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SCHOOL BOARD: Trustees cut time to talk

Speakers get three minutes instead of five

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Without any discussion, the Clark County School Board voted Thursday for a proposal that would reduce the amount of time members of the public are allowed to speak.

Trustees voted 6-1 to limit the maximum amount of time anyone is allowed to address the School Board to three minutes, rather than five minutes.

A three-minute rule was already in place for speakers who wished to address an item on the agenda. The new proposal affects only those speakers before the School Board to discuss multiple issues, who previously had a five-minute time limit.

Thursday's vote was lumped with four other agenda items when it was passed. Trustee Shirley Barber was the School Board member who dissented.

But trustees waived a provision that limited the amount of total public speaking time to 60 minutes. Trustees sometimes allow the public to speak longer than that when many people have signed up to address hot-button issues.

Trustees also approved a provision that recommends that one or two people act as representatives when there is a group of people discussing one issue.

Trustee Carolyn Edwards said in July that the issue is not about limiting public input but rather about being an efficient government body.

"What we're trying to do is have people be succinct and precise with their comments," Edwards said. "This isn't an opportunity to just get up and ramble."

Edwards said that a board member still could recognize someone who used up their three minutes and allow the person to talk for an additional two minutes.

District spokesman Michael Rodriguez said that before Thursday's vote, a person who was recognized by a trustee and allowed to receive an additional two minutes of speaking time could get up to seven minutes to address the School Board.

Rodriguez did not recall any member of the public speaking for that long in recent months.

The vote infuriated Constance Kosuda, who was present at Thursday's meeting. She said there was a reason trustees did not discuss the matter before approving the changes.

"Every time the public comes here, they're made to wait until the end of the night," Kosuda said of the practice of having speakers who are not discussing agenda items wait until the end of the

meeting to address the board.

Kosuda said the practice discourages public input. She said it was "incredibly rude" that trustees moved forward with a vote without discussing the issue.

"They like the dog and pony shows. They don't want to hear criticism," she said.

Kosuda was the only member of the public Thursday to speak out on the issue.

Barbara Hunter, a spokeswoman for the National School Boards Association, a nonprofit based in Alexandria, Va., said the changes are typical of what is being seen in school boards nationwide.

She added that allowing the public to speak at meetings is only one way that trustees are able to hear from their constituents in learning about important issues in their communities. Hunter said School Board members can hear from the public by visiting schools or attending town hall meetings.

But Gary Peck, executive director of the ACLU of Nevada, said the School Board is being hypocritical by limiting public speaking time.

"They talk constantly about the importance of public and parental involvement," Peck said. "But they seem to be viewing the public comments as a burden they need to endure rather than something that is an important part of the process."

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