It's Your Government

Every day public officials adopt ordinances, resolutions, and laws--or amend laws--which affect you either adversely or positively. In either case, YOU have a responsibility to 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. Yes, Uncle Sam--and all of his representatives--wants to hear from you. After all, they were elected to office to represent the “people,” a.k.a. you.

It is always best to communicate early, before the ordinance or resolution is actually up for the vote. This can be done with a letter, postcard, or phone call. Discuss the issue. Don’t argue the matter; discuss. Ask the public official--whether they are members of the local planning commission, city council, county commission, Metro council, or even dog catcher--why the idea is being considered. Why do they think there is a problem to be fixed? Hear them out. Explain in your own words--pulling from your experiences as a businessperson, parent, taxpayer, softball coach, etc.—why the idea is good or bad. 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 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 of benefit to the community or not. But how do you do this without being swallowed up by intimidation? It's easy.

First of all, remember that everyone on the commission or council is just like you. They too 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 and how they feel (what they want and need), public officials rely on citizens to come forward and talk to them and to speak out as to what will or will not be best for the community.

The next time you hear or read of your local planning commission, city council, county commission, or whomever giving consideration to an ordinance or law you do not like, take responsibility for coming forward and speaking to the issue.

Be an educator. Outlined below are some simple steps to follow when presenting oral testimony to your public officials.

When presenting testimony it is important that you present yourself and your comments in the best possible 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. You can do a good job. You can avoid speed-reading your testimony and deliver a crisp new argument to the council if you follow some general guidelines.

- Write out your testimony. Get your thoughts in order; use your own words.
- Do your research. Read the ordinance, bill, measure that will be voted on. 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, offer a solution.
- Thank the council, legislators, whomever you are testifying before for allowing you to present testimony.
- Introduce yourself. Site your background and mention your experiences that make you an expert or give you the qualifications to speak to the subject.
- Present your written testimony "for the record." In most jurisdictions this means handing it to the recording clerk.
- 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. You don't need to--nor should you--read
your testimony verbatim. Often you will not have time to, so just speak to your main points. Your 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 but don't insult them--certainly
  don't call them liars. Take the high ground.
- When finished with your summary, do not run from the witness table. 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, and not just this time but every time after this. When
  asked a question you cannot answer, it is better to offer to get 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.

It's government of the people and for the people. So, be a part of it.