

Title: Riley County Commission ceasing power, restricting freedoms

The hearts and minds of vets are finely calibrated to detect infringements on freedoms and the smell of authoritarianism. One of vets' biggest fears during COVID-19 is the U.S. government seizing power and taking away our freedoms. We are already seeing it in the Riley County Commission right here in our backyard...

The Riley County Commission is an elected body of three commissioners, accountable to citizens, and in control of a \$68 million budget. They also act as the Riley County Board of Health, essentially in control of our health department and local response to COVID-19 pandemic (Note that there is not a single commissioner with a background in public health). Our freedom in Riley County grants us, the people, a direct say on who sits in office, what policies are made, and how tax money gets spent. We are their boss. Not the other way around.

And right now, we are not free.

Stay-at-home orders and other policies have obvious implications for a free society. How are we free to support, object, or comment on any decision and policies if we don't even have access to the buildings and meetings where decisions are being made? For example, the weekly county commission meetings held at 8:30am on Mondays and Thursdays at 115 N 4th St. See, did you even know those meetings existed???....

The County commission is keeping their meetings and decisions a secret.

Frankly, these meetings are well designed to keep the public in the dark. Meetings are poorly publicized, never televised, and held during working hours to limit public attendance. These meetings last for hours, where commissioners and the county clerk waste peoples' time with unnecessary paper/administrative work *during decision making meetings* and rubbing elbows talking about baseball and who knows what else (because chit chat and wasted time doesn't show up in the meeting notes).

Commissioners get paid \$32k plus benefits of taxpayer money ([\\$209k, total](#)). It's a full time job, on paper. We have one commissioner, Ron Wells, who exploited our public water service by [not paying for a water bill for several decades](#) because of some good ol' boy handshake deal that he made, letting taxpayers foot the bill. We have another commissioner, Marvin Rodriguez, who ran his election campaign on increasing TRANSPARENCY in county government of all things, and has done nothing to increase it. And the third commissioner, John Ford, who has not stood up to either one of them. Rich Vargo, the county clerk, who gets paid upwards of \$115,000 a year is complicit in all of this. This is embarrassing, terrifying, and unacceptable.

We demand transparency NOW.

For the last month, Riley County citizens have felt a justified and heightened sense of anxiety about our freedom and democracy. They have been demanding that the commission televise or live stream their commission meetings, using petitions, public comment, emails, phone calls, and even a press conference. As of May 5th, 2020, there are over 700 petition signatures.

The commissioners' response? "NO".

The county commissioners say things like "we are too busy right now", "we will look into it", "the media is already covering our meetings", "the voters should vote on it," or "it's too expensive". These are all excuses.

Here are the facts:

- **It's easy** - Riley County is the largest county in the state that is not televising or live streaming meetings. Other local bodies using live stream: Pottawatomie County, City of Manhattan, USD-383 School Board, Manhattan Urban Area Planning Board, Riley County Planning Board, City of Manhattan Zoning Appeals Board, to name a few. Also, it's your job, commissioners.
- **It's free** - Ordinary citizens have been showing up to commission meetings with a cell phone and a tripod and live streaming meetings on Facebook. For free. On a regular cell phone. With virtually no training. Toddlers can stream. Ordinary citizens have been showing up to meetings with a cell phone and live streaming meetings on Facebook. For free. On a regular cell phone. Civic Plus offered the county live streaming software for free for 90 days, with no obligation and reduced cost after. The commission refused the offer.
- **Press media attendance is limited** - Media is only at the meetings for a limited amount of time because, well, even they don't have time or patience to sit through these marathons.

We demand that county commissioners 1) live stream commission meetings and 2) provide a way for the public to give public comment, electronically, during the meetings.

Democracy dies in darkness. Our vets did not give their lives to freedom to have it crushed by the current county commissioners.

Sincerely,

SSG Kerrigan USA RETIRED GW '81-'92
SPC Angela Dorsey ARMY VETERAN '09-'13
Kaleb James Army Veteran '07-'15
SGT Jeff Gauthier USAF veteran '75-'79
Richard K. Green Army Veteran 79-90.