

NEWS

Brunswick town responds to backlash over live stream issues

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After a year of complaints about a lack of transparency, Holden Beach officials have reopened their meetings to the public this month and are hoping it will make past criticism of their live streams water under the bridge.

Since the start of the pandemic, the town of Holden Beach has responded to in-person meeting restrictions by live streaming their Board of Commissioners meeting on Facebook and later posting the audio to YouTube.

But during virtually every one of those meetings, resident comments pop up throughout the stream complaining of inadequate audio that leaves them unable to follow the meeting.

Residents were also frustrated that the video stream does not show the commissioners or any presentations given at the meeting, instead focusing the camera at the town's official seal.

"We were thinking they were eventually going to get the hang of it and get better," said Tom Myers, president of the Holden Beach Property Owners Association. "Everybody else kind of worked out the kinks and got really, really good at virtual meetings but here it never really changed."

Myers said over the past year he's received too many complaints to count, leading him to send a letter to the board in October calling on them to consistently use microphones, position the camera toward the commissioners, have speakers say their name before commenting, and to take roll call votes, among other suggestions.

In the letter, the association also offered to purchase a tripod or camera for the town to use to ensure all speakers and presentations could be seen by the public.

After resending the request to the town in February, the letter was read into the record but the board did not comment on it. Other than that, Myers said, he's received no response or acknowledgement from town officials.

Commissioner Brian Murdock acknowledged the town has received numerous complaints about their meeting, but said they we're not in a position financially to make the necessary changes.

"Sure everybody's written and complaining that they can't hear, but that's not really in our wheelhouse," Murdock said. "We're not in charge of any of that, that's handled by staff. I just show up for the meeting and do what I can."

According to Town Manager David Hewitt, the town does not have the personnel or IT capabilities to make use of the camera or tripod, even if the donation allowed them to upgrade from an iPhone to a camera.

"We're not set up for and don't have the manpower to really do live stream stuff," Hewitt said.

"We were just trying to get by and accommodate as best we could with the circumstances presented by COVID, and it worked to varying degrees for people."

But even after using noise cancelling headphones and following up with staff on unclear items, Myers said it hasn't been working for association members.

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He said people fed up with being unable to follow the meetings have tuned out, pointing to a recent meeting in which parking recommendations were to be discussed as an example. After the association emailed members about the upcoming item, the board received more than 200 emails from a town of just over 500 residents.

"That to me was a big wake up call," Myers said. "It's like, wow, everybody's really concerned about this and they had no clue this was going down because they couldn't follow the meetings and the discussions."

However, other residents like Ralph Gallo, who previously left critical posts under the live stream, now say they are ready to move forward.

"They are back to letting the public attend the meetings. Tonight was the first night back. So what's past is now a mute subject," Gallo said in a Facebook message.

According to Hewitt, as of now the town plans to discontinue their live streams and remain fully in-person. What effect the change has on public participation remains to be seen.

“I think the proof is in the pudding: Now that the doors are opened back up how many people are going to come to the meeting anyway?” he said. “Last night there were 5 or 6 people there, what does that tell you?”

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