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The petit goatee, and other peculiarities of local governance during a 21st-century pandemic

By **Andrew Jenner, Publisher**

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Screen shot from the May 12, 2020, city council meeting

By **Andrew Jenner, publisher**

It was the kind of content [made for a city spokesman's Twitter account](#). Early in the city council's pandemic-induced exile to virtual meetings, Councilman George Hirschmann's cat jumped up onto his lap and, for all we know, into local history as the first cat to participate in Harrisonburg public policy-making.

Perhaps, this was just Ernie being Ernie. Then again, perhaps Ernie (who shares Hirschmann's affections with another cat, Bert), had noticed the Sesame Street lunchbox perched on the bookshelf behind Councilman Chris Jones. It was a preschool memento that's come along for the virtual ride when Jones reports for council duty from the comfort of his home office.

Like many of us, members of the city council have been grounded at home lately, forced to become suddenly familiar with the latest videoconferencing platforms. In the interest of curve-flattening and social distancing, council meetings went online in April. And so, they've been wrestling ever since with issues, such as the [gruesome math of COVID-era public finance](#), via GoToMeeting — physically isolated from each other and the public they serve.

Mayor Deanna Reed presides from her dining room table, a location she's chosen for its good lighting. Councilman Richard Baugh prefers a spot in the conference room at the offices of Hoover Penrod, the downtown law firm where he works. Above him, an oil portrait of founder Lawrence Hoover lends a dignified air to things, albeit unintentionally.

"Literally no thought went into that as the backdrop when I started this," Baugh wrote in an email. "It's started to occur to me that the portrait might be distracting. But it's a great room for this where I can isolate."

"While I totally get that reviewing and giving thought to these backdrops has become a thing, that's not instinctive for me," Baugh continued. "I tend to be someone who focusses entirely on practicality, and anything beyond that has to evolve, be pointed out to me, etc."

Vice-mayor Sal Romero took a far more intentional approach in appointing the basement office in his home, however. Until recently, the space was cluttered with memorabilia from his soccer days. Deciding that wasn't in keeping with the dignity of the occasion, Romero cleared it all out.

"I'm always very careful about self-image," Romero said. "My biggest fear is you're watching one of these public meetings and something really strange happens."

And so, his office door is locked during virtual council meetings, keeping his kids and his dog at bay.

Reed's dog, Bowe, is also banned from council meetings. The mayor drops him off at her parents' place beforehand.

Jones reports he once had a near miss with his youngest son, who slipped into the office during the meeting but never quite made it on camera.

"The office has French doors so I usually just wave at him through the glass," said Jones.

Also on Jones's bookshelf: his favorite Marley album, *African Herbsman*, pictures of his family and many books. There are three that he wishes every city resident would read: *The Holy Bible* ("New Living Translation version best read cover to cover in 90 days"), *Before the Mayflower* and *Who Moved My Cheese?*

Hirschmann imposes no such restrictions on Bert and Ernie.

"They are my best buddies and help keep me sane or sometimes not," he wrote in an email. "Love all animals, just don't have to get up early morning to walk them. Strongly against any kind of animal abuse whether it is elephants or house flies."

In addition to emerging as the council's foremost pet exhibitionist, Hirschmann also serves — according to at least some of his colleagues — as its leading perpetrator of videoconference faux pas. According to Reed, he's the most regular talking-while-muted participant. Meanwhile, Jones reports equal struggles with using the mute button when warranted.

"It's definitely amazing and bewildering to hear George cough, gasp, sigh, clear his throat, moan and groan during the meetings," Jones wrote. "He really just forgets to click mute. It's fascinating how unbothered he is making that much noise."

Hirschmann, responding to these allegations:

"It's been different participating online. Can't talk when others are talking, and sometimes at length. My mic cuts out as I have been told you can me breathing, and they turn it off or maybe that is automatic so as to not create static. Easy enough to turn on, just have to remember. RATHER do the meetings live as it is better to pick up nuances innuendos, and to interrupt if need be."

Let the record reflect, however, a far gentler assessment from City Clerk Pam Ulmer, who participates by audio and sets up the meetings from either the council chambers or her office.

"Council Member Hirschmann is using the GoToMeeting without any issues as everyone else is, though we have all had to learn a few things about this program throughout the public closure period," she wrote in an email. "On occasion I have had to mute members microphones to make sure that audio comes in as clear as possible for those that are speaking."

Back, for a moment, to Romero's disciplined approach to his virtual meeting attendance. Although he's taken great pains to minimize the distraction his surroundings might provide, he has not applied the same logic to his chin, which now sports a quarantine goatee. While an attempt at facial hair has become something of a personal tradition during summer break, when his work with the city schools takes on a slower rhythm, Romero said quarantine also felt like a good time to do it.

"I'm going to let it go and see what happens," he said.

His kids are fans, as is Reed. (To be clear, Romero admits to keeping it somewhat trimmed and managed; his is not quite a full-blown, caution-to-the-wind goatee)

Jones, a self-described "goatee and mustache guy," is a little less impressed.

"I am pretty sure that's called the 'petit goatee,'" he wrote. "On a scale of 1-10 it's a 5, looks good but incomplete."

Romero embraced creeping baldness and started shaving his head in his late 20s, and has generally been dealt a tough hand in the hair department.

"I wish I could grow a full moustache and have options, but I just can't. It is what it is."

Like everyone, he's eager for this all to be over. He's looking forward to good old regular, in-person council meetings, and when that happens, the petit goatee will be a thing of the past — "unless something magical happens."

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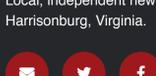
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