

RE: Agenda Item C.4 for Town Council 8/12/26 Meeting

Dear Town Council,

I am asking you not to adopt Resolution 2026-10 in its current form.

I find this resolution deeply troubling, in large part because of the extraordinary contradiction between what it says it is trying to accomplish and what it does.

The resolution says that Springdale strives to engage the public in a civil and democratic process, and that these rules are intended to promote open and transparent government and effective public participation.

Those goals sound great. But then the policy proceeds to close, discourage and control the avenues through which public participation and open government happen.

The policy discourages or restricts elected officials from discussing certain town matters with residents outside public meetings. Why? It tells council members not to ask questions of people during public comment. Then when? Many of us have relevant experience and insight into certain town matters. It tells members of the public that they cannot ask questions during general public participation. When can we ask questions? If it's an administrative item, never, I guess? And if an elected official is contacted by the media, that official is required to coordinate with the mayor before commenting. Why should a council member consult the mayor? Maybe our town manager or media rep. but being required to consult another voting member of the council is a conflict.

Since this is an administrative item, council members can't talk to the community about it and there's no opportunity to ask questions and receive an answer, at least not at the meeting where this will be discussed and possibly voted on. Does that seem right?

Taken altogether, this creates an almost complete circle of isolation. At what point in this system are elected officials and the public supposed to have a conversation?

During the work session that ultimately led to this document, the issue of public questions was discussed. I did have some trouble following this part, but I thought that the public would still be able to ask questions; the Council simply might not answer those questions immediately and a response could come at a later time from staff or council.

That seems reasonable but, unfortunately, I must've gotten it wrong.

The proposed rules state that during general public participation, only comments (not questions) are allowed. If the Council's intention is to ever allow questions while reserving the ability to answer them later, then the policy should simply say so. Instead, the current language eliminates questions altogether.

We, the residents of Springdale, will not have any opportunity to ask questions or gain any insight whatsoever beyond staff summaries and council deliberation for any administrative items. Ironically, that includes this resolution.

That choice is especially difficult to reconcile with a resolution that repeatedly describes itself as promoting public engagement. Public participation is not simply allowing someone to stand at a microphone for three minutes while everyone else listens silently.

That is public comment and not the same thing as public engagement.

Engagement requires communication in both directions. It requires elected officials to listen, but sometimes ask questions. It allows residents to be able to seek clarification. It requires elected officials to sometimes be accessible. It allows the press to be able to ask individual elected representatives what they think and why they think it.

An elected official can't speak to a member of the press without consulting someone who could see that subject matter very differently AND has a vote...WOW!

In a town as small as Springdale, informal communication between residents and elected officials is not a defect in local government, it could be one of its greatest strengths.

I understand the legitimate concerns behind portions of this policy. Council members should not privately deliberate matters that legally belong in an open meeting. They should not make promises on behalf of the Council. Meetings need reasonable rules and of course people should behave civilly. Officials and staff deserve protection from harassment and intimidation. All good stuff. But none of those legitimate goals require building a wall between elected officials and the community

There is yet another irony here. The policy tells elected officials to make the public feel welcome, to listen courteously, and to appreciate public comments. How? Genuine openness is not demonstrated through body language while someone speaks for three minutes. It is demonstrated by a willingness to engage with people, answer questions, hear criticism, seek out different perspectives, and explain decisions. A government can be polite while becoming increasingly closed off. Eventually you have created a system in which everyone is behaving courteously, meetings are running efficiently, all the procedures are being followed and meaningful communication with the community has become extraordinarily difficult or non-existent.

Do you believe that is the direction Springdale should be going?

Please do not adopt this resolution simply because it creates cleaner procedures and more controlled meetings. Ask instead what kind of relationship you want to have with the community. If the answer is an open one, then this document needs substantial revision.

Springdale does not need a more carefully managed relationship between its government and its citizens. It needs more communication, more openness, more questions, more listening, and more genuine dialogue.

Please open the door wider instead of closing it. Let's have more not less.

Thank you for reading,

Noel Benson