

# Troy council passes new e-rule

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The Troy City Council recently passed a rule prohibiting council members from communicating with each other online during council meetings, but council didn't pass a rule to ban the use of any electronic communications during meetings.

On Feb. 6, only Martin Howrylak voted against the addition of a rule to council's Rules and Procedures banning members from chatting among themselves online during meetings.

The issue came up after Councilwoman Robin Beltramini noted that with Wireless Oakland's free, open Internet access, council members could potentially talk among themselves on their laptops without making their comments public, as required by the Michigan Open Meetings Act.

But Beltramini proposed an additional rule that would go beyond the requirements of the Open

Meetings Act to ban all forms of electronic communications by council members during meetings, which would include using the Internet to research a law or for other reference.

Troy Mayor Louise Schilling supported the proposal.

"I think that's very important that we preserve the integrity of the items (used for council decisions) being part of the public record of this meeting. And by using our computers to access other information, how would we make that part of the public information that is provided for the public record?"

Schilling asked.

When the issue was first discussed, Howrylak stated that he would not want accessing statutes and other relevant information during meetings to be disallowed.

"We have our city attorney who has that ability to access those," Schilling said, which is one of the reasons the attorney attends the meetings, she said.

But by that standard, Howrylak said, "I guess you could take that a step further and say that we shouldn't research our agenda

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packets. We shouldn't get them until Monday evening.

"We are required to do our responsibility, whatever that might be, to fulfill our duties, which includes making decisions. If in order to make a decision we need to do some research ... I think we have that right," Howrylak said.

Schilling said that she tries to research items before the meeting, which Howrylak said could still be a problem if you want to store that

information in an electronic file.

Councilwoman Cristina Broomfield agreed that council members should be allowed to access the Internet for quick reference.

"With all due respect ... I don't think that councilperson who wants to access a quick reference ought to be limited to having to go through the city attorney. We're talking about running our meetings more efficiently, not taking up so much time. Sometimes it's just a quick reference. My opinion is they should be able to do that," Broomfield said.

Beltramini said her main goal in putting forth the proposal was to make sure people have council's "undivided attention."

"It doesn't matter if you're e-mailing, ... if you're doing that, you're not paying attention to what's going on in the room, and all of that can be done before the meeting commences. So that was the purpose behind this," Beltramini said.

Schilling and Beltramini were the only council members to vote yes for the second rule.

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