

Citizens able to testify at city council meetings



Photo by Clay Eals

Citizens testify at council hearing

"You're going to a city council meeting?! God, what a drag."

Cora Gangware, an Emerald reporter, consistently gets this kind of reaction from friends and acquaintances about her beat.

"No, it is not a drag," says Gangware. "Some people have closed minds about city government. To them it is a remote, alien, and tiresome body of obscure officials busy with matters that do not affect them."

"What they don't realize is the council is made up of some very human people, with interesting and sometimes conflicting personalities. The mayor is a handsome, personable and outgoing man...these people are not remote or unreachable."

Gangware began covering city council meetings with many reservations: Would it be incredibly dry? Would it be too complex and involved to fathom?

"At first I was amazed at the number of people who attend those meetings," said Gangware, "and I was impressed by how actively those people participated."

"I'll bet a lot of people don't realize that they have a right to not only attend all council meetings but also to speak their minds at those meetings."

"The council members listen to what people have to say...a councilman will call upon a member of the audience by name and say, 'Mr. Jones, you voiced an opinion on this matter, could you please clarify these points for me', and Mr. Jones will go up to the microphone and his opinion will be heard by the decision makers."

Wickes Beal, current council president, describes city council as "the ordinary citizen's representative in city government."

"Our council meetings are generally well attended by the public," said Beal. "If people have issues on their minds they come and speak out...the same thing applies to students."

"Students are interested in participating in government, especially those interested in politics," asserted Beal. "It's a very valuable experience for them and us when they come down to city council and speak their minds on various issues. I've found most students to be very articulate."

"The mayor and city council are elected and are unpaid," said Beal. They represent in our American system of government the separation of powers. The council is the legislative body. It is up to us to pass the laws and to define policy and it is then the responsibility of the city manager to carry out that policy."

Beal described Eugene's city manager system as a "good efficient city government for a small city like Eugene."

"We could probably hand the city over to Hugh McKinley and tell him to run it — and he would probably do a very fine job — but then city government would become very remote and distant," she said.

The council itself is made up of eight diverse individuals who represent the diversity of the community. Wickes Beal, Beth Campbell, and Neil Murray are closely attuned to the University. Councilmen James Hershner, Tom Williams, H.C. McDonald, and Gus Keller represent the business point of view. The council members come from a variety of backgrounds and professions. Bob Wood teaches in West Eugene, Hershner is an attorney, and Murray works in administration at the University. Williams owns Williams Bakery, Gus Keller is a part owner of John Warren Hardware, and McDonald manages the St. Vincent de Paul outlet in Eugene.

The council represents a wide range of viewpoints, from substantially conservative to fairly liberal.

"Often we vote unanimously on issues," said Beal, "but because our views are different there are naturally conflicts of opinion. I don't think it would be a fair city government if it were otherwise."

The people of Eugene recently rejected a proposed charter amendment which would have authorized salaries for the mayor and council members, something the mayor has been advocating for several years.

Both Anderson and Beal expressed concern that increasing demands and obligations of a growing city government will one day become a barrier to working people interested in serving on the council.

"Council members spend at least 20 hours a week or more on city business," said Beal. "This can be a real burden on someone working on a 9 to 5 job."

Beal says that voter rejection of both the proposed charter amendment and the city budget in the last election reflects "a very deep concern with the rising cost of schools and government on the property tax payer, as our only source of income is the property tax."

Two issues vital to student interests, housing and parking, keep coming up. Various student groups, both independent and affiliated with the ASUO, have worked on these issues.

Beal talked about student housing problems and their relation to the city council.

"The majority of students want to live within walking distance of the University — unfortunately we have Sacred Heart at the University's doorstep. Naturally doctors and clinics want to be located near it."

"City regulations force developers to provide so many off-street parking lots for tenants — this means a lot of expensive land is taken up by parking lots."

"And...all those student cars...the parking spaces they are using are raising the cost of their housing."

"These are just some of the problems we are delving into," said Beal. "We have always tried to maintain a close relation with student body officers and we welcome student input."

"You never know when an issue will stir the student population," said Beal. When mall regulations were discussed, Beal said that students showed up in force to preserve the mall as a gathering place and to oppose factions interested in restricting the area to retail business.

