

A proposal to change the Board of County Commissioner (BOCC) Work Session Schedule in order to enhance our Work Session experience, limit time in meetings, provide ample opportunity for policy discussions, minimize agenda-cram and rushed deliberations, and strengthen decision-making.

The work of Durham County government is important, complex, and expanding in volume. This work deserves the focused, informed attention of its elected leaders, as well as ample time for County staff to do the real work of implementing the board's policy decisions. I know that we all want to deeply engage in the County's important policy work, while at the same time being efficient with and respectful of the precious time of both our staff and board member colleagues. For this to happen, I am proposing a modified monthly meeting schedule, coupled with careful packaging of agenda items and more intense time management.

Problem Statement

The current process, with a single work session per month, offers only one opportunity for a growing number of items that need to be discussed at a work session. To date, our single work session per month requires loading more items on an agenda than can be covered in a reasonable amount of time (4 hours or less). The optimum functioning of staff and board members begins to decline beyond the 3-4-hour time.

The September 4 work session is a glaring case in point, starting at 9 AM and ending after 5 PM. This meeting far exceeded the projected time limits per agenda item, took staff time away from their normal work schedule, rushed discussion of items near the end of the agenda, and yielded meeting-weary staff and board members where we could not function at our best. While this is the most glaring example of an overloaded agenda running long, it is by no means an isolated case.

Proposal

I propose that the BOCC, in consultation with staff, considers making the transition to a schedule similar to the one used by the City Council, where we would have the regular meetings every other Monday night and the work sessions on Thursday afternoons of the same week.

The Thursday work sessions would be in preparation for the Monday regular meeting to follow 10 days later. The regular meetings would remain at 7PM, and the work sessions would be scheduled from 1-4PM.

Oftentimes, these work sessions might take less than 3 hours. Only on occasion, they might go until 5PM, but extending the meeting until 5PM would require a vote. On the rare occasion that a longer meeting is needed, it must be scheduled in advance, with prior notice, so that we can all plan accordingly.

We could begin using this schedule in January, giving enough time to sequence the work for agendas and make any necessary personal calendar adjustments.

Justification

Currently, the BOCC is the only local elected body in Durham that meets in a work session less than two times per month. The City Council and the Board of Education both have 2 work sessions. It is also standard among Durham's surrounding counties to meet in 2 work sessions each month. **To be clear**, adding a second work session **does not** mean adding more total time in meetings. Instead, the current, single long work session would be divided into 2 shorter, more efficient and effective sessions.

An added benefit of this schedule is that there will be only two weeks with BOCC meetings, leaving two full weeks without meetings. This can make it easier to plan for both work and weekends. For work planning, County staff, working with the board chair and vice-chair, will have more advance time for planning and preparing agendas. There will also be two chances for an item to make it onto an agenda in advance of the regular meetings, which will foster carefully developed, fully vetted agenda items, ready for incisive discussion. For weekends, everyone will have two weekends per month without a BOCC meeting the following Monday, versus only one weekend per month using the current schedule. This will mean more leisure weekend time without the stress of preparing for a Monday meeting.

Another benefit is that a schedule with two work sessions will offer more opportunities for public engagement and public comment. Residents will now have two sessions from which to choose to attend and address the board, if desired. Public attendance at meetings is typically low and having an additional work session has the potential to improve this by providing two chances to attend.

Concurrent actions

I believe there are steps we can take to immediately improve the work session experience, as we begin to transition to the new schedule. Commissioners should work with staff to:

- Only use public meeting time for matters that require that kind of discussion or decision-making.
- Use other means of communicating information in lieu of the work session, when that might make better sense.
- Make sure each agenda item is fully-vetted and ready for discussion.
- Allot the appropriate amount of time for presentations, working to keep them tight.
- Structure consent agenda so that items pulled are discussed after approval of those consent items not pulled, rather than item by item. Staff members not connected to pulled items are free leave the meeting.
- Be mindful of the agenda items' time projections.
- Use discretion about length of comments.

Conclusion

The overall objective of this proposal is to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and overall experience of the work sessions for commissioners, staff and the public. The outcome should be that work sessions will be more productive for everyone, so that commissioners will be able to make well-informed, sound policy decisions, while using the County's precious resources as effectively as possible.