

Strategies for Good Oral Testimony

Oral testimony provides an opportunity to further persuade a commission or council about a decision they are making. Oral testimony is more personal and emotional than written testimony.

Step 1 – Provide Good Written Testimony

Oral testimony should be viewed as supplemental to written testimony. It is not possible to cram all of the details and rationale for your position into 3 minutes of speaking. Rely on the written testimony to provide the full argument. See Strategies for Good Written Testimony.

Step 2 – Follow the Rules

You will be required to sign up to testify, and you will need to provide your full name for the record. Everyone will have the same time limit, typically 3 minutes, to speak – stick to it. The commissioners are just listening, not responding, so do not ask them direct questions.

- A. Check with staff to confirm the time limit for each person testifying
- B. Show up at least 15 minutes early to sign up to testify
- C. Practice, practice and practice your testimony to fit in the time limit

Step 2 – Keep it Simple

You can highlight your arguments from the written testimony or you can be creative and tell the history of the site or an experience you had related to the proposal. Script out exactly what you plan to say to ensure you are making your point(s) well and in the time provided.

- A. Start with your full name and “I support XYZ proposal” or “I oppose XYZ proposal”
- B. State that you provided written testimony and include the date you sent it
- C. Highlight the top three reasons you support/oppose the proposal or be creative by sharing your own personal experience or knowledge

Step 3 – Be Courteous

More likely than not, the commissioners are all volunteers or unpaid officers and serve because they care deeply about the community. Treat them with respect. Other testifiers may have different opinions than you, and they deserve their time to be heard without interruption.

- A. Keep all arguments on topic and related to the decision-making criteria
- B. Close by thanking the commissioners for listening to your concerns/comments
- C. Do not clap, boo or talk during other people’s testimony

**Note – If there are true conflicts of interest or formal disclosures that a commissioner should state, bring those up with staff ahead of time, not during oral testimony.*

Oral Testimony as a Group

Each person providing testimony will be required to stay within a time limit, typically 3 minutes. This makes it difficult if you have many reasons you support/oppose the proposal. One effective strategy is to testify as a group.

How ...

1. [Talk to Your Neighbors](#) – Find a few people that agree with your position and arguments and that are comfortable speaking in public.
2. [Meet and Plan](#) – Meet up and talk about the position and arguments. Make a list of the main topics you want to cover in oral testimony and decide who wants to speak on each.
3. [Script Your Testimony](#) – On your own, script out what you plan to say on your topic. Work from your written testimony (oral testimony should always be supplemental).
4. [Meet and Practice](#) – Meet up again to practice your testimony. Ask for constructive criticism to help you hone your arguments. Practice to make sure you fit in the time limit.
5. [Testify Together](#) – Show up 15 minutes early to the hearing and sign up to testify back-to-back. If possible, sit together in the room.

Why use this strategy: If you have five topics to cover (e.g., transportation, water quality, air quality, noise and property values) it will be hard to cover all five thoroughly in 3 minutes. But if each person uses 3 minutes per topic, then the whole argument gets 15 minutes of air time before the commissioners.

Example

Jane: Transportation (3 minutes)

John: Water Quality (3 minutes)

Jim: Air Quality (3 minutes)

June: Noise (3 minutes)

Jack: Property Values (3 minutes)

What to say: “My name is Jane Smith and I along with a group of my neighbors oppose the shopping mall proposal. I provided written testimony on June 1st and will be referencing it. I am going to cover transportation” When you say a *group of my neighbors*, everyone in the group should raise their hand. Each person should reference the same group at the beginning to be clear there are many who feel the same way.

If the hearing is online only, then say “.... I along with # of my neighbors, who will also be testifying, oppose the shopping mall proposal....”