

Ontario City Council

League of Women Voters of the Claremont Area Observer Report

By Observer Charles G. Ferrell – May 24, 2018

The Ontario city council includes five members, a mayor and four City Council members, all elected at large by the voters in Ontario. There are no council districts. Each of the five members has one equal vote. A majority of the City Council sets the policies and direction of the Ontario City Government, which is then administrated by the city manager who is hired by, and reports directly to, the City Council.

CITY LEADERSHIP

The City Council includes Mayor Paul S. Leon, Mayor Pro Tem Alan D. Wapner and Council Members Jim W. Bowman, Debra Dorst-Porada and Ruben Valencia. The top City officials include City Manager Scott Ochoa, City Attorney John E. Brown, City Clerk Sheila Mautz and Treasurer James R. Millhiser.

The City Council meets the first and third Tuesdays of the month at 6 p.m. in Council Chambers at Ontario City Hall, 303 East B Street in Ontario. Except for April of this year when I had conflicts, I have attended about half of the meetings since August 2017.

OBSERVATIONS

The City of Ontario has gone through some challenging times in recent years, much of that related to the decline of Ontario International Airport, which had been under the control of Los Angeles International Airport and the City of Los Angeles for several years and allowed to decline during those years. After a great deal of negotiations, including gaining support of other cities and governmental agencies in the Ontario region, an Ontario Airport Commission, including City and other regional leaders, was formed over the past couple of years and now the Ontario International Airport Authority (OIAA) controls the airport. As a result, the airport is gaining additional carriers and as the only international airport in Southern California with room to expand, it is expanding. The expansion itself has limited positive impact on the City, but the real benefit of the airport growth to the city is the boom in the economy in the general vicinity of the airport. The City is also benefitting from a thriving Convention Center and Arena, which last year began hosting a National Basketball Association "G-League" team, operated by the Los Angeles Clippers. Ontario, as were many California cities, was hurt when the State confiscated all Redevelopment Agency (RDA) funds to balance the State budget (for one year). Cities which were successfully operating an RDA lost many opportunities to upgrade areas. In Ontario a deteriorating downtown and the area around Holt Boulevard between downtown and the airport were deprived of needed renovation. In addition, 20% of RDA funds were going towards low cost housing, and losing those funds slowed growth in these areas for Ontario. Still, the city appears poised to tackle those and other areas of need with a City Council that seems on the same page and a new city manager who is in the process of restructuring and reorganizing the City Hall staff and departments.

City Council meetings are run very professionally by the Council and the city manager. Members arrive on time, the meetings start on time, those who wish to speak fill out request cards and

most all presentations by the public are pithy and respectful while the council members act in the same manner. Speakers are limited to three minutes and are verbally warned by the City Clerk when they have one minute left. A suggestion would be to replace the verbal warning, which sometimes startles a speaker and causes him or her to lose their train of thought, with a green, yellow and red light, as many cities and agencies do. The yellow light could warn them with a minute or 30 seconds remaining, which could make the process smoother.

The City Council agendas are plentiful and available at the door of Council chambers. The Council members appear to have done their homework on the issues and ask well-thought-out questions from staff. This City Council is no different than many others in that many items go on the Consent Calendar (in which all items are passed at one time by a single vote without any comment). Some items probably do need some public airing, such as purchases of a million dollars or a multi-million dollar grant the city has received. Doing that would improve the transparency of the Council meetings and better inform the public what is going on in their city. There have been no problems, however, in pulling items off the Consent Calendar when requested by a council member, staff or member of the public. The council could make it clearer at every meeting that anyone, including a member of the public, can request an item be pulled from the Consent Calendar and discussed.

A suggestion regarding the agendas would to include the staff recommendation on the agendas available at the door for the public. This bit of transparency would make it easier for members of the public to prepare to speak on the issue.

Although the meetings follow good government standards and are professionally run, at times the Council isn't very clear on how each member voted on an issue. A suggestion, which many other councils and agencies do, would be to have a board with the council members' names and lights so the public could see how each member voted on each issue. This would just make the voting more transparent.

Attendance at City Council meetings is sparse, except for staff which pack a section of the seating area, which is the area that appears on camera behind speakers on the Governmental Channel Cable TV broadcasts. A suggestion would be for the city to put those broadcasts on the official City Website, so members of the public could access them around the clock on their computers.

CONCLUSION

This current Ontario City Council appears to be operating well as a team. The meetings are being run in a professional manner; members of the public, the few who do attend, are virtually all courteous and the Council members respond accordingly. I have made some suggestions, some tweaking that could be done to make the meetings more transparent and run more smoothly, and another regarding offering broadcasts of the meetings around the clock over the city's official website. Overall, since I have been observing Ontario City Council Meetings, based on the criteria I have read from the League of Women Voters and the 40-plus years I worked as a newspaper reporter, including 30 years as a community newspaper editor (this includes time when I lived in Ontario and edited the South Ontario News community newspaper), Ontario is in a good place right now and poised to move forward in an even more positive direction.