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Long Branch officials seek to quell rancor

Office hours will be offered for residents to utilize

BY CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS JULY 19, 2010

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LONG BRANCH — Members of the new City Council soon may offer evening office hours a few days every month this autumn in an effort to be more accessible to constituents, away from what officials term the partisan and frequent carnival-like atmosphere of public council meetings.

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It is not ironic that one of the first concerns council members expressed last week as they ironed out the specifics of the program was how to manage security, with city Business Administrator Howard H. Woolley Jr. and City Attorney James G. Aaron assuring newly installed council members help — if needed — would be available instantly from city police, who are just a few floors away.

Under the arrangement, Woolley and two council members will meet with interested constituents at the City Hall council caucus room from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Sept. 1, Sept. 15, Oct. 6, Oct. 20, Nov. 3, Dec. 1 and Dec. 15. Aaron will be available by telephone in case any concern has legal components.

During the council meeting Tuesday, which became — as it often does — unruly, one incident stood out: when longtime council critic Vincent LePore of Broadway addressed the governing body.

As officials evaluate other ways to improve the addressing of citizen complaints and concerns, Mayor Adam Schneider said the LePore incident — in which three police officers were called to try to keep order — remains the best evidence against televising the regular portion of council meetings.

In the mayor's view, citizens who want to interact effectively with their leaders are best served by contacting them away from the political drama often acted out in the public meeting room: by telephone, by more visible e-mail addresses on the city's website, on Facebook, Twitter, or just in

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everyday life at sporting events, school activities or at the grocery store — noting new council members are deeply involved in community activities from church groups to athletic events.



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Schneider said the people who generally come to council meetings are his political opponents whose message and manner of delivery appear to have been rejected by city voters in definitive May 11 balloting, in which the mayor captured a sixth term.

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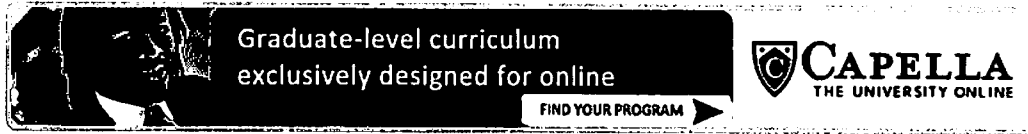
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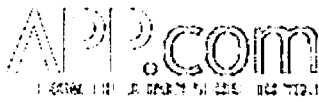
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Long Branch officials seek to quell council meeting rancor

Office hours will be offered for residents to utilize

BY CAROL GORGA WILLIAMS STAFF WRITER - JULY 19, 2010

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Schneider — paraphrasing Albert Einstein — and calling particular attention to the political opposition, suggested it may be the definition of insanity to do something in the same way over and over again, though expecting a different result.

"This is all about politics," Schneider said. "Let's not pretend it is about something else. If you scream at me, what makes you think I am going to be cooperative?"

At the meeting, Diana Multare, saying she represents a group called Long Branch Citizens for Good Government, continued her regular criticism of the administration — which technically only had been seated for 12 days. She questioned the ethics of Schneider's team, asking them if "the ends justify the means."

Then, she said, "the election is over and we are still here," but the mayor questioned who Multare meant by "we" since the group appears to be partisan, without measurable achievements.

"Transparency is a two-way street," the mayor said. "They've never said when they have their meetings. It will be the same three or four people who show up at council meetings. We've just had an election and they are playing the same game they played before."

Despite his contention about their relevance, the mayor said they still are free to take their best shot.

"I think they can get as angry as they want," he said, referring to the council's five-minute rule for public comment. "That does not bother me. As long as there is a (time) limit, I will be there."

The council for months has been taping and broadcasting the caucus or work portions of meetings — streaming it on the city cable commission's website — and Schneider maintains that people interested in city business and how decisions are made can watch the caucus meetings, where issues are debated by council members and where City Hall employees make their case for new programs or initiatives.

The city is facing significant budget problems over the next few years and there is no funding to pay to tape and broadcast public meetings, Schneider said. And make no mistake, no one is lining up to volunteer, he said.

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The council is trying, he said, noting it started its first public session last Tuesday with new Council President Mary Jane Celli reading new guidelines for public behavior. The guidelines reinstate a second public comment portion at the conclusion of each meeting.

"The council reserves the right to terminate any remarks made by any individual which are rude or in a tone which would (incite) or engender hostility whereby in the judgment of the council president, the meeting may become disruptive," the guidelines said.

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