



## **America is a “Free Speech Zone” - Except in Government Meetings**

By Karen Lees, CSG student

When something happens in my own community that triggers alarm bells, I am compelled to write. And this subject provides an excellent learning opportunity, which is one important purpose of the Language of Liberty series.

Last Thursday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, the City Board of Alderman in Sparta, Tennessee declined a motion to allow citizen input at City Board meetings. Their decision is now a part of the public record: a policy that alienates the people they represent and is repugnant to the Framers' original intent of free speech enshrined in the First Amendment.

City Board meetings are required to be open to the public under Tennessee State Sunshine laws, and are among the most critical places that free speech of the public should be encouraged and fostered.

First Amendment scholar [David L. Hudson, Jr. writes](#) about free speech in government meetings, “Sometimes government officials need to silence disruptive citizens or to prohibit endless repetition. However, other times the officials may be squelching citizen speech because they want to suppress the message.”

The Framers wisely designed our unique system so that everything government does must be in public view and subject to public scrutiny. Hearing the public verbalize that scrutiny can be uncomfortable for elected officials. However, encouraging public involvement and input, adding it to the public record, and thereby fostering public trust is an integral part of their job.

When one is elected by the people, they are tasked with doing the people's business on their behalf. Banning public comment in public meetings would be like telling your boss he or she is banned from giving input in staff meetings concerning the job you are doing for him or her.

As it was designed, the experience of citizen interaction is actually *supposed* to be uncomfortable for elected officials at times.

The people are to act as sandpaper to government. It's not comfortable for either party to smooth off rough edges to keep a governmental body a true representation of the people, but it's absolutely necessary. Without the people's input, officials under the influence of unbridled control of policy will naturally become what they once hated - the abhorrence that probably motivated them to run for office in the first place. This historically documented dynamic played out in Europe over and over again and was the very reason for the Revolutionary war.

It is the citizens' duty to interact with government and bring something of value to the table. Their testimony and research can be invaluable to elected officials. These are relationships worth cultivating. We are also tasked with keeping our republican system maintained and within its designated boundaries: that was never intended to be the sole responsibility of elected officials. It actually goes against the nature of their job. The people are the ultimate check in that balance.

What many elected officials don't realize is that it takes a lot of courage to get up and speak before a governing body and do it well. If a citizen has enough passion to address an issue, it's extremely difficult to do it calmly, trying not to offend the dignity and respect of officials. It's not a natural inclination. For those few who attempt it, they should be commended, not discouraged.

I've only known a very few who could give and take correction well. It seemed to come naturally to former State Representative and fellow self-governance student, [Charles Curtiss](#). His open and down to earth manner is refreshing. He's had to advise me on several occasions. Thankfully, he made it as painless as possible. But unfortunately, I had already shot my mouth off in public; so much of his advice was for the "next time". So for now, writing my thoughts on paper help me to practice verbal temperance.

As [Thomas Jefferson](#) put it, "The qualifications for self-government in society are not innate. They are the result of habit and long training." I am grateful to Representative Curtiss for mentoring others and myself in diplomacy, enhancing the training Jefferson refers to. Curtiss truly lives out Jefferson's [quote](#): "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion."

Many times, citizens get frustrated and we often lack the political knowledge, skills, and ability to articulate our desire to make necessary policy changes. Sometimes, we're asleep at the switch. So perhaps our city officials became too comfortable with our apathy and developed a "we've got this" mindset. That's on us. If we did not confront it long ago, it's our own fault.

But if we know and understand our Constitution and the way our system of government was designed to work, we can then maintain our system and keep it within its proper boundaries. It's not as hard as we think, and no, it's not too late to do it.

Our Tennessee community has made national and international headlines in the last few years, and not for our beautiful countryside or our bluegrass music. We have become infamous for making bad public policy that has violated some of the most basic of Constitutional rights. Most of us had a gut feeling of “That’s just wrong” when it happened, but didn’t know why. It is important we learn the constitutions (Federal and State) so we can spot when they are violated a mile away, and understand why it’s wrong. Besides, think of it - this kind of negative publicity will never encourage tourism, new industry, or new residents.

Our community is home to some of the best, kind-hearted folk anywhere. I do not believe for one minute these erroneous policies come out of ill intent, but out of ignorance. There is no shame in ignorance. There’s only shame in the prideful attitude that keeps one ignorant.

Perhaps this is why Tennessee legislators passed a law to compel schools to teach the Constitution? Our system is deteriorating because the maintenance crew - the people, are not maintaining it.

So, in the spirit of making our community a better place to live and work, consider this a challenge to become a self-governed, well-educated, involved citizen. Hands-on training in civics and the Constitution is available at a very low cost per person. No one is above learning something new - or reviewing things forgotten.

I specifically challenge elected officials to set an example by organizing an educational initiative for adults and youth in hands-on civics training and the Constitution, and then becoming a mentor in self-governance. Representative Curtiss was a good example to many when he was the first elected official to enroll in self-governance training back in 2014. He still enthusiastically encourages others to do the same, and continues to mentor many.

We are all stakeholders in a self-governing society and we all, whether elected or not, must govern together. Let’s practice working with our local officials and teach our youth to do the same for the sake of our communities today and in the future.

*The Language of Liberty series is a collaborative effort of the Center for Self Governance (CSG) Administrative Team. CSG is a non-profit, non-partisan educational organization, dedicated to training citizens in applied civics. The authors include administrative staff, selected students, and guest columnists. The views expressed by the authors are their own and may not reflect the views of CSG. Contact them at [CenterForSelfGovernance.com](http://CenterForSelfGovernance.com)*

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