

City Council tunes in clearly to speakers 20 miles away

Mariel Garza, Columnist

LA Daily News

November 23, 2005

The Los Angeles City Council is notorious for ignoring the public at its thrice-weekly meetings. One lawyer even sued the council a couple years ago - and won. Still, council members' attention regularly wanes during public testimony in favor of gossiping round the horseshoe, answering e-mail or making deals.

But when Winnetkan Chris Jurgenson appeared larger than life on the council room's screens Tuesday morning, members sat up, got quiet and paid attention.

Maybe it was because Jurgenson had kind words for the council - or maybe it was just the power of the big screen. Jurgenson probably wouldn't even have noticed if members had been inattentive. He was about 20 miles away from the council chambers, standing in a small room in Van Nuys, talking into a camera and a bright light.

Jurgenson, a member of the Winnetka Neighborhood Council board, was one of a dozen people who dropped by Room 208 in the newly reopened Van Nuys City Hall on Tuesday morning to watch the debut of the teleconferencing of council meetings.

The council will be trying out the live testimony via TV over the next year. If it catches on, it will become a staple not just in Van Nuys, but also in San Pedro and other locales far from downtown City Hall.

"I'm just here to see how it works," said Judy Price, a Valley Glen Neighborhood Council board member. In the end, though, she took the opportunity to speak.

There really wasn't much to see. Attendees on Tuesday assumed the teleconferencing would happen in the brand new, full-size council meeting room in Van Nuys City Hall.

But the actual apparatus was set up down the hall in a small room about the size of a midlevel manager's office.

The room had six chairs for speakers, a table with copies of meeting agendas and a phone to call the City Clerk's Office downtown to log in. Two big-screen TVs stood in the corner. In front of one was a podium with a microphone facing the teeny camera mounted on top.

That's it. If this thing gets really popular, attendees will be allowed to sit in the big council chambers down the hall and watch the meeting on those screens. When the council president calls their names for comment, they will have to scurry down the hall to the TV room.

One thing that did not change was that those who came to address the council were forced to

wait - and wait. Just a usual council day, with the meeting beginning more than 30 minutes late because of tardy council members.

Even then, it was nearly an hour later before the five speakers from San Fernando got a chance to appear. People were getting antsy sitting in the small room and pacing the hall outside.

Adam Park was perhaps the only City Council novice to check out the debut of the teleconferencing Tuesday. The L.A. Valley College student pronounced it a good idea with a particularly apt description: "It decreases the spatial gap in communications."

Well put. Because spatial "gapidity" between the politicians and the people was exactly what many San Fernando Valley residents had been complaining about for years - and one of the reasons the region nearly seceded from the rest of the city.

It's tough enough that the council meets during the day when most upstanding residents of the city are at work. But then residents have to fight the traffic downtown and scramble for pricey parking.

And there's no guarantee the council will even have a quorum that day or won't delay taking up an issue that someone drove 25 miles downtown to address. It's discouraging.

"Going over the hill just takes too much of my time," Jurgenson said. "It's prohibitive."

This will make it much more convenient.

Happily, for the city's journalist crowd, there is no lack of things the local government does badly. But the truth is, for all the stupid things city, county and school district officials and politicians do, there's probably at least an equal number they get right - or don't mess up.

And, so far, the first attempt at bringing the council to the people via technology is one of the things done well.

Now it's up to the public to encourage this kind of constructive behavior by attending the teleconferenced meetings. Otherwise, the project will end.

"If they stop coming, we will stop this," said Deputy City Clerk Konrad Carter, manager of the council public services division.