

County Board gets little zoning info

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La Salle County Board members only get a small fraction of the record when it comes to zoning board decisions. An official from Lee County wondered how the La Salle County Board could make such decisions without more of the record.

La Salle County's attorney issued a warning before County Board members started discussing a number of zoning issues this week: **Disregard any information they get outside the record from zoning board meetings.**

The County Board essentially operates in a quasi-judicial capacity. It is like a jury, which also must disregard outside information.

But there's a difference between the County Board and juries: While juries hear testimony and can access case exhibits, the board receives only a small fraction of the record.

County Board members receive descriptions of properties in question as well as what the applicants want to do. This information is made available in the packets on their desks when they arrive for meetings. **However, they do not receive the meeting minutes from zoning board sessions, which is a part of the record.**

Officials say the minutes are not released to County Board members, because they are considered a draft that still needs the zoning board's approval. But the zoning office says it makes documents available to County Board members on request.

At last week's County Board meeting, member Steven Tuftie, R-Ottawa, noted he had not seen the list of conditions county officials were proposing for a sand mine expansion until he arrived at the meeting. **Tuftie, who represents the area of the mine expansion, said he wasn't invited to the "huddle" of officials who helped draft the conditions.**

Many Northern Illinois counties — even those much smaller in population than La Salle County — make available entire meeting packets online before meetings. But La Salle County sticks to a paper-based system, with packets placed on desks before meetings. Longtime board member Tom Walsh, D-Ottawa, said if the county had the money, it could issue iPads to members, so they could get all the information they need electronically.

He said one of the reasons he attends so many of the board's committee meetings is they are where he gets the necessary information for monthly County Board meetings. "Board members are concerned," he said. "They would like to see more information." In neighboring Lee County, which has a third of La Salle County's population, the County Board gets more information before it makes decisions on zoning and other issues. Zoning board minutes, including drafts, are posted online and made available to County Board members about two weeks before their meetings.

Informed about La Salle County's process, Lee County zoning official Chris Henkel asked, "How do they vote on anything if they don't have the information? I don't know how they would do that."

Brian Gift, La Salle County's zoning official, declined to comment.