

# Council tightens public speech

City Council  
✓ Mayor's new rules aim to shorten meetings that can last up to 11 hours

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SANTA CRUZ — The mayor has had his finger on the City Hall microphone's "off" switch lately to ensure constituents comply with new rules limiting public comments at council meetings.

Since December, when Ryan Coonerty took over the mayor's chair, he has laid ground rules limiting how long, and on

what topics, members of the public can address the council. For those who continue much longer than the new limit of two minutes — or pontificate on subjects not related to the issue at hand — Coonerty is quick to mute the volume, even mid-sentence.

At this week's council meeting, the mayor employed the tactic three times

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Mayor Ryan Coonerty, Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews and Councilman Mike Rotkin listen to public comment during a recent Santa Cruz City Council meeting.

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in an effort to rein in council meetings that often last 10 to 11 hours.

"I don't think long council meetings are necessarily better council meetings," Coonerty said. "They were starting at 1:30 [p.m.] and most of the time finishing at 11, 11:30 [p.m.]."

In famously liberal Santa Cruz, residents passionate about a host of causes, ranging from the war in Iraq to homelessness, regularly share their views at the local public forum. That means council meetings, which in other towns attract a handful of participants except on the hottest issues, regularly draw a crowd.

Even at sparsely attended Santa Cruz City Council sessions, a handful of regulars dominate the public comment periods and share their thoughts on almost every issue at hand.

By comparison, county Board of Supervisors meetings, which have looser rules governing public comment, begin at 9 a.m. and often finish before lunch. There, audience members have three minutes to speak.

To move things along at the city, Coonerty also has asked staff members to shorten their presentations, stopped council members from engaging in duplicate discussions on the same topic, and blocked audience members from pulling items for discussion from the consent agenda — the portion of the council's workload typically approved with one sweeping vote and little conversation — without support of a council member.

Before, some residents regularly would pull as many as eight items off the consent agenda and speak for three minutes on each one, Coonerty said, significantly extending the meeting.

Still, some of the council's most vocal audience members have declared the new rules unconstitutional and an affront to their freedom of speech.

"You are cutting off public comment on a number of items,

which is completely inappropriate and I believe illegal," said homeless advocate and long-time council gadfly Robert Norse.

The issue even dogged Coonerty as he ran for a county delegate slot to support presidential candidate Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention in Denver this summer.

Activist Metteyya Brahmana encouraged Democrats to deny Coonerty the position, as his new council rules "contradict one of Obama's central premises of his campaign concerning getting ordinary citizens involved," Brahmana wrote in an e-mail to Obama supporters.

But council members say the ones complaining the most are usually the ones the rules were put in place to control.

Norse, for one, has a reputation for long-windedness that goes back years. In 2001, for example, he complained that the minutes taken during a council meeting did not include all his comments.

"If we did that," then-Councilman Keith Sugar quipped, "we would have to call them 'hours' rather than 'minutes.'"

In Berkeley — another city known for its outspoken residents — assistant management analyst Raquel Molina said similar rules governing public comment are in effect. Speakers there are limited to two minutes, and only council members can pull items off the consent agenda, Molina said.

Other members of the Santa Cruz City Council seem supportive of the changes.

When staff or audience members are waiting to deliver a report or speak out on an issue, said Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews, it's important "that they aren't forced to wait through inordinately long comments over and over again by the same people."

Coonerty said he hopes the new rules will encourage other city residents to run for office, as the position won't require such a time commitment on Tuesday nights.

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