

# Des Moines Peoples Town Hall

July 12, 2021

Des Moines City Council is continuing to make the city's council meetings less accessible to the public. We demand the city immediately begin offering hybrid or entirely virtual meetings. "Public" meetings with barriers to restrict specific groups of people are not public.

The council is determined to eliminate every access people have to their local representatives. This is clear retaliation to the public for speaking up and attempting to hold council and DMPD accountable. Retaliation to public speech shows that the council does not believe the people have a right to criticize the city, and that they feel comfortable using their power to strike back against people working to hold them accountable. This retaliation has been racist and sexist, primarily targeted at Black and Brown people and women.

While this retaliation feels routine to many of us since it has been happening for over a year, we must acknowledge that it is not normal. We have not seen any other city take such extreme measures against the simple and crucial act of speech in public meetings. It is violent and chills speech far beyond the council chambers by sending a message that the city is willing to attack those who speak up.

The city is spending over \$15,700 to make city hall less accessible in an attempt to reduce the criticism they hear in public meetings. This includes paying heavily armed private security guards to block the entrance to city hall. The guards are instructed by the council to not let people enter the building with food or water.

The city has decided to restrict the council's informational Working Session meetings to 25 people, with no overflow and no online streaming option. They have also stopped posting session recordings online. This choice was made without announcement and without any explanation to the public of why it was changing or who made the choice. There is no excuse to reduce the access to meetings the city itself says are "informational" to 25 people, especially when some of these meetings are 8 hours long.

The city has outright refused to offer hybrid meetings with virtual and in-person options. Other Iowa cities and counties have offered hybrid meetings without issue. City hall is not an accessible building, especially with council's new restrictions. Many people are physically unable to access these meetings. Council has also removed previously available access for people with hearing loss. There is no sign-language translator or closed captioning in the council chambers. Attempts to find accommodations have been outright rejected at city staff.

The city has begun threatening and using arbitrary arrest on people in the council chambers. To justify this, they have cited old council rules that the mayor refused to uphold, instead inventing new rules spontaneously against whatever community members are doing in the council chambers.

The city has removed most public speaking time from the meeting, but has kept public comment on specific Hearing items- usually those that concern developers. Council is picking and choosing which people are allowed to speak, and what they are allowed to say.

The people of Des Moines will not be silenced. City council is taking these extreme measures because of how successful we have been at advocating for ourselves and bringing attention to the corruption and violence of the city. We will continue our work to build a better and more accountable Des Moines.