"We recently formed a mall activities committee — with several student members — to develop ideas for expanding the use of the mall through a city corporation which would lease space on the mall itself."

Beal enthusiastically described some of their ideas. "People could set up 'kiosks,' brightly colored canvas tent-like structures which would serve as a temporary shelter for special sales and exhibits."

"If we charge a set fee the downtown merchants will not feel so threatened...the established merchants could also take advantage of the plan," said Beal.

"We want to use that space to create extra life and activities — I can see outdoor stalls, flower carts, and some day, outdoor restaurants."

"In 1971 the Vietnam War was the issue concerning the students more than anything else. Peace groups joined with students and petitioned for a vote of the people to get out of the war. These students combined to get the signatures, the city put it on the ballot, and peace won the vote — this is one of the ways the council and students have interacted in the past."

"Students after all are a sizable group in this community," said Beal, adding with a smile... "and most of them live in my ward. So we are very concerned about the things that concern students."

Kathleen Glanville

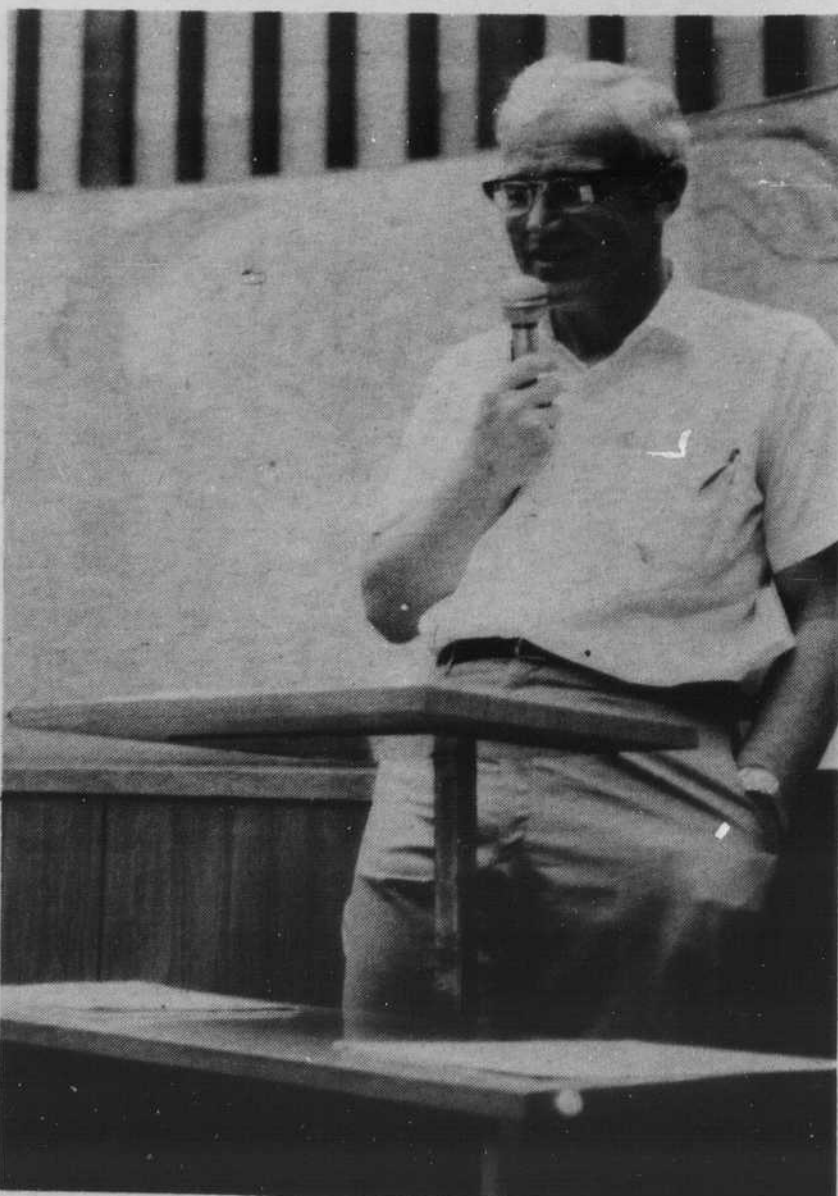


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Hugh McKinley