

HOW TO TESTIFY AT A PUBLIC HEARING AND MAKE IT COUNT

- From time to time you and your neighbors may become concerned enough about a problem to speak up about it in public.
- All the decisions concerning land use, zoning, budgeting, the enactment or change of laws, and other matters are required to go through a public hearing. Notices of hearings are published in a section of the newspaper devoted to that purpose.
- The opportunity of a hearing is provided so that citizens who may be impacted can voice their opinions. BUT - don't waste your testimony. The following are some suggestions for making the most of your opportunity to get the attention of decision makers at a public hearing, whether they are a Planning and Zoning Commission, a City Council, or other group.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TESTIFYING AT PUBLIC HEARINGS



REMEMBER YOUR OBJECTIVE:

To persuade the decision makers to vote or decide in favor of your side of the issue. It usually doesn't help your cause to anger, alienate or antagonize the group you are standing before.



KNOW THE LAW:

Officials are not likely to make decisions in violation of city or state codes. No amount of passion, exhortation, or pleading by citizens will accomplish this. (However, laws can be changed. If there is a bad law, organize to have it amended).



SHOW YOUR STRENGTH:

Many neighborhood groups have organized their testimony by having one or a few people speak on behalf of the group. The leader will ask those in the audience supporting the testimony to stand. When your name is called from the sign in sheet, you might just state that you agree with the testimony given by the person(s) speaking on behalf of the group. This conveys to the decision makers the seriousness with which the issue must be dealt.

SPEAK TO THE POINT:

Public officials have heard hundreds of people give testimony. They are grateful when the testimony is pertinent, well organized, and is directly in regard to the matter at hand. Long stories, lectures of philosophy or abstract complaints about generalities are usually a poor use of time, since the immediate problem is for the decision makers to choose a course of action to take on a specific question.

(OVER)



STATE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

Don't leave the decision makers wondering just what it was you wanted them to do.



BE INFORMED:

Read up or interview people on the subject at hand before you plan your testimony. Get a copy of the plan being heard, the staff report, the proposed ordinance, or other pertinent material. Then read it and plan your comments.



BE BOLD:

Don't be held back because you aren't an engineer, technician, or even a very good writer. If you think that you have an idea worth considering, chances are that it is. The decision makers have staff assistance to help polish up suitable ideas or rearrange words to fit something in.



IF YOU DON'T WISH TO SPEAK, WRITE:

At most hearings, all testimony is reviewed by the decision making body with some assistance from staff. If written testimony is specific, focused, and concise it will be given just as much attention as oral testimony. By necessity, oral testimony has time limits so that more people can speak, but written testimony has no length limitations. It may be effective to summarize your testimony orally in 3 - 5 minutes and then submit the details in writing.



BE REASONABLE:

Put yourself in the shoes of the decision makers. They must balance all views, interests and proposals being made, and find the best course for serving the overall public good. While it is your obligation to present your own interests, remember that you have legitimate competition. Be prepared occasionally to compromise.

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