

Open and Accessible: Petition for Improved Transparency Measures

Background/Justification

Core to the Council's strategic goals - and our Town identity - are our shared values of transparency, inclusivity, and welcoming public voices in Town decision-making.

Unfortunately, several barriers to operational transparency impede the Mayor and Council's ability to serve Chapel Hill in alignment with those values. These procedural "weak links" include inconsistent conflict of interest (COI) policies, lack of accessibility of COI disclosures to the public, backlog of Council meeting minutes and updates to the Development Activity Report, and inadequate mechanisms by which the public can determine progress of accepted petitions.

These pose a unique opportunity for our Mayor and Council to demonstrate your commitment to building community trust.

Petition Requests

We request that the Council propose a comprehensive strategy to enhance transparency with the people of Chapel Hill.

We suggest that the following receive thorough consideration by the Mayor and Council and return to the Town Council for action within 30 days:

1. **Comprehensive Conflict of Interest (COI) Policy** -- The creation of a standardized COI policy to be applied to *all* those acting as Town representatives, including Town employees, elected officials, and volunteers such as those serving Advisory Boards. This policy should ideally prohibit representatives from the following when a COI applies:
 - a. Voting;
 - b. Participating in formal discussions or deliberations; and
 - c. Attending meetings while the item is discussed, regardless of the representative's membership in the governing body conducting the meeting (for example, an Advisory Board member should not attend the meeting of *another* Advisory Board during discussion of an item for which he/she has a COI).

2. **Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest to the Public** -- That any COIs for *all* Town representatives – real or perceived – must be disclosed not only internally, but to the public. Such disclosures should be clearly stated:
 - a. At the beginning of all relevant meetings or discussions; and
 - b. In print at the beginning of meeting agendas and resultant materials, such as minutes. Referencing examples from other municipal governing bodies in our area who practice this standard, such as OWASA, should aid in ease of implementation.

3. **Public Access to Council Meeting Materials** --

- a. **Meeting Minutes:** That Council and other publicly-available meeting minutes be promptly made available to the public, and that the Town clearly identify and commit to a concrete timeframe for this (e.g. within one week).
 - b. **Meeting Transcripts:** That transcripts of Council meetings be generated and made available to the public within a Council-determined timeframe. Video tapes are useful but an ineffective substitute for meeting minutes.
 - c. **Council Voting Records:** That meeting minutes clearly record each individual Council member's vote, not simply the collective outcome of a vote; at present the public must search within video recordings to find this information, which does not meet an acceptable standard of accessibility, particularly for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing members of our community;
 - d. **Development Activity Report:** That the Town's Development Activity Report be updated and publicly available within three business days in advance of advisory Boards and Town Council meetings where applicable development proposals are considered, and that the Report indicate the date and time of the last update.
4. **Status of Public Petitions** -- That the Mayor and Town Manager provide increased specificity and frequency of updates regarding accepted petitions to Council. Ideally, this should include:
- a. That an individual in the receiving department be identified as a point-of-contact for the accepted petition, and that this individual's contact information be shared with the petitioner;
 - b. That a monthly update by the staff be sent to the petitioner via email detailing what concrete actions the receiving department has taken with regards to the petition;
 - c. That a monthly update be made to the publicly-available petition tracking website which includes the next actions to be taken on the petition and the expected timeframe for such actions.