

Danedri Herbert

Written testimony in support of HB 2562

If little Gardner, Kansas, can livestream its city council and planning commission meetings available and archive them online, you can do it, too.

Though providing access and transparency to your constituents should be your primary consideration for this legislation, lawmakers also receive benefit.

I am speaking to you today as a Kansan, resident of Gardner, a former editor of the Gardner News and freelance writer who regularly covers the legislature. During my 8 years at a local paper, I covered extremely tumultuous city council meetings. Regularly, readers would inform me--in not so nice tones--that I provided biased coverage of the happenings at city hall. That is open to interpretation, but I can tell you, I couldn't wait for the day when readers didn't have to take my word for it. They could watch it and see for themselves. In the era of fake news, I think this would be an advantage to those on the other side of the dias as well.

After years of discussion and debate, Gardner finally put a camera in council chambers, and the catalyst that finally made the governing body get serious about it was an argument that bled out of a council meeting and into the streets. Once council member was arrested and charged with assaulting another council member following a meeting in which that same council member publicly threatened to meet the other in the parking lot and do beat him senseless. (He used saltier language, before stomping out of the chambers.) He followed a council member home and proceeded to tackle him in his front yard after the meeting. The disgraced council member resigned, but the remaining council members quickly drew the conclusion that having a recording of events puts everyone on their best behavior.

Cost was a major concern throughout the years of discussion, but when having video available became imperative, council found a way to do the project inexpensively in 2011. Initially, they outfitted council chambers with a security camera--the kind you can buy at Sam's Club for less than \$200. The camera didn't allow for livestreaming, but it captured sound and video of the proceedings. City staff would download the meeting for viewing on a YouTube channel the next day. According to city staff, that required about an hour of staff time after each meeting.

Since then, council has upgraded audio and video in the chamber. The upgrades had nothing to do with transparency. The equipment the council used prior to videotaping

meetings was old and it was time. Officials spent \$75,000 to upgrade and part of their upgrades included better recording equipment. The piece of that project that allowed the city to automate the recording process and add livestreaming cost less than \$1,000.

Now the livestreaming process requires hitting a button to start recording and hitting a button to stop. The video is broadcast live on the city's YouTube channel, which costs nothing. And YouTube does the archiving, too.

A contentious Gardner council learned the hard way that an armed society is a polite one. With live streaming, you're arming citizens with knowledge and information. And you're encouraging civil discourse and civic involvement in the process for a very limited cost.