

## **As I see it**

*By Ed Peterson, District 1*

As I write this column on Aug. 1, we are nearing an important election in which voters will decide upon extension of a sales tax to pay for construction and operation of public safety facilities. The county has spent a great deal of time and energy on this issue, so it is paramount in my mind. However, by the time you read this column, the sales tax will be old news. Thus the quandary of the writer: how to translate the thoughts of the moment into subject matter that will interest the reader when read.

If the sales tax passes, the county will be proceeding with its plans to build the jail, crime lab, and juvenile facilities when you read this. If the sales tax fails, we will be scrambling to find alternative solutions when you read this. As I reflected on this situation, I realized that it is not much different than the task elected officials face all the time in communicating their issues and decisions to constituents. It underlies our greatest challenge: assuring trust between the public and governing bodies. A solid understanding of the *process* is the only way the public will be able to trust its governing bodies. So if you will indulge a bit of tedious procedural discussion here, I will conclude with the bigger picture of why it matters.

As a general rule, elected bodies work with issues, conducting research and analysis before the issues are discussed and considered publicly. Frequently these issues require consideration by more than one committee or board before they get to the final decision-making body. Almost always, the solutions change as they work their way through the process.

The county's process works like this: Issues and problems are first addressed by county staff or appropriate boards (such as the boards that govern the Park and Recreation District, Library, and Mental Health). As issues become ripe for decision by the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC), the county manager, in consultation with the BOCC chairman, sets them for consideration during a public agenda. Sometimes the issues are brought to the board for informal discussion during a Committee of the Whole meeting and action is taken at a subsequent business session. For the most part, issues are completed at the staff level at least two weeks before they are placed on the BOCC agenda. They are reviewed by the BOCC one week before final action and again discussed at the time of final action during a Thursday morning business session.

As you can see, issues are a moving target as they work their way through the process. Many issues we work with, such as land use issues where an owner wants to split one lot into two, affect only a few constituents. Other issues, of course, have broad ramifications. In any case, the county's philosophy and tradition is to encourage as much public input and participation as possible. Our task is to make the information available to you at the time that is most meaningful and effective for you.

Approaches are available along a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum, we could simply leave it up to the constituents to monitor our activities for matters of interest. We do provide substantial information about coming issues on our Web site on the "Agendas" links (<http://lims.jocogov.org>), but this approach only presents issues that have completed the earlier staff and committee vetting process.

At the other end of the spectrum, we could publish everything we are doing. That would not seem to serve you, in that most of the information would be of no consequence and it would be burdensome on the county to keep the information before the public.

We seem to have landed somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, where pending issues of large consequence are brought to the public early in the discussion, often by citizen interest groups, and smaller, less consequential, matters are first publicized when they are ready for consideration by the BOCC. Citizens who have expressed interest in a particular matter are usually included early in the process.

Our system isn't perfect, and the always-changing nature of public policy doesn't lend itself to easy information dissemination. Seeing how topics are developed within the county may help you understand how an important decision could seem to come from nowhere. In the debate over the public safety sales tax, criticisms were leveled at the county for "springing the issue" on the public. In actuality, the county has worked for *years* on whether to proceed with the facilities and how to fund them. We are doing the same work now on capital programs for the future.

Johnson County has become a large community with a complex web of governance (as promised, the big picture!). The process described above for the county is comparable to that followed by other elected boards, such as city councils and school boards. It is hard to keep up with all of them, even in the information age. And a "big surprise" will occasionally pop up.

As a community, we in Johnson County need to bridge the gap between our elected bodies and the public. The elected officials need to continue to improve their communication with the public. The public needs to remain vigilant. Most important, we need to nurture a general faith in our process and institutions. They have served us well in the past, and continue to provide outstanding services at a very reasonable cost. A continuation of this trust will enable us to be the community we want to be.

*Ed.Peterson@jocogov.org; 913-715-0431*