

Dear Chair Haschak and Members of the Board;

I am very supportive of the "shelter-in-place" order from our Public Health Officer and feel that this order given early in this pandemic has helped keep the incidence of COVID-19 in the County low thus far. I am also very grateful for the efforts made by the CEO and so many County Departments which are handling the myriad of contingencies that this emergency demands.

However, I am concerned that ability for the public to participate in discussions and decisions directly affecting their lives not be an unnecessary casualty of COVID-19.

In particular, I am concerned that while the public is being asked to shelter in place except for essential trips outside the home, Planning and Building Services, in at least one instance, perhaps others, is pushing forward with a controversial and non-essential Use Permit Public Hearing.

I know you are aware that many citizens are not able to participate virtually from their homes in governmental bodies's discussions and decision-making. This situation is especially frustrating, even frightening, when the decision has the potential to seriously affect one's life. For example, I am not able to sheltering in place right now as I write this email, and while I have been observing the meeting from 9:00 to the lunch break. I am fortunate to have access to a semi-private office space where I can feel reasonably safe while I try to participate in the meeting. Many people have no such option.

Many residents depend on the public libraries or commercial cafe's to access their emails or to access the internet. Some people, who don't have their own computers, or need assistance for more sophisticated use of the internet, rely on friends or neighbors to help them negotiate the digital landscape when that is the only option. Clearly it is not possible or advisable for those citizens to participate in local government under these conditions.

I understand that PBS feels the Governor's Order N-29-20, which relaxes certain Brown Act requirements for public meetings under these present circumstances, gives it the green light to proceed with even a controversial public hearing. This may or may not be legally defensible, but it certainly is not in the spirit of conducting the public's business in public, and it certainly ignores the Board of Supervisors' acknowledgement that, in deference to the public, issues not essential to the working of the County or related to the COVID-19 crisis, be postponed.

I urge the Board to communicate with PBS that it delay public hearings on high public interest, non-urgent issues until the shelter-in-place order is lifted or modified. If the shelter-in-place order extends beyond May, than PBS should develop means by which all interested members of the public can participate in the hearing. Such means might include thorough education and press coverage, including the use of print media, with instructions on how to participate virtually in the meeting. The County could also set up locations in the District in question, that have the necessary technology and someone on hand to assist citizens negotiate virtual participation, and where there is adequate room for social distancing and where proper safety protocols can be enforced. This could be a situation similar to that provided for Department Heads when the participate in Board meetings.

Keeping our government open and transparent and protecting citizens' rights to have a voice in their own government are essential activities on a par with health safety and economic support. When this crisis has passed, we want our democracy to be in tact and robust. I urge you to make meaningful and inclusive public access to local government processes during this crisis a priority.

We at the Willits Environmental Center are available to help facilitate remote access if the shelter-in-place order continues beyond May. Thank you for your consideration of these issues.

Sincerely,
Ellen Drell
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