



OUR OPINION: Laurel school board battle about more than just soccer

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— It's not just about soccer.

The Laurel School Board's decision to deny residents the ability to speak at board meetings about forming a soccer team is something it may regret. Not only is there now the risk of legal action, the board also may discover that such a rule has a serious downside.

The issue at hand involves citizens who want the district to either establish a soccer team or allow students interested in soccer to compete on another district's team. The board has steadfastly refused to grant either option.

Board members have the authority to make such decisions. But do they have the power to prohibit people from speaking at public meetings about district-related issues?

The district already has a cumbersome process where individuals must sign up to speak well in advance and give the topic of any presentation. If it's not on the agenda, or the district doesn't consider it pertinent, the presentation is squelched.

So much for free speech in a civic setting.

By no means do we think school board members — or meeting visitors for that matter — should have to sit through mindless, pointless meanderings. There's no sense, for instance, in asking a school board to ban nuclear weapons or oppose the war in Iraq.

But the issue of whether or not there should be a Laurel soccer team is related to the school district. That board members aren't interested should not translate into the silencing of citizens.

The way we understand it, the Laurel board's position is that no one can comment at a public meeting unless district officials decide the subject pertains to an ongoing matter or one that may become worthy of consideration. That means citizens who show up to complain about a recent tax hike could be turned away on the grounds the issue already has been decided.

This rule begs the question: If board members show no interest in a given subject and refuse to hear presentations, what are citizens to do? Is the Laurel board inviting the public to call members individually at their homes and businesses, or track them down somewhere in the community?

That's not a particularly good idea.

We happen to believe Pennsylvania's Sunshine Law was designed to give citizens a voice that Laurel board members are trying to shut down. This makes the district look bad and substantially raises the visibility of the controversy. This editorial proves that point.

School board members may not like hearing repetitive presentations or listening to proposals they dislike. Our response: Welcome to the world of public service. It's part of the package.

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