



# “Cooking in a Hot Kitchen”

A planned and educated approach to controversial commission meetings

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## The Problem

- ▶ Public meetings about controversial topics have become increasingly disrupted and divisive

## The Reasons

- ▶ Live streaming video or broadcast of meetings
- ▶ National and state-wide trends in meetings – recently Congressional town hall meetings
- ▶ Encouragement for “grass roots” involvement
- ▶ Strong feelings about national topics – climate change, logging, water quality, Orca whales, - the list goes on

## And

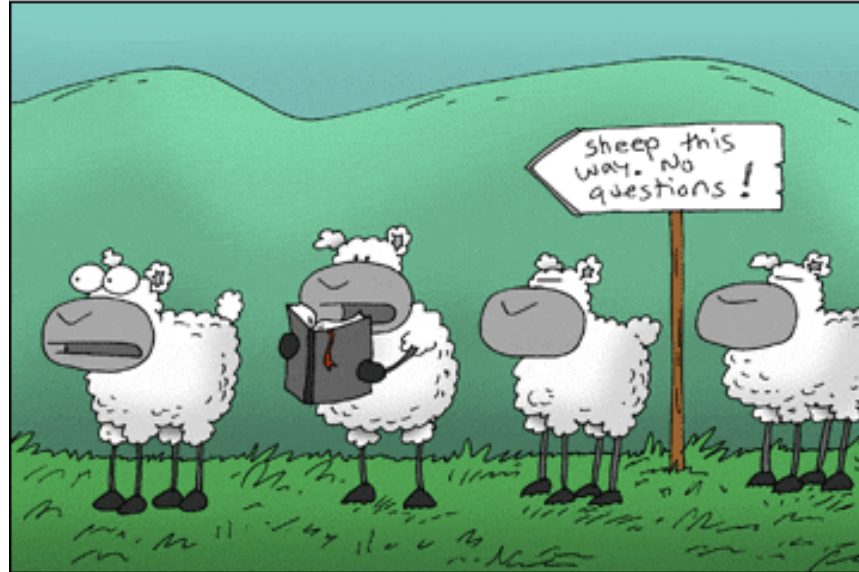
- ▶ A lack of thoughtful planning and education by the governments

**At commission meetings– the  
commissioners see this:**



# And the public might see this:


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(See Acts 8:32)

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HERE IT IS, "LED LIKE A SHEEP TO THE SLAUGHTER" ... WHAT THE HECK IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?



“This meeting was like many of the meetings that I would go to over the course of two years. The only way I can describe it is that, well, the president is like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people. *There is no discernible connection.*”


Paul O'Neill

US Sec of Treasury for President George W. Bush



## The Central Thesis

With proper planning and commissioner education of the meeting process, a port district can address a controversial topic in a public meeting in the most constructive manner possible





## **IDENTIFY** controversial topics early and plan ahead

- ▶ Usually, these topics are foreseeable
- ▶ Controversial issues need the commissioner's "A" game
  - ▶ Educated on the meeting process
    - ▶ How to react to large crowds, how to react to ad hominem (personal) attacks and how to react to disruptive citizens
  - ▶ Prepared on the meeting topic
  - ▶ Ready to listen
- ▶ Keep the issue in perspective



## **EDUCATE** commissioners on the commissioner's role in the meeting

- ▶ Above all - be polite and engaged
- ▶ Keep a sense of perspective
- ▶ Recognize that some may have (or just be expressing) an opposing view



# WHAT ARE THE VIEWPOINTS that the port commission will have to consider?

## ► Very Important Step

- Most “big issues” have many valid interests and viewpoints
- The commission’s job (at 30,000 feet) is to weigh competing interests and viewpoints
- Allows the commission to prepare for the meeting
- Importantly, allows the commission to acknowledge that it is a controversial issue for which the commission will need to weigh different interests and viewpoints

## MAKE A PLAN

- ▶ Allow all the time needed and all the meetings needed for public comment
  - ▶ Build in breaks
- ▶ Decide how many meetings before a decision will be made
- ▶ Who will run the public comment period?
  - ▶ Commission president, executive director or moderator
- ▶ Decide who and how will the port explain both the competing viewpoints and the process to the public
- ▶ Reach out to the opposing views – invite them to the meeting

## GET A ROOM – a large enough room

- ▶ Too small a room leads to high emotional energy
- ▶ Create some distance and elevate
- ▶ Consider using a city or county council chambers (interlocal ahead of time)
- ▶ ADA compliant room
- ▶ Now video capable



## GET A ROOM – a large enough room

- ▶ Get a podium for speakers
- ▶ Make sure the PA system is up to the task and loud enough





## AT THE FIRST MEETING and each meeting where the topic will be discussed

- ▶ Introduce the topic and acknowledge the controversial nature of the topic
  - ▶ Let the public know that the commission's job to listen and weigh the various interest and viewpoints
  - ▶ Acknowledge that this will be a difficult decision
- ▶ Note that public comment is needed to inform the commission
- ▶ Provide the timeline and invite oral and written comment
  - ▶ When will the commission discuss the issue and make a decision?

## **PUBLIC COMMENT PROCESS** needs to be explained at each meeting

- ▶ Public comment not public debate
  - ▶ “It is our opportunity to hear from you to help us understand all aspects of this issue”
- ▶ Polite and respectful
  - ▶ “In the best tradition of the citizens of our community”
    - ▶ Do not invoke a commission set of rules
- ▶ Note that ad hominem (personal) attacks are not in the tradition of “our community” and ask people to refrain



## **ALLOW ALL PUBLIC COMMENTS** to be heard if they are present

- Have a podium
- Have a per speaker time limit (bell) and gently remind speakers to wrap up comments “in fairness to all the speakers”
- Take public comment on this topic first (after roll call)
  - Polite, respectful and personal
  - Thank each speaker
- Remember, this is sometimes a new experience for most speakers and each speaker is looking to be heard
- Sign up sheets or line up?

## DO NOT ENGAGE

- ▶ If a commissioner engages one speaker, then the others will demand a similar accommodation
- ▶ Always be respectful
  - ▶ Verbal and non-verbal communication
- ▶ Commissioners may ask a speaker to meet at another time for more information
- ▶ Expect a bit of “street theatre”
  - ▶ Walk outs and backs turned



## **IF A MEETING GETS TOO HEATED, take a break**

- Better to have scheduled breaks
- Remind the audience of the “community standard” and respect for all who attend
- Keep a sense of perspective – the commission needs competing viewpoints
- Commissioners should never respond to a personal attack directed at them – let another commissioner or executive director invoke the community standard

## MAKING THE DECISION

- Set a pre-determined meeting for discussion and decision
- Acknowledge the competing viewpoints
- Restate the role of the commission in balancing community viewpoints and interests
  - Talk about the port's mission
- Thank everyone for their input
- Actually discuss the issue and the viewpoints received
- Decide the issue and take a break



## The Central Thesis - Conclusion

With proper planning and commissioner education of the meeting process, a port district can address a controversial topic in a public meeting in the most constructive manner possible and *make a discernable connection with the public*



➤ QUESTIONS?