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## Stay involved: Government works best when residents are paying attention

Rare is the public official who hasn't walked into a roomful of angry residents waiting anxiously for a meeting to start. It happened twice this week, as city commissioners in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph both faced sometimes contentious audience members who were not happy about the way the business of local government had been handled.

In Benton Harbor, the city is taking all kinds of heat for its decision on Monday, by a 6-3 vote, to sell a small portion of Jean Klock Park. We've been among the critics on this issue.

Many St. Joseph residents turned out to a meeting to discuss the redevelopment of the old St. Joseph River Yacht Club property. With the Yacht Club moving to the old Lighthouse Depot building, owners of the site are subdividing it. The bee in many bonnets on Tuesday evening was a request (that was withdrawn) to slightly increase the height of the homes by raising the grade of the site.

Along with the upset residents, the two meetings shared something else: A sense from commissioners that it would be great to see more people week in and week out, rather than only when there are hot issues to debate.

St. Joseph Mayor Mary Goff said it well Tuesday. "Every time we have a meeting with this many people, I say, 'Stay concerned.' Send a representative. Call. Stay involved in your local government."

It is something for all Southwest Michigan residents to think about. Like the citizen who never votes and then complains about the people in office, a resident who tunes out local government - except when there's a hot issue that affects him - risks being taken less seriously by those in charge.

We would never go as far as to suggest that citizens don't have a right to complain. After all they are still paying the taxes that fund local government. But better involvement from citizens leads to better government all the way around. Leaders will work harder for the citizenry if they know people are paying attention and appreciating the effort.

Or, if you're more cynical, leaders may avoid corruption or currying special favor if there is an indication that enough people are watching.

Either way, people should pay more attention to the workings of local government.

(An opinion of The Herald-Palladium editorial board)

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