

# The Star-Ledger

## Hillside leaders agree to smile for the camera

Township council finally approves airing meetings on local cable TV

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

BY JASON JETT

Star-Ledger Staff

Imagine watching gladiators in khakis and pantsuits.

Next year in Hillside, residents will be able to watch their local government in action -- live -- as council members spar over issues, pass ordinances and otherwise conduct the people's business on cable television.

The move was long in coming and not without rancor in a township where council members, while perhaps camera-shy, are anything but coy about their opinions. For more than a decade, the council failed to videotape its meetings, perennially not delivering on commitments to better use video equipment and services that the local cable television franchise provides.

That ended Monday night when the council voted 6-0 to adopt an ordinance forced upon it by a citizens petition drive to amend the township open public meetings and records law.

"Keeping the public informed is critical," Second Ward Councilwoman Shelley-Ann Bates said after the vote. "We see what can happen when people are kept informed."

Bates, who sponsored the ordinance, said that with new technology and the assistance of high school volunteers, the law can be implemented with a minimal burden on taxpayers.

The local law mandates the broadcasting of council meetings on Comcast of New Jersey Channel 35 and the posting of government records on the township website within 60 to 120 days.

Had the council not adopted the measure, the citizens petition that the township clerk certified in August would have led to a referendum on the ordinance.

Council Vice President Edward Brewer Jr. presided over Monday's landmark session in the absence of Council President John Kulish, who had opposed the ordinance as too costly when it was introduced last month.

"It doesn't end here," Bates told audience members who supported the ordinance. "You made this happen. It is your support, and your will, that makes change happen."

Fourth Ward Councilman Gerald "Pateesh" Freedman added, "I applaud you all. If you weren't sitting here, this ordinance would not have passed. It shows the power of the people. You are responsible for the passing of this ordinance."

When the ordinance came up for a vote, Bates noted Hillside residents have been able to watch other governing bodies -- those in Union, Irvington and Newark -- in action on cable television, but not their own township's.

She stressed that the legislation was submitted to the township council nearly a year ago, but it was not acted on by the majority until she and other residents collected enough signatures on petitions to force the governing body to vote or hold a referendum.

The issue galvanized a political opposition not seen in the township since the resignation of former mayor Barbara Rowen in late 1999 and the dissolution of the Hillside Citizen Action Committee.

Rowen and former councilwoman Mattie Holloway spoke in favor of the ordinance during the meeting, as did a half-dozen other residents, including former township council candidate Sip T. Whi taker.

Although the vote was unanimous, sentiment for the law was not.

Jeers and taunts repeatedly were exchanged between the dais and speakers, and at one point Brewer threatened to have Rowen removed by an auxiliary police officer.

Joseph T. Loeb, a citizen action committee leader in the late 1990s and early 2000s who has since died, was the subject of vitriol between Rowen and Councilman-at-Large Leonard Gilbert.

Gilbert told the audience he had Loeb's name removed from the ordinance because the deceased opposition figure did not deserve the honor, while Rowen, Whitaker and a half-dozen other residents defended Loeb.

During the public forum, Brewer repeatedly declined to answer residents' questions, referring to a new township council policy stating that public inquiries would be responded to orally at the end of a session or in writing within days of a meeting.

Angela Menza, a school board member, challenged that policy during the meeting as a violation of the state Open Public Meetings Act.

"This is why they don't want their meetings televised," former council candidate John O'Shea said during the tumult.

*Jason Jett may be contacted at [jjett@starledger.com](mailto:jjett@starledger.com) or (908) 302-1509.*