

Guide to Talking with Elected Officials

This guide will assist you in the process of discussing an issue, concern, proposal with your elected official(s). Outlined are steps to help you effectively communicate with elected or appointed officials in writing, through e-mail, phone, or in person. With neighborhood issues, most likely you'll need to deal with your local elected city or county officials, but the following tips should apply to all levels of government.

Key Points

1. Keep your communication simple, concise, and to the point.
2. Don't raise questions that you aren't prepared to answer.
3. Don't ask questions to embarrass or otherwise put the other party on the defensive.
4. Whenever possible, work to build consensus.
5. Use all the resources available to you. Do your homework. Search out others in your situation. RNeighbors can be a valuable resource.

Letters and E-mails

A well-written letter or e-mail is the most commonly used and effective means of communicating with elected officials. In today's technological age, e-mail and social media use has surpassed "snail mail". Don't expect the same attention to an easily posted e-mail, Twitter, or other form of communication, as you might get with a well written letter, phone call, or personal meeting.

If you are representing the concerns of many individuals, state this in your closing. You may even want to consider "signing on behalf of" or including the signatures of those you represent. Try to avoid the "round-robin" form letter. A well stated request providing information that the decision maker can use to make their decision is far more important than a flood of requests that are poorly stated or are not possible to grant. Make your letter clear, concise, focused, factual, and limited to one page if possible. Follow up statements with convincing evidence to support them. It should be polite, not emotional, and should compellingly make your case.

Key Components of an Effective Letter (the 5 W's)

- Who:** Your position and the name of the group you represent, if any.
- Why:** Clearly indicate the issue that you are writing about and your position on that issue. Limit your letter to one issue. Supporting details can be attached.
- What:** Be clear about the issue and what you want to be done about it. (more about this later) Always try to address the "what" in the first paragraph of your letter. Repeat what you want in your closing paragraph as well.
- Where:** Discuss the aspects or areas where the issue impacts you. Make sure to address the specific impact on you and those you represent.
- When:** When do you expect the issue to be resolved? When would you like to follow up in person to discuss further or to provide more detail?

Meeting with Elected Officials

A personal visit generally has more immediate impact and leaves a longer-lasting impression than a letter. Depending on the level of official you need to contact the means of connecting vary. Congressional district offices are staffed with people whose job it is to communicate with constituents like you. On the State level you may need to contact the legislators' staff to either arrange a time to visit their office in the capitol or make arrangements to visit on their return to their district.

Local officials are more easily accessible as they reside or have offices near to you.

In either case, as with writing letters or e-mail, be specific about who you are and who you represent, be specific about your issue, what you would like to discuss, and what you expect from your meeting. Perhaps you simply need to learn more about that official's position on the matter. You may save a lot of time with a phone call or reading a position paper first.

Speaking Before the City Council, County Commissioners, or Any Board

Do your homework. The tips for writing a good letter or e-mail apply here as well.

Make notes. No one expects you to be a professional speaker but it is much appreciated if you can state succinctly why you are before the group and what it is you would like from them. Notes can help you make your points and stick to the subject. Please avoid reading your statement verbatim from a prepared script. This does not come across well. The elected officials are citizens and taxpayers like you. They understand dealing with regular people so be one. Try to RELAX!

Because the issue is very important to you it's understandable that your emotions may try to get the best of you. Please do whatever you can to leave them in the hallway before you speak. If you don't feel capable of doing this then try to find someone who could represent you. You'll get some sympathy and empathy from the committee but decisions are made by facts and the law.

If you have supporting documentation we strongly suggest that you contact someone in administration who sets the agenda for the meeting to include your documentation with the information package provided to the council/committee several days prior to the meeting. This is appreciated. This provides for a thorough review on your topic prior to you presenting this same information.

Meet with your local official prior to any decision-making meeting. In Rochester, the City Council very strongly suggest opposing parties meet to discuss their issues in an attempt to work toward a compromise prior to meeting with the Council. We strongly suggest that every effort be made to do this.

Part of your homework is to discuss your issue with staff and or your Council member. Both are obligated to follow strict guidelines or the law. There are variances and some discretion allowed in some cases. You'll be most satisfied with the outcome if you fully comprehend the topic you are dealing with and what is needed to make a decision in your favor, etc.

Avoid asking questions to put the decision maker on the defensive such as, "How would you like it if ... ?" The answer you'll get or should get is, "It doesn't matter what I like or dislike. I'm sworn to uphold the law and our attorney is here to insure that I/we do." You won't achieve anything except marked yourself as someone who isn't dealing with facts but instead is attempting to "shame" a decision. Don't do this.

Know what and who you are dealing with. Whoever you are working with, don't ask for more than they can deliver. This puts the other party immediately on the defensive. On the other hand, don't be afraid to ask for what you feel the law allows.