

OPINION

GAZETTE
EDITORIALS

Like it or not, a town board must hear its detractors

Being an elected official in a small town like Milton can be a pretty thankless job — long hours for relatively low pay, mundane work, and you've got to put up with gadflies coming out to your meetings to rant about the job you're doing, or even something totally unrelated to it. It all goes with the territory, unfortunately — the glamor of being in politics — and don't even think about changing it the way they just did in Milton.

The changes, detailed in Wednesday's Gazette story, will restrict the public comment period that's traditionally been at the end of monthly town board meetings. Now, the so-called privilege of the floor will only be held if the board votes to hold it. Speakers, who used to be able to talk as long as they wanted, will be restricted to five minutes apiece. And all comments from the floor will be cut off after a total of 30 minutes.

A little history can explain how these changes came about. Supervisory Frank Thompson got sick of the same old gadflies going on — and on — about the same old problems. Especially since some of

the problems had little to do with the board or involved issues the board had addressed but couldn't resolve. So wanting to limit repetitive or irrelevant comments may have justified the institution of a five-minute time limit (as many government bodies have), but the idea of limiting the overall number of comments at a given meeting doesn't seem proper — or fair. In effect, that's what could happen with the 30-minute rule if a slew of people showed up to address one or more issues and each spoke for a full five minutes.

Then there's the concept of making the privilege of the floor an option — available only when the board decides it should be. Were the board ever to decide against opening the floor, whoever might be denied the opportunity to speak that night would have a legitimate grievance. The board can't pick and choose whom it wants to let speak, which is what it would appear to be doing under such circumstances.

A five-minute-per-person limit is OK, but the other restrictions should be dropped.