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For Audience, No Debate About Bungled Event

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By [Bill Turque](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Even the most bitterly contested candidate debates seldom trigger mutiny by the audience. But that was nearly the case at last week's meeting of the Providence District supervisor Democratic primary hopefuls, conducted by the [League of Women Voters](#) of the [Fairfax Area](#).

There were complaints before the event began, sparked by the league's decision to declare the debate "intellectual property" and to bar bloggers from recording it, although replays were available on Fairfax Public Access and [Google Video](#).

League President Sherry W. Zachry moderated, and she seemed overwhelmed. She exasperated the crowd at the [James Lee](#) Community Center in [Falls Church](#) by interrupting the candidates in the June 12 contest -- incumbent [Linda Q. Smyth](#) (D-Providence) and neighborhood activist Charles W. "Charlie" Hall -- forgetting to explain ground rules, musing out loud about changing the format in mid-debate and then scolding the audience for protesting when she decided against it.

Hall's campaign, for reasons that are not clear, apparently agreed to a format that required him to answer every question first, repeatedly buying Smyth extra time to consider her response.

About 15 minutes into the contest, as the inequity became clear, Zachry raised the possibility of changing the rules.

"Switch! Switch!" came the voices from the seats.

"Audience, I'm sorry, you don't get to tell me what to do," she explained. Then she added: "I'm asking higher powers if we can change it in the middle of the debate." One of those higher powers was evidently Smyth, who indicated that she was quite comfortable with the rules as they stood.

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Sherry W. Zachry moderates last week's debate. (By Carol Guzy -- The Washington Post)

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From the Extras

When Zachry said they would continue with the format, audience disapproval mounted.

"You may leave if you don't like it," she said.

As the debate continued, the crowd grew more restive. "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" people shouted.

"Excuse me!" the now-indignant Zachry said. "We do not have this kind of behavior at a league debate!"

Zachry had no comment afterward. In a letter to the Connection Newspapers, which co-sponsored the event, she apologized to the candidates for ambiguities in the rules as they were written but said she was "not pleased" with the questions raised about the format.

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
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