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Making 'town hall' meetings work

By HARRIS SOKOLOFF

IT TAKES courage to be mayor, and more courage to lead public forums about budget decisions during tight and contentious times.

The first of Mayor Nutter's town hall meetings on the budget was last night. I wasn't there, but I'm betting I know what happened: The mayor, with his budgetary leadership staff, presented their work, described what they've prioritized, what they've cut and why. They likely included some of the trade-offs they made and why they made them.

Then a long line of citizens queued-up - physically or on 3-by-5 cards - to ask the mayor and his budget team "questions" to which they expect "answers."

If the past is any guide, most of those "questions" were statements of what the speaker wanted, gripes about what the mayor decided and accusations of why those decisions were made.

This is not to disparage citizens. It is, rather, to point out that this kind of forum has a certain ritualistic feel to it. It's a ritual where the leader makes a public statement, individual citizens make theirs, often in the form of complaints, accusations and preaching, while the leader stands up front and "takes it," often without response.

In this ritual, giving unhappy citizens a forum to "speak out" most often means "speak out against."

This is not to say that such public forums aren't valuable - they are. But we must understand their value, and what they can and cannot accomplish.

Citizens often come to such forums because they want to hear the leader's reasoning from the leader himself, because they want to confront him directly, because they want to be heard, or because they want what they want no matter what the trade-off and want to make sure the leader knows it.

If what the mayor wants is just that - to give Philadelphians a chance to hear directly from him why he made the decisions he did, to give them a chance to tell him what they think, or to make their demands - then the forum is likely to accomplish that.

But in the end, most citizens want more than to just be "heard." They want what they say to make a difference. And so, they are likely to leave the forums glad they went and voiced their opinion. But they're also likely to be dissatisfied when nothing changes.

True, if enough citizens get up and say the same thing over and over again, the mayor may revise some of his plans. And it may be that compromises will emerge from those forums.

But this may be another unfortunate result.

It reverses one of the things that started to emerge in the last city election cycle.

At that point, citizens learned that their voices could be richer and more productive if they were willing to come together to work through issues and come up with "common ground" ideas, rather than a set of individual citizen complaints.

Given the right opportunity and structure, citizens can rise above accusing and complaining. My work on the Great Expectations project and at the Penn Project for Civic Engagement showed this in more than 100 community forums in

Philadelphia.

We demonstrated it again this spring when we held 10 forums on the budget - one in each City Council district - where we asked citizens to talk about the mayor's six major budget areas. In each of those forums, citizens came together, climbed beyond individual interests to define a broader public interest they were willing to work for.

So the mayor must be clear about the purpose of these forums: Are they designed to inform the public and then give them a chance to respond, to tell the mayor what's on their mind? Or are they sessions where citizens work together to think through the public interest - the work of citizenship?

If all these meetings do is give citizens a chance to say what they thought coming in, they won't have accomplished much.

IF THE MAYOR goes to the trouble of convening eight town hall meetings around the city, bringing his staff with him, he should go beyond this ancient ritualistic activity.

He should structure the forums so citizens talk with each other about what's important, and what they are and aren't willing to trade off in these hard times.

The forums should provide a way for citizens to see and grapple with the difficult facts and choices that have been staring city budget staff in the face for the last month behind closed doors.


They should be an opportunity for Philadelphians to go beyond the wishful "don't cut my stuff" thinking and grapple with the emotional complexities at the base of the current realities.

In the process, they'll learn from each other - and with the mayor and his staff listening, they, too, will learn. New ideas can emerge from those deliberations. *

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