

The Illusion of Transparency

Update 4/12/2025

This update is the text of a Public Comment delivered by Tom Coleman at the 4/7/2025 Council Meeting. I thought that the "Opinion Piece" he and Eileen Murphy had created was an articulate summary of public frustration, and a statement of what many would like to see. I asked Tom for permission to publish/post what he read at the podium, for those who had not heard it.

Dear Council and City Manager:

A brief aside, to start. Of all the words uttered by several of the members of this council, perhaps the most hypocritical is "Transparency". You say you intend to be open and above board in your governance, but your actions are just the opposite. For an issue brought before this body to have city funds spent, it should be publicized early enough for the public and other elected officials to study the pros and cons of the subject. Ideally sufficient time from first notice will allow questions to be sent to Council Members or raised in Public Comments. The Council Packets, as prepared and published by the City Manager should include sufficient information to describe the perceived problem to be solved, depict how the proposed expenditure or action will mitigate the problem, document that all staff and other stakeholders understand if their departments or activities will be affected, indicate the Budget Line that will be charged and it's sufficiency, show that procurement norms have been met via multiple bids or use of the State schedule and is this a one time or recurring expense.

There are three methods that the City Manager and some of the Council use to sneak items past full review and effectively make a mockery of the oft touted "Transparency" they espouse.

First the City Manager regularly publishes Council Packets with agenda items lacking the above prerequisite detail.

Second, far too frequently, Agenda Items are added at the very start of a meeting. By definition, these last minute adds do not have full documentation, clearly have not been reviewed by staff and do not allow study by fellow Elected Officials or by the public. There is seldom any time critical emergency requiring last minute adds. It is readily apparent that they are made to limit full examination of them.

Lastly is the crown jewel of smoke and mirrors, the inappropriate inclusion on a Consent Agenda of potentially controversial or ill researched, unjustified expenditures. You have all seen the Georgia Municipal Association definition of what should and shouldn't be on a Consent Agenda. It is easily seen that many items are put on the Consent Agenda not because they are pre-approved and routine, but in order not to have them publicly discussed and fully reviewed.

Council Members hold our City Manager responsible for fully documenting agenda items. Do not vote to allow last minute additions, rather defer them to the next meeting, demanding full review. Do not vote to allow inappropriate items on a Consent Agenda. You have the ability to no longer have the public smirk when they hear you use the word "Transparency".

Thank you.

Tom Coleman

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Updates 9/12&14/2024

9/12/2024 - Several times during my 16 years on Council I tried to get the Council to allow the City Manager, to manage the City staff **without Council interference in the hiring, firing, and day-to-day direction of department heads, or their staff**. Beyond approving personnel policy, budgets, and other **non-individual-specific** actions, the **individually focussed** personnel responsibility of M&C would be the hiring/firing of the City Manager, and acting as a quasi-judicial body, for resolution of a minuscule number of personnel **appeals** allowed to be brought to M&C under City personnel policy. This avoided past incidents where two Council members could threaten a department head that if he/she did not cooperate, they only needed one more vote on Council to fire them.

Early this year (2024), the new Council made it clear that they intended to go back to M&C hiring and firing Department Heads. **In the first meeting of the year, they fired the City Manger** who had been hired with the understanding that he would have day-to-day personnel management responsibility, **without M&C interference**.

From what I have observed (**from afar**) in the conduct of Council meetings, the current Interim City Manager does not seem inclined to offer comment that might suggest a different direction from what the 4 councilpersons appear to want to follow. **Note that in a separate posting on this site, I have listed the departure of (at least) 15 department heads or other key members of staff who since have been fired, resigned, or allowed to resign (in lieu of being fired) - (note, the resignation option was given to the City Manager one meeting after he had been publicly fired)!**

