

Providing Public Testimony - Tips from Realtor® Advocacy

Every day public officials adopt ordinances, resolutions, and laws which affect you either adversely or positively. You can help educate those officials as to why the idea they are pondering or the vote they are about to cast is a good thing or a bad thing. And yes, elected officials do want to hear from you. They were elected to office to represent the people, aka you.

It's always best to communicate early before the ordinance or resolution is up for vote. This can be done with a letter, email, or phone call. Remember, discuss the issue but don't argue the matter. Ask the public official why the idea is being considered. Why do they think there is a problem to be fixed? Hear them out, then explain in your own words, pulling from your experiences as a businessperson, parent, taxpayer etc., why you support or oppose the idea. Ask to participate in the process as the city, county, or municipality sits down to consider or draft the language of the proposed regulation. Being in the discussion early with constructive comments and facts is key to success.

Another means by which to let your elected officials know what you want is to give them formal public testimony. This means you take a seat before the body of public officials you hope to educate and tell them why the action they are considering is a benefit to the community or not. But how do you do this effectively?

First, remember that everyone on the commission or council is just like you. They may have families, vacuum their floors, and eat several times a day. And like you, they care about their community and about what is good for the benefit of the majority. To know who the majority are, how they feel, and what they want and need, public officials rely on citizens to come forward and speak out about what will or will not be best for the community.

The next time you hear or read about your local Planning Commission, City Council, County Commission, or whomever is giving consideration to an ordinance or law you want to support or do not like, take responsibility and come forward and speak to the issue. When presenting testimony, it is important you present yourself and your comments in the best manner, both concisely and logically. In most cases the time you are allotted to testify is limited and in some cases the speaker before you will have expressed the same message you have prepared. Don't fret and avoid speed reading your testimony. Simply deliver a crisp, clear, and concise message.

- Write out your testimony to get your thoughts in order. Use your own words.
- Do your research. Read the ordinance, bill, or measure that will be voted on and speak to specific points in the measure and why you are for or against it. If possible, know what the opposition is saying and counter their comments.
- If you name a problem, try to offer a solution.
- Thank the council, legislators, or whomever you are testifying before for allowing you to present. Introduce yourself, cite your background, and mention the experiences that make you an expert or give you the qualifications to speak on the subject. Let them know if you are one of their constituents.
- Present your written testimony for the record. In most jurisdictions, this means handing it to the recording clerk or using an online portal.
- Summarize your testimony. Call ahead to the council clerk and find out how much time will be allowed for public testimony. Condense your oral remarks to fit this time frame and know that you don't need to read testimony verbatim. Often you will not have time to do so. Simply speak to your main points. Your written testimony can be longer and more detailed than the oral comments you make.
- Do not argue with the council or board you are testifying before and do not get angry. Present your viewpoints logically and rationally. You will gain more credibility this way.
- Don't call names or point fingers. Know your opponents and their arguments. Stay focused.

Once finished with your summary, do not run from the witness table. Instead, offer to answer questions. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. Do not try to be an expert if you're not. You will get caught and then the accuracy of your entire testimony will be questioned, not just this time, but every time after. When asked a question you cannot answer, it is better to offer to find the answer and submit it later. Although you may be testifying as a private concerned citizen who is a Realtor®, your comments and attitude will reflect on all Realtors®. A good presentation will shape the public's and the individual's perception of you and the industry to which you belong. Finally, remember, it's a government of the people and for the people so be a part of it.