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Make Your Voice Heard

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

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4 pages

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Make Your Voice Heard

*A Citizen's Guide
to Effective Participation
in Public Hearings*

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Family Living Education
Cooperative Extension Service
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Make Your Voice Heard

"Nobody in government cares about what I think or need."

"Nobody listens."

Public hearings held by government bodies can serve the following purposes:

- Provide an opportunity for citizens to influence public decisions.
- Give individual citizens and groups a chance for person-to-person exchange.
- Act as a viable and useful part of the democratic process at every level of government — local, regional, state, and national.

Someone IS listening!

Examples of Public Hearings

All levels of government conduct public hearings such as the following:

- Discussion of new rules for day care centers — conducted by the State Department of Social Services.
- Determination of the state's recreational needs — held in regions, conducted by a state legislative committee.
- Discussion of zoning to allow the construction of a shopping mall in a city — conducted by city council.
- Hearing on plans for use of Community Development funds — a federal requirement for use of these monies — conducted by the local units of government.

Why Hold Hearings?

To Communicate — The public body can find out what citizens think about an issue. Citizens have a chance to learn the attitudes of other citizens and of the officials.

To Inform — Governmental bodies may hold a hearing to educate the public about an issue. Questions and discussion usually follow.

To Learn — Some hearings are held to get help from the public in drafting laws or ordinances.

To Get Feedback — Officials may hold hearings to find out how well something is working — a look at procedures and administration. These hearings may also be a response to a complaint.

How Do You Find Out About Them?

Michigan's Open Meetings Law requires that notice of all regular and special meetings be made well in advance of the meeting.

Under this law, you (or your group) can request,

in writing, that a public body put you on a mailing list for **notification** and/or **agendas** of all meetings of that body. There may be a slight charge.

Also, remember that your newspaper or personal contact with a member of the public body are good sources of information about a public hearing.

Why Should You Participate?

Because you are concerned or unhappy or worried about a decision or potential decision of a public body.

Because you are in agreement with a decision or plan. (Note: this reason is too often overlooked.)

Because you have data — results of studies, surveys, budget information, etc. — that may have impact on a governmental decision.

Because you represent a group that wishes to make a statement on a public issue. This may be a formally organized group or an informal grouping coming together around a particular issue.

When You Testify

First, Some General Thoughts

- **The first time is definitely the hardest** — standing in front of the microphone with all eyes on you. You'll be amazed at how much easier the second time is!
- **Be cautious of "overspeak."** Choose your time wisely. When a government body hears the same person meeting after meeting, they begin to discount the comments.
- **Avoid duplication.** If several other speakers have already said what you planned to say, adapt your remarks by quickly summarizing these points and try to concentrate on a point that hasn't been highlighted.
- **Know the issue.** Don't just speak on the basis of a neighborhood rumor. Read the proposal, understand the implications, talk to the opposing side. It is also appropriate to raise questions in your testimony.

Getting Ready

- Even if it's a local hearing and you're planning informal, individual testimony, take the time to prepare an outline — you'll feel more confident.
- Written testimony is important for a legislative hearing and/or if you're representing a group. Prepare neatly typed copy with your name, the name of the group, the issue, the date. Make copies for each member of the board or committee and copies for the press.

Some Basics on Testifying

1. Identify yourself immediately. Stand, even if a microphone is not provided.
2. If representing a group, give the name in the first sentence. State the position of the group; tell briefly how member opinion was determined.
3. Outline the problems as you see them. Give alternative suggestions or solutions.
4. Consider the financial aspects of the proposal. If you are making a costly recommendation, it may be wise to suggest areas where there could be a budget cut.
5. Mention positive aspects of the proposal.
6. Be clear, concise, and brief.
7. If you have detailed, technical information, don't include it in the testimony. Mention it and attach to copies of the testimony.
8. If relevant, refer to present laws or procedures and indicate how the proposal would affect those laws.
9. Be polite and calm—getting upset and emotional is not productive.
10. Address one issue at a time. Take care of other issues on a different occasion. Don't wander off the subject.
11. Be prepared to answer questions about your testimony. If you don't have the information to answer the question, try to follow up after the meeting.
12. End your testimony with a one-sentence summary of your (or your group's) opinion. Thank the committee or board for the opportunity to testify.

After the Hearing

1. Try to have a brief, polite word with members of the committee or board after the meeting.
2. Consider a follow-up letter to the board. Also, perhaps a "letter to the editor" would be helpful.
3. Depending on the timing of a vote on the issue, other kinds of action might be appropriate follow-up to testimony: a petition drive, a survey, planning a tour, working in coalition with other groups, starting a letter-writing campaign, publicizing future hearings.

A Final Word

Don't give up on public hearings if your point of view doesn't prevail. It is still important to participate.

You can learn a great deal by participating in a public hearing — about the issue, about the government body, and about the supporters and opponents of the issue.

Material adapted from the publication, *Anatomy of a Public Hearing*, by the League of Women Voters of the United States.