I am writing this in advance of the **two Special Called Meetings (SCM) for tomorrow (Friday, 9/13/2024)**. At the 2nd meeting, I believe it is likely that the 4 Council Persons will announce a permanent City Manger (**unless they are influenced by these comments, or your comments at the 1st SCM (AKA "Town Hall Meeting")**). **Only 30 minutes have been allowed to receive in-person comments from the public**, which time can be easily eaten up by any of the 4 Councilpersons. Its inconceivable that would be enough time for the candidates to be questioned by the public, even if that was allowed. My understanding is that possibly two candidates were interviewed via Zoom at the last Council meeting. As I recall, the last City Manger (Stanley Hawthorne) was selected in a process where we (M&C) first interviewed them via Zoom and then brought in the finalists for an **in-person** interview with M&C. They were also given a tour of the City and met some of the department heads (who could also provide some feedback on **their** experience with the candidates). Perhaps that is what is going to happen again, this time, at a later date, before final selection... But my "gut feel" tells me this just might be a "check-the-box" appearance of transparency.

9/14/2024 - As I predicted, about half of the minuscule 30 minutes of the "Town Hall Meeting" were eaten up by non-citizen speakers. **Watch on the City YouTube page (Note that after the apparent conclusion of comments, the comments session was re-opened, after display of the City logo, for one last speaker.)**

No appointment decision was announced at the conclusion of the SCM Executive Session. Perhaps this was prompted by one citizen's comment during the Town Hall, that this was a violation of the Georgia Open Meetings Act... **Watch On YouTube**.

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8/4/2024

Since the beginning of the year 2024, I have been observing Council meetings as an outsider - from a high level. I have browsed the agendas and watched a few streamed portions of the meetings noting the lengthy, often chaotic, procedural housekeeping dialogue - at the same time also noting the often limited substantive discussion of the actual agenda items at hand. I have been dismayed by the impact of last minute items being added to the agenda at meetings (**see "Aids For Citizens To Follow Legislative Actions"**), some without forewarning/information going to at least some of the Governing Body, and then being processed with little or no objection from the four council persons, while the Mayor was muzzled from objecting or directing. And all the time, this process was touted as being transparent (presumably **meaning** transparent to the citizens who were attempting to make sense of it).

It has been 7 weeks since the last (June 17th) council meeting. I had hoped that this period of respite would allow Interim City Manager and the new Council to take a breath, renew, get organized, and live up to their claim of transparency. I decided to look at some of the agenda items in the packet to see how understandable (transparent) they were. I was disappointed...

Comments on just a Few Selected 8/5/2024 Regular Meeting Packet Items (By Agenda Item #)

4.A Workshop Session minutes dated June 7, 2024 - After 7 weeks, why don't we have the minutes from the other June Workshop, and the two Regular Council meetings, ready for review and approval?

8.B Senior Homestead Exemption. This is a hugely important item, where are the details? E.g., is this leading to proposing that a couple earning \$140,000 should get a senior City tax exemption?

8.H \$50K Contract with Favor House to Manage Food Distribution - This is what we set up Ignite to do, and what it has been doing very well. Is this in addition to, or in lieu of, Ignite?

8.J Finding Executive Search Firms for Recruitment of Department Directors for the City - This appears to be paying a contractor to find search firms (also contractors) to find Department Heads. I would hope that we would simply first consider the services of the search firms we have previously used. Do they not want to work with us? Presumably the total of \$60K obligated so far, went for other services as well.

8.BB Ward 2 Community Resource Center - Why would Council approve the the first phase of a project without any cost data, and no idea of what future phases, and their costs, would be?

8.CC Raise the Number of Multi-Family Units, below which inspections are not required, from 5 to 11 - The City has had a serious problem maintaining the quality of apartments that ARE subject to inspection, why would cutting back on inspections be desirable? The documentation in the packet does not give a rationale.

8.DD International Travel for Councilman Carn - Where is the detail? In the past, International Travel that he and I have taken has been paid for by the County. Who is paying for this? If the City, how much and why? Transparency would be good.

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