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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 in your neighborhood, or some other matter and wish 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.

So when you finally get motivated to speak up about something, do so. The opportunity of a hearing is provided for just that purpose. BUT - don't waste your testimony. These suggestions included here are to help you make the most of your opportunity to get the attention of decision makers at a public hearing, whether they are a Planning Commission, City Council, or other group.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TESTIFYING AT PUBLIC HEARINGS

1. 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 addressing.

2. 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.) The purpose of the hearing is to assist decision makers in determining whether the proposal complies with the City's comprehensive plan and local ordinances. The Planning Department will assist you in finding the local plans and ordinances.

3. 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 may ask those in the audience supporting the testimony to stand in order to convey the seriousness of the issue.

4. SPEAK TO THE POINT:

Public officials have heard hundreds of people give testimony. They are grateful when the testimony is pertinent, well organized, and directly regards the matter at hand.

5. STATE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

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

6. 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 proposed ordinance, or other pertinent material. Plans, plats, and applications are usually in the files of the Planning Department about ten days prior to the hearing. If possible, read these materials before you prepare your comments.

7. 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, then chances are that it is. The decision makers have staff assistance to help polish up suitable ideas or rearrange words to fit something in.

8. IF YOU DON'T WISH TO SPEAK, THEN WRITE:

At most hearings, all testimony is reviewed by the decision making body with some staff assistance. If written testimony is specific, to the point, and concise, it will be given just as much attention as oral testimony. At times, oral testimony is limited 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. Written testimony must be received in the City office no later than seven (7) days prior to a public hearing. To assure your written comments are in the record, you must submit them prior to the above deadline.

9. 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.

