board takes action by voting on resolutions. Typically, residents are afforded an opportunity to comment before the resolutions about any one of them. There is a comment period at the end as well, during which residents are allowed to speak briefly on any topic. Furthermore, some actions require a public hearing inviting comment on that specific issue.

It is neither easy nor comfortable to approach the podium and speak during these comment periods. People generally only leave their homes, come to town hall and wait their turn to speak if they deeply care about an issue. So, the board has a responsibility to take these comments seriously and listen with an open mind. After all, once elected, officials represent everyone in their district, not just those who voted for them.

Recent town board meetings have many residents concerned that our supervisor is not interested in hearing from us.

At the March 22 meeting, a resident's comments about the police lieutenant position were met with a tirade from Supervisor Tom Martino about finances. The speaker, still standing, tried to reiterate that he wasn't asking for a lieutenant to be hired, only for the position to be left vacant. Martino continued to harangue the man and the audience about financial matters, clearly not listening to the speaker's point.

At the public hearing for the wetlands law, speaker after speaker opposed its repeal. They encouraged the board to consider ways of amending or re-filing

the law. After closing a public hearing, elected officials should take time to consider the comments and schedule a vote for a future meeting. But this board insulted the audience by immediately voting to repeal, without so much as a bathroom break after the public comments were completed. The repeal cost taxpayers nearly \$5,000 in attorney bills, and now the town is left with no wetland regulation.

The first two meetings in the month of April, traditionally workshops for board discussion, have been designated "special meetings" with voting items on the agenda. No public comment time is scheduled. This means the board is voting on actions, many of which involve spending taxpayer dollars, without inviting taxpayers to speak.

On behalf of the residents of Hyde Park, I ask Martino and each member of the town board: How can we reach you? This is a serious question. These five citizens have been elected to represent their constituents for two years. We need to know how they would like us to contribute our knowledge and opinions.

Should we call or e-mail? Are councilmen planning to hold ward meetings or use the town's e-mail alert system? (Past council members have used both regularly.) Will the public comment period before resolutions be reinstated? I do hope the rules will be clarified so that lines of communication can be improved.

I fear people will stop taking time out of their precious evenings to speak at town board meetings. Why bother if you are ignored, or worse, yelled at by the supervisor? It is incumbent upon each town board member to improve this situation.

As a Democrat, I believe each person has a piece of the truth and that taxpayers should have a voice in how their money is spent. Listening to residents should be humbling, not an annoyance.

Democratic County Legislator Dan Kuffner is known for spending a great deal of personal time attending meetings and listening to residents to inform his decision making. Democrat Nancy Sheehan runs an open office as receiver of taxes and prides herself on being accountable to the public.

The Hyde Park Democratic Committee is active as a support network for residents. If you're concerned about town issues, the Democrats want to hear from you: hydeparkdems@gmail.com.

Carol Lally Metz is a former town board member and a member of the Hyde Park Democratic Party. We encourage our readers to send us columns to be considered for publication. E-mail columns, as well as letters to the editor, to editorial@thehudsonvalleynews.com.