

Strategies for Good Written Testimony

Providing good written testimony is important if you want to persuade a planning commission, board of commissioners, city council or other formal commission to make a certain decision.

Cautions

- **Don't NIMBY** – If you oppose something, try to not make it personal. Commissioners hear “not in my backyard” all the time. If you are concerned about property value or noise impacts, focus on the whole neighborhood or community.
- **Don't Copy** – If someone sends you their letter, do not copy it verbatim. Make your letter unique to your perspective. If the whole neighborhood wants to say exactly the same thing, write one letter and have everyone sign it.
- **Testimony is Public** – Your written testimony is part of the public record and anyone can request a copy. It will likely be posted online.

Step 1 – Know your Stuff

Make sure you know what is being proposed and why, as well as how the commission or council will make their decision. This information should be readily available online. If you have questions, reach out to project staff not to the commissioners.

- A. Review all background materials
- B. Determine what criteria the commission or council will be using to make a decision
- C. Call staff if you have questions

Step 2 – Keep it Simple

Commissioners will receive a lot of testimony, and you don't want yours to get lost in the stack. Your letter should be short (1 page is best) and to the point. All the reasons why you support or oppose a proposal must speak to the criteria the commission or council will use to make a decision. Propose solutions to problems when you can.

- A. Start with “I support XYZ proposal” or “I oppose XYZ proposal”
- B. List the decision criteria and write your rationale for supporting or opposing under each
- C. Be kind and respectful – commissioners are people too

Step 3 – Support your Statements

Give your *because* statements weight beyond just your opinion. Attach supporting materials to your letter. You can attach photos or memos from other organizations or you can cite online documentation. But keep in mind that commissioners have a lot to read, so keep it to the point. They won't read a 100 page document on water quality; instead include the few pages with relevant information highlighted. Make sure all materials are clear and legible even if printed, scanned or posted online.

Example 1 Written Testimony

June 1, 2000

Dear Planning Commission,

I am writing in opposition to the proposed Big Box USA store, permit number RZ00-100. I urge the Planning Commission to recommend denial of the requested change for the following reasons:

1. **Transportation** (County Code 12.345.67(a)(1)) – The development will have a negative impact on traffic that cannot be mitigated at the project level. Study by ABC Consulting (Attachment A, excerpt of transportation study) shows that the intersection of Main Street and Division Avenue does not currently meet the County's required level of service. Adding an estimated 1,000 trips per day, as stated by the applicant, will only exacerbate the problem. The County should first invest in fixing the intersection to the required level of service.
2. **Flooding** (County Code 12.345.67(a)(2)) – The 100-acre property is currently undeveloped and covered in forests (Attachment B, aerial photography). The USGS mapping (Attachment C, soils map) shows that the soil type is very well draining. Forest canopy and well-draining soil provide natural attenuation of rainwater. Paving over the property, as proposed by the applicant, could create localized flooding and the current County requirements for stormwater management are insufficient to address peak storm events. The County should first update the rural stormwater regulations to address large scale urban development.
3. **Neighborhood Character** (County Code 12.345.67(a)(3)) – Big Box USA will fundamentally change the character of the neighborhood and does not meet the County's Comprehensive Plan policies (Attachment D, relevant policies) that require maintaining small town character and supporting neighborhood-scale retail. Main Street from the intersection of Division Avenue east to Maple Avenue is a retail corridor with stores averaging 7,000 square feet. Big Box USA, at 80,000 square feet, is out of character with the scale of the neighborhood.

While not directly related to the criteria the Planning Commission will be using to make a decision, I am also concerned about displacing wildlife. I recently walked the right-of-way along the edge of the property and observed deer, red tailed hawks and rabbits (Attachment E, photographs of site taken from the right-of-way). The property provides a large area for wildlife within town and the habitat would be removed by the development.

Thank you for considering my reasons for opposing the proposal.

Sincerely,

Jane Smith

1234 E 1st Street

Small Town, WA

Example 2 Written Testimony

January 30, 2010

Dear Planning Commission,

I am writing in support of the proposed change to development regulations to require parks in new subdivisions. I urge the Planning Commission to recommend approval the new requirements for the following reasons:

4. **Public Health** (Comprehensive Plan Policy EH1.2) – Access to open areas for recreation is important for the physical and mental health of the community (Attachment A, CDC Health Benefits of Open Space). Even passive recreation, like viewing trees, is shown to improve one’s health. It is appropriate at the time of subdivision to require land to be set aside for a park that is within walking and biking distance of new homes.

5. **Neighborhood Character** (Comprehensive Plan Policy CM3.4) – The new regulations will require consideration of existing stands of mature trees to be included in the park. Our town has many stands of Douglas Firs that are part of our character. Preserving these trees in parks will help us retain our identity as the town develops. In addition, parks are a gathering space for the neighborhood. Events like Music in the Park or Farmer’s Market increase the sense of community.

6. **Heat Island** (Comprehensive Plan Policy EH2.3) – When undeveloped areas are subdivided and developed, the trees and shrubs are replaced with structures, driveways and roads. These hardened surfaces absorb sunlight and radiate the heat back out in the afternoons and evening, creating a heat island effect. Preserving parks and open spaces helps to reduce the heat island effect in neighborhoods (Attachment B, WHO Health Impacts of Heat Islands).

While I support the proposal overall, I would like to ask for a change. The proposal requires at least ½-acre of park space per 20 residential lots; however, there are no requirement for what is included in the park. Please add a list of required amenities including play structure, picnic tables, gazebo, walking path, etc. While not all amenities should be required at all parks, the developer should be required to choose at least three amenities to ensure the park is not just a weedy field with trees. I also support and would like to see the maintenance requirements strengthened to ensure the park is kept in good working order.

Thank you for considering my reasons for supporting the proposal.

Sincerely,
John Brooke
5678 W 9th Avenue
Small Town, WA