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AN EDITION DEVOTED TO OPENNESS & TRANSPARENCY

**A Community Openness and
Transparency Report Card:
What grade would we receive?**

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Transparency Pledge**

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An opportunity to demonstrate
an open and transparent process**

A Community Openness and Transparency Report Card: What grade would we receive?

An Openness and Transparency Report Card is an exercise to assess how we go about making important decisions in Owensboro-Daviess County, and whether citizens think openness and transparency has characterized our decision making process in recent years.

This is not about individuals; it is about process. It is not an assessment of the intentions, integrity or competence of elected or appointed officials, board members or senior management. It is not an effort to second-guess decisions that have been made.

What are the criteria through which openness and transparency can be assessed? We suggest the following:

- Was there was a genuine effort to engage the public in this community decision early in the process?
- Were there opportunities for public dialogue beyond the mandated public hearings?
- Were public meetings conducted at convenient times and places for most people?
- Was relevant information and all the options connected with the pending decision shared with the public in an easy to understand and balanced manner?
- Was the public given ample time to digest the information and respond to officials before votes were taken?
- Did officials deliberate openly before they made their decision, or did they simply promote their pre-selected preference?

What major community projects or important policy decisions warranted this kind of assessment? We suggest the following:

- The decisions on features and facilities that will characterize the downtown master plan.
- The decision to finance the downtown plan with an insurance tax increase.
- The decision by OMHS to purchase Large Scale Biology and provide venture capital for Kentucky Bioprocessing.
- The decision of the city school board to use its bonding capacity to finance a gymnasium and other additions to Owensboro High School.
- The decision to merge Owensboro-Daviess County and Our Lady of Mercy Hospitals.
- The decision to build a new \$500 million hospital.
- The selection of where to build the new hospital.
- The decision by OMHS to buyout Catholic Health Partners for \$36 million.

- The decisions on where to build various public buildings: the public library, post office, OMU, Social Security, police station, & WKU-Owensboro.
- The decisions on the designs of these public buildings.
- The decisions on taxpayer incentives to extend to new or expanding business and industry: Scott Paper (now Kimberly Clark), MidAmerica Airpark tenants, and others.
- The decision to raise the health tax to build a new Daviess County Health Center.

The decisions connected with these important community projects may have indeed been the correct decisions, or they may prove to be the correct decisions in the long-term. But were the decisions made in the open? Did the public have a meaningful role? Did the process build trust in officials and our institutions or contribute to public discontent and cynicism?

The Root of Civic Tension

Participants (in an Owensboro-Daviess County public opinion study) had one serious, intensely felt, overriding concern: How decisions are made in the community. Again and again, participants said the major decisions are made by a small group of influential people, a “clique,” who carry on behind the scenes, with minimal public input. As a result, they said, decisions on key issues generally benefit a few people instead of the community as a whole.

Instead of being paramount and top priority, the greater, broad, public interest is, participants said, regularly subordinated to the interests of small segments of the community. These sentiments were equally pronounced among residents of Owensboro and more rural Daviess County.

Doble Research Associates, 1999

We still need ... communities to communicate about the common good. ... People feel disengaged from the larger forces at work and disheartened at their lack of power. ... As Aristotle said, "Man is a political animal." We are fulfilled through civic engagement; without that, we are morally deficient.

Our representatives are elected in order to execute the general will of the people for the common good. If we see their will to be at odds with the general will, it follows that our representatives owe an explanation, in particular a justification, for the decisions they make.

We owe reasons to each other, and once we engage in the examination of reasons, once we hold them up to the light, we are better able to understand each other's will, including our own, and including the general will.

...it is only when differences of opinion can be discussed openly that progress toward truth may be realized. ...We are the check on each other in the pursuit of truth, such that true ideas will shine with their own light, and false ones fall ultimately into darkness.

**Stephen Carden, Ph.D.
Presentation to Owensboro-Daviess
County elected officials
"We the People" Citizens for Good Government
program**



An Openness and Transparency Pledge

Citizens for Good Government (CGG) organized in 2008 to promote the implementation of the “people’s priorities” that emerged from the government discussion period of the “We the People” AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting ®.

From these deliberations, the top recommendation was to: “Establish policies that ensure openness and transparency.”

CGG researched the subject, examined models, and recently proposed the following pledge to the Owensboro mayor, Daviess County

judge-executive, and city and county commissioners. CGG plans to challenge other officials (school boards, library board, health district board, major nonprofit organizations, etc.) to adopt a comparable pledge.

An edited pledge has been signed by the county judge-executive and commissioners. The mayor of Owensboro and city commission have taken the matter under consideration.

The Openness and Transparency Pledge as proposed by Citizens for Good Government:

Citizens for Good Government

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Dale Murphy
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David Oberst
Ron Payne
Jerry Ralph
Mike Ricks
Mike Riney
Sherion Roberts
Judy Schell
Bob Schell
Bruce Whitmer

Citizens for Good Government: Openness & Transparency Pledge

Citizens Pledge

Assumptions

The citizens of Owensboro-Daviess County embrace and support government of the people, by the people, and for the people that is effective, efficient, and ethical in working for the public good. A governing body will generously share its power by sharing facts and knowledge of the process in which it is engaged. Openness happens only when leaders insist on it.

Openness and transparency is a two-way concept. When citizens take an active role in their neighborhoods, their communities, and their governments, they have the power to impact positive action, and when necessary, to make positive change. Citizens of Daviess County are asked to commit time and effort to participate with governing bodies and public boards to guarantee positive results.

Principles

All citizens are asked to commit to follow these principles.

