
EDITORIAL

The March Toward Darkness

In a shocking sneak attack on the public's right to know, the City of Gilroy began the march towards conducting its business in the shadows rather than in sunshine, out of view of the community members and the press.

Without outreach to the public or public interest advocates—and without even a single public comment—the Gilroy City Council voted Monday to spend \$30,000 to place a measure on the ballot that will reduce transparency in the public bidding process for its most expensive projects.

Buried in the fine print of a charter amendment to streamline the bidding process is a provision that would allow local government to bypass its obligation to publish its notices in a newspaper of general circulation when it spends public money on civic improvement projects over \$200,000.

This surprise assault on civic transparency is a harbinger of what the public can expect in a world in which elected officials and professional staff are no longer required to publish their information in a broadly distributed public forum. There will be more backroom and insider deals, and less scrutiny of public spending.

Civic officials make the case that online bid submission forums are adequate to alert the big construction firms needed to execute their multi-million dollar design-build projects. That completely misses the point. Members of the public and local businesses should know about and be able to comment on these building projects and high ticket contracts.

As communities around the world become “news deserts” because of disinvestment in community journalism, taxpayers lose. Studies have shown that wasteful spending increases without

independent scrutiny. Members of the public lose accountability when there is no reporting on the actions of the officials they elect, and the people their governments hire.

“Given the advent of technology to notify bidders, removing the requirement to advertise in a newspaper would create efficiencies in the process and allow additional time to be spent on more successful avenues to generate bid interest, as well as saving money currently spent on such advertisements,” the city staff’s memo argued.

Saving a small amount of money on advertising to be able to spend large sums of construction money out of view of the public won’t save taxpayers a dime in the long run. Online bidding systems controlled by industry interests don’t ask the kinds of questions that members of the public and journalists do.

We are hardly disinterested in this matter. For more than a century and a half, the Gilroy Dispatch has covered Gilroy’s civic affairs, and we use the money from public notice advertising to pay journalists’ salaries, and to print and distribute this newspaper, even to homes that don’t subscribe to it, for free. Gilroy is one of the remaining communities to have a locally-based, owner-operated newspaper—many other cities have lost theirs.

City officials expect smooth sailing come November, with City Administrator Jimmy Forbis saying they don’t expect the amendment to be “very controversial,” pointing to a similar measure in 2020 in the City of Santa Cruz that passed comfortably with 81%. That measure, however, did not alter public notice requirements.

Hopefully the public is informed enough to not let this unhealthy piece of legislation just sail right through.