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This is wordy, but I feel quite strongly about it.

In the May 27 Council Meeting a presentation by Aaron Kimsey, Assistant City Engineer, depicted planned changes to the Council Chambers. The focus need related to accessibility and the difficulty of existing stairs and rampways. The goals included making the chambers more inviting and accessible for the public.

I am very disappointed in the planned changes and find them to be the exact opposite of inviting for the public. While government definitely has hierarchy and the players have roles with relative importance or significance, it is still a community activity - of the people, for the people, by the people. We are a democracy and the current council chambers do a wonderful job of embodying the spirit of a democratic America. The new design in theater mode is a sad step back from the light of an engaged democracy to a shadowy realm with an authoritarian taint where we are welcome to observe as long as we know our place. I propose that the goals of resolving issues with the current chamber could be achieved without changing the character of the space.

If we ponder how workspaces are designed, where people are expected to work together with many in the room having some voice, we may note that such spaces are always created with people facing each other, and often specifically try to create a sense of equality. There may be roles involved and they are typically embodied in some kind of formal or informal process. In more informal settings, common respect for each other and consideration of the roles or positions of participants suffice. For more formality, a structured agenda or something like Robert's Rules are common. But, the space intentionally creates a less hierarchical atmosphere, respecting that the contributions of multiple views and ideas have value.

On the other hand, theater mode is designed for broadcast. Those on the dais or stage have a voice and everybody else is invited to listen or commanded to pay attention. The only voices that matter are those emanating from the few who are identified by the very arrangement of the room as important or worthy. This is absolutely not a collaborative environment.

Whatever the original goals driving the design of the current council chambers, the effect is truly wonderful. While there is a gentle expression of hierarchy, there is a strong expression of collaboration and community. Council members face each other and this surely affects the civility and cooperation they display to each other. When staff members speak, they do not so much come before the council as they join the circle, join the effort, offering information and advice. Even staff members that are not in that inner circle are obviously "on deck" and available to jump in and offer their expertise. Similarly, when a citizen gives testimony, they step into the collaborative space. They primarily face the leadership and council, but do not have their backs to all the staff and other community members.

It is well known how human behavior changes when we are not face to face with others. Long before electricity, offensive words occurred in printed words that were unlikely to be expressed in person. The stages of communication technology brought noticeable exacerbation of this effect and the internet has made common unbearable treatment of each other. My experience is that Salem council chambers tend to be much more civil and cooperative than in the opposing layout typically seen in government chambers.

The new design degrades the character and atmosphere of the space from a place where a group of people come together to address issues and solve problems, working together for the good of the community. It separates us. Instead of being together, we, the audience are disconnected from the community, being forced

to all face the same direction, not facing each other or having any sense of connection. This design is an overbearingly hierarchical order that screams the importance of the powerful few, raised above and looking out over the mere staff who are dragged before them and marginally aware of the peasants viewing their greatness from a safe distance.

As one who often attends city council and other meetings in the council chambers, I very much appreciate that there is not really a back row, instead there are multiple places I can sit in the room that all let me face or partially face most of the people in the room. Except from a few seats, nobody is ever talking where I can see only their backs and cannot observe their expressions, body language and gestures. In fact, I can observe most of the people in the room. If somebody is offering testimony or opinions, I can watch how various people are reacting to the speaker, how engaged they are. I see nodding heads and frowns, how many are engaged or distracted or falling asleep.

I have always been impressed with how business is conducted in the Salem council chambers. Even through the few times in the past when somebody was a little less mature than their years might suggest, or topics were emotional, or citizen testimony was unskilled, the overall atmosphere has been respectful and at least tolerant if not patient. As we spend this interim time in temporary spaces, we will have an opportunity to experience a space designed for a different purpose. Is it really as good as the chambers we now have? And if we think so, then let us reflect. Is it really or are we just rationalizing or accepting what is being planned because we think we can't change it or question whether it is worth the effort. We will live with the new design for a long time. Does it promote good governance, good effort, good community? Are we doing this because it is better or just mimicking the design used by other government bodies? Are we giving up chambers that promote democracy for a design that people less focused on democracy thought was a good idea and failing to question what is good for our community?

I believe motivated designers given the goal of fixing the problems without destroying what is good about our council chambers could come up with a much better solution.

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