

Transcript of Virginia Palacios testimony to the House Energy Resources Committee, September 15th

It's hard to know where to start. I, I think, you know, this agency has been opaque for a long time, starting with the name having nothing to do with what they do.

Um, you know, every time I tell people how the open meetings work and how public input at the open meetings work, they laugh and they say, "That can't be. You know, we're in the United States of America. We're in Texas. Don't we care what people think?" A lot of things happened at today's open meeting that were not on my bingo card.

Say, say that again. That a lot of things happened at today's Railroad Commission open meeting that were not on my bingo card. The first was that the railroad commissioners heard comment on an agenda item from multiple people. That usually doesn't happen at an open meeting. One of the other things that happened was that I got cussed out by Commissioner

Just instead of referring to names, let's just say a commissioner. Okay? Sure.

For stirring up a word that I will not say, an expletive, and for, uh, you know, complaining in another word that was an expletive. Um, I do my very best to go to every Railroad Commission open meeting in a respectful manner and to comply with their policy on decorum and respect. I bring data to the Railroad Commission, usually their data analyzed and summarized, so that they can make better decisions.

My organization, Commission Shift, works with impacted community members all across the state that live among oil and gas development, that have concerns about groundwater contamination, air pollution from facilities that the Railroad Commission permits, and health impacts that they're experiencing from those facilities.

Many of those people who I have talked to do not want to pay to come all the way to Austin for only three minutes of public input or to comment on an agenda item when they expect the railroad commissioners will not hear comments on that agenda item. And they are frustrated with how this system works, and they need their problems to be solved.

So I go every month and I give testimony at the Railroad Commission open meetings. Sometimes I share their stories, sometimes I talk about broader policy

issues. I wish that I had the money to reimburse everyone to come to the Railroad Commission every month and to speak at the Railroad Commission. But there's also time away from work, you know, and I can't pay somebody's salary and wages to even come to the Railroad Commission every month. The point is, it's not hard to be a more transparent and accessible state agency.

We have asked the Railroad Commission for three simple things at their open meetings: guaranteed public input, not only when a railroad commissioner requests it, hearing comment on posted agenda items every time, and allowing people to give remote public input, calling in or coming into a video call during the open meeting so that they don't have to drive all the way.

Not only is it lost wages and, and the travel expense to get to the commission, a lot of folks are elders who are still managing the minerals for their family, still managing the land for their family, and they're having health conditions that prevent them from traveling. They need an accessible way to talk to the commissioners. I have a testimony here with other data, other information to give you.

I think the, the one thing that isn't being said out loud that may feel like a non-sequitur, but is obvious that we should fix to reduce the bias of the commission, is the campaign finance laws. We can't have elected railroad commissioners taking two-thirds of their campaign contributions from the same companies that they make decisions about in their official capacity.

And I believe that that is what leads to public participation policies that seek to separate the public from their lawmakers. And I think that is a long-term change that we can make that will solve this situation.