

Editorial

Blacksburg's secret council appointment

Town council didn't want the public watching.

Blacksburg Town Council failed residents last week when it appointed Mike Rosenzweig to fill a council vacancy. It wasn't whom they selected — for all we know, Rosenzweig is a stand-up guy — but how council members did it. Council closed the public out the process almost entirely.

Mayor Ron Rordam had promised an open process, but council didn't deliver on the eve of Sunshine Week.

It never accepted applications from interested candidates. Instead, it hand-picked people council wanted. Not that the public even knows who most of those under consideration were; the council only revealed the two finalists.

Even then, council might have salvaged an open process and conducted public interviews. It could have given residents a chance to weigh in at a public hearing. It did not.

Council was so wedded to secrecy that it even hid from the public when it came time to make a decision. Rordam and Councilman Don Langrehr argued against a closed meeting, but the other four chose a smoke-filled, dark room to pick their new colleague.

OK, probably the room was neither smoky nor dark, but the insider baseball hearkened back to good-old-boy days.

The law allows council to meet in closed session for such discussions, but it does not require it. It even encourages government bodies to embrace openness.

Councilwoman Leslie Hager-Smith rationalized her poor decision. "I'm per-

sonally comfortable having this discussion in closed session. I wouldn't want to have my job review done in the lunchroom," she said.

Except this wasn't a job review and current council members are not the boss of the new council member. He works for the public, and his job review takes place at the ballot box.

This had nothing to do with protecting the candidates. Secrecy only protected sitting council members who did not want the public to understand what issues and values they hold important.

If they told the public what they really think, the public might not vote for them next time. Now, voters can and should remember that four council members — Hager-Smith, Tom Sherman, Susan Anderson and Al Leighton — prefer to keep secrets.

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