- Citizens will actively participate in meetings, public forums/hearings, and seek to understand the truth and purpose of issues under consideration.
- Citizens will present their ideas and suggestions in a welcoming and unthreatening manner using civil dialogue in a non-judgmental and respectful manner.
- Citizens will foster a welcoming spirit of inclusion and trust between officials, organizations and the public.
- Citizens will seek to educate themselves and ask pertinent questions so that they can better understand problems and solutions facing our community.
- We as Citizens will listen to the issues and discuss the solutions possible in an unthreatening manner.

Proposed Pledge

Assumptions

The citizens of Daviess County embrace and support government of the people, by the people, and for the people that is effective, efficient, and ethical in working for the public good. A governing body will generously share its power by sharing facts and knowledge of the process in which it is engaged.

When governments operate with full transparency, everyone wins. When citizens take an active role in their neighborhoods, their communities, and their governments, they have the power to impact positive action, and when necessary, to make positive change. Elected officials gain powerful allies when citizens support governmental policy they helped to shape. The citizens of Daviess County are asked to commit time and effort to participate with governing bodies and public boards to guarantee positive results.

Definition

A governing body as described above follows a public and deliberative decision-making process that is inclusive of all citizens. Before possible strategies and decisions are determined, a governing body is forthcoming with understandable information that is accurate, complete, and candid.

Principles

All public/private boards and our citizens are asked to commit to follow these principles.

We _____ commit to the following:

- We will not circumvent open meetings laws in any way or for any reason. We will deliberate and make decisions publicly, share complexities of issues promptly, set forth options and choices under consideration, including costs, benefits, consequences, tradeoffs and differing opinions.
- We will be sensitive to the potential impact of our actions on stakeholders and constituent groups. We will communicate with stakeholder and constituent groups before decisions are made. We will be assertive-utilizing all resources available including electronic, audio, and print media - in educating our constituency on the issues for which we are responsible.
- We will inform and educate our citizenry on the issues facing our community. We will conduct public forums, readings and votes on important decisions to guarantee there is substantive public participation. We will not dismiss the views of citizens who may be uninformed; rather, we will educate them and/or provide them with all pertinent information so that they can educate themselves. We will continually encourage citizens to present their ideas and suggestions in a welcoming and unthreatening manner and setting. We will foster a welcoming spirit of inclusion and trust between officials, organizations and the public.
- We invite - we urge - citizens to actively participate in meetings, public forums/hearings, and seek to understand the truth and purpose of issues under consideration.

Signature

Date

Signature

Date

Signature

Date

Signature

Date

(An open and transparent) governing body ... is inclusive of all citizens. ... Before possible strategies and decisions are determined, a governing body (should be) forthcoming with understandable information that is accurate, complete, and candid.

**Citizens for Good Government
Owensboro**



The RFP for the Downtown Hotel: An opportunity to demonstrate an open and transparent process

The Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corporation will soon receive proposals from hotel developers who are interested in building a hotel to complement an “events center” (arena-convention center) in downtown Owensboro.

This is the first major step in the implementation of the downtown “placemaking” master plan adopted by city and county governments a few months ago. Since the closing of the Executive Inn, Owensboro-Daviess County is essentially out of the convention business. The hotel-events center complex is expected to re-establish the community as a competitive destination for conferences and conventions, accommodate exhibitions and athletic events, and more.

The plan calls for the hotel to be built in the area where the state office building stands currently.

The development of the downtown plan was characterized by extensive public participation. However, local officials have been criticized for the lack of public dialogue connected with the financing of the plan. Despite the criticism, a majority of city and county officials adopted an increase in the insurance tax to finance the plan’s public projects: events center, park expansion, market square, parking, street improvements, traffic rerouting and more.

In recent months, officials have appeared to be increasingly sensitive to public outreach:

- Members of the Daviess County Fiscal Court signed an Openness and Transparency Pledge. (City Commissioners are expected to sign a comparable pledge.)
- Work sessions have been open to the public, broadcast live and replayed numerous times.
- A call-in television program has been established.
- Informal breakfast and luncheon meetings have been open to the public.
- Special public meetings concerning the downtown plan have been presented by county commissioners in rural communities.

The hotel RFP process and collaboration on the events center creates a special opportunity to engage the citizenry in important decisions connected with this vital and ambitious public-private partnership:

- What will be built (size, scope, brand name of the hotel)?

- Where will the hotel be built and how will it connect with the events center?
- Will there be spaces in the hotel that are the responsibility of the public to maintain (e.g., lobby and commons area)?
- What will the hotel look like? Will it complement the design of the events center?
- How will it be financed?
- What incentives, if any, are offered to developers in the RFP?
- Is the hotel developer requesting additional incentives?
- Will there be any assurances that the hotel will remain open and be well-maintained for the long-term?
- Who will select the developer?
- What is the criteria through which hotel developer proposals will be compared?
- What will be the management relationship between hotel and events center?
- How will parking be addressed and what public cost will be involved?

Citizens will be interested in these and other matters.

To fully and appropriately engage the community in this exercise in public participation, officials must understand that the process must ... be open.

... go beyond public “input.”

... go beyond mandated public hearings.

... not be about “selling” a decision that has already been made in advance.

Officials should share the specifications that will be sent to prospective bidders and the list of hotel developers that will be invited to bid. They should also share the list of publications and websites where the project and the RFP will be advertised.

In so doing, the public will gain confidence and trust in the process and the officials behind it. Decisions will inherently be wiser and stay focused on the common good.

Transparency is “crucial to civic health.” The public’s trust can be earned and sustained only when our leaders are forthcoming and forthright in providing us with a “torrent” of reliable information about the condition and conduct of public institutions.

George Will
Newspaper columnist