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Directing the conversation to the right place

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After a while, these large public hearings take on an awful familiarity. The faces of the citizens are different. But not what's in the faces.

Like grief, there are stages. If it's the first hearing and it's held fairly early on, before there's been a lot of back-and-forth, people generally file into the appointed cavernous auditorium with a certain gravity of manner, and concern or outright worry.

But also no small degree of disbelief. How could it be possible that you go to work every day, mow your lawn, pay your bills, raise your family -- and then one day learn you might soon be living down the road from a landfill? Or something else you find equally alarming.

And not only that, whatever it is might affect the nearby lake or river or pond or stream -- which people use for, say, drinking or irrigating crops or fishing or swimming and canoeing.

Behind the disbelief is almost always trust. The state won't let this happen. There are laws and regulations. The people you elect and send to Columbia, they won't let it happen.

The Department of Health and Environmental Control, they'll stop it.

Citizens find seats and wait for a hearing to begin. They have apprehensions but nonetheless, hope.

These are water wars of our times. They're about who can do what to water that people share and depend on. DHEC issues permits. And the procedures allow public comment.

The precipitating particulars of what leads to a public hearing will vary. It might be a proposed landfill or development or something on the order of a power plant that could release emissions that settle into water.

But things pretty much play out this way: Citizens, often hundreds of them, come to a hearing. One after another, they stand up and speak, usually with passion and feeling. Depending at what point matters are, there can also be anger, a lot of anger, and tremendous frustration.

The DHEC representatives present will receive the brunt of this. They hear people out. Eventually though one of them will rise and say the equivalent of this: We feel your pain but if (fill in the blank) checks all the boxes and meets the regs, we have to issue a permit."

This is when a new kind of disbelief sets in.

Opinions differ as to how matters get to this point: DHEC is reactive, not proactive. Or it doesn't have enough staff. Or it doesn't have enough teeth. Or it's too cautious in using them. There's more.

But keep in mind: Whatever DHEC is or isn't but ought to be, the people we elect and send to Columbia set the course. They decide on the regs and how much money the agency gets and the reach of its mission. If there is anger and anguish, they're who need to hear it.

State senators are up for re-election in November. Start with them.

And one more thing. Plan ahead, communities. Especially in rural areas where land-use plans are nonexistent, or practically so, pure wishing and hoping won't be enough to keep a landfill or a factory hog farm or a 1,000-home subdivision from moving in next door, right beside your favorite part of the river.

Brad Wyche, of Upstate Forever, points out, "DHEC will not issue a permit if it violates local plans."
