



Transparency, accessibility rise as issues in Boone County Commission campaigns

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the final part of a three-part series about the Boone County Commission election.

COLUMBIA — Two of the three seats on the Boone County Commission are up for grabs in the Nov. 8 election. Through video interviews with candidates and profiles of citizens, this series examines three major issues facing Boone County: growth, disparity, and government accessibility. This third part will focus on government accessibility. View a customized ballot based on your location for local, state and national races

In the Southern District, Republican Fred Parry faces Democrat Brianna Lennon.

Video: Southern District on accessibility from Columbia Missourian on Vimeo.

In the Northern District, Democrat incumbent Janet Thompson is running against Republican Brenndan Riddles.

Video: Northern District on accessibility from Columbia Missourian on Vimeo.

A transparent and accessible government can engage citizens in a variety of ways. One example can be found in the city of Columbia.

It's mid-September, and a conference room in city hall is packed with teenagers, gathered for the first Youth Advisory Council meeting of the school year.

The council is an actual advisory board for the city, made up of high school students from around Columbia. They cannot make policy. But this is not the Model United Nations, either. Their reports and presentations are reviewed by the Columbia City Council.

"We're the future," Rock Bridge High School junior Justin Washington said. "The people in office right now won't be here forever. They're going to need somebody to replace them."

Fourth Ward Councilman Ian Thomas has taken a special interest in the Youth Advisory Council since he helped establish it over a year ago. The group has given young people in the city a direct avenue for sharing their voices with top policymakers.

"The presentation they gave on poverty in general was very helpful indeed," Thomas said, referring to a report given in May. Thomas attended the advisory council's October

meeting to ask the group to tell him how effective the Columbia Police Department's community policing initiative has been, especially for youth.

Gathered around the table in September were 16 students from Rock Bridge, Battle and Hickman high schools. They were focused. None had laptops open, and few ever took a smartphone out.

This meeting was partially devoted to brainstorming. Small groups broke off to discuss possible topics they could report on during the year. Students wrestled with a variety of national, state and local issues, from civil rights to middle-class economics.

Near the center of the conference table, three students pulled chairs close to one other and discussed one problem they had seen firsthand.

"Sex education is not great," Rock Bridge junior Kristine Cho said. "Contraception wasn't discussed as in-depth as it should have been."

"Yeah, like they always make such a big deal about teen pregnancy, and like, young teen families," Hickman junior Kieran Malloy said.

"I guess there's the health class," Malloy said.

"We have the same kind," Cho said. "That, that just glosses over it."

At the end of the meeting, Battle High School senior Taylor Livingston gave a presentation about ways schools can help fight poverty. Livingston had done research on how community schools could offer important services to students and their parents.

"The cycle of poverty is, really it's detrimental," Livingston said, gesturing toward a PowerPoint. "I think it's one of the worst things in the entire world. Like, I think it's worse than cancer."

Matt Leuchtman, who teaches at Battle High School, helped set up the Youth Advisory Council. His students can use class time to develop their work with the council, and in September he helped set the tone for the year ahead.

"City Council wants to know what your vision of the future is," he said. "But we will not know unless you speak up."

There is no equivalent group of young people advising the Boone County Commission. Thompson, though, was enthusiastic in an email about the possibility of forming one. It "would have the added benefit of bringing together students from all of the school districts," she said.

If students from across the county were organized into an advisory group, however, they would lack immediate access from the county to the kinds of resources the Youth

Advisory Council gets from the city. Accessibility is a two-way street, and the city spends a lot of money trying to be transparent about what the City Council and other municipal government groups are up to.

The city spent more than \$29,000 for software that makes it easier to create and share meeting agendas, and to make detailed agendas and supporting documents available to the public. That price tag did not include an additional \$23,000 in annual maintenance costs for a variety of hardware and software services, including maintenance and file storage.

Jeff Rogers, who runs media and event services for the city, pays two staff members a standard rate of about 65 cents more per hour than their normal wage to operate the five to six cameras used to broadcast City Council meetings, as well as those of the Columbia Planning and Zoning Commission. That ends up costing the city \$1,352 more a year, or about one-half of 1 percent of Rogers' total payroll.

Two sign language interpreters, charging about \$55 an hour, translate the meetings as they happen. Interpreters cost the city about \$15,000 a year.

And in the days after a meeting, City Clerk Sheela Amin can spend up to an hour tweaking links online to make it easier to find information about the topics discussed.

Audio from Boone County Commission meetings is recorded and available upon request, although it is not posted online. The commission does post the weekly calendars and agendas for its regular meetings online, but any supporting documents must be requested.

Some commission meetings are heavily attended, such as the Aug. 30 session when the commission approved the new Nursery Heights subdivision, after a number of residents signed a petition to oppose it. (The meeting was featured in Part 1 of this series.

Other meetings draw little attention. Thompson noted that last year, the commission held three meetings to discuss the budget with County Auditor June Pitchford and invited public input. No one from the public attended.

Mike Martin, founder of the Columbia Heart Beat and a longtime critic of the county's accessibility, doesn't see that as a lack of interest from the public.

In September, he posted on commission candidate Fred Parry's Facebook page a portion of an op-ed piece he had written in 2013. In it, he warned against conflating a "lack of participation with lack of interest."

Regarding "the public's lack of participation in county budget hearings," Martin wrote, "blame elected officials."

At the end of the Youth Advisory Council meeting in September, students headed out into the night. They have a lot of work ahead of them.

Livingston hung back, and she explained why it's important to her to have a vested interest in exactly what's going on with her local government.

"If there are things that bug you, you need to make a conscious effort and, like, let people know about it," she said.

"That's your duty. It's your life, it's your city. It's your civic responsibility to try to change that."

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.