

# Tips on Providing Public Testimony

March 2025

# How to provide public testimony: Instructions and Tips from City of Portland Housing Bureau

[How to provide public testimony: Instructions and Tips | Portland.gov](#)

## Provide verbal testimony when:

- Emphasize the personal impact of the issue. Speaking at the hearing allows you to really emphasize the personal impact of the issue on you and your community. Facts and figures are great, but personalized testimony is the most effective.

## Before the meeting

1. Practice! Verbal testimony is generally limited to two-three minutes per person. It can be helpful to practice beforehand to make sure you have enough time, and to prepare an outline so you do not read your testimony word for word.

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## Preparing your testimony

The below template is a useful resource when preparing your public testimony. Feel free to utilize as much of this prompt as you would like.

### 1. Introduce yourself and the issue you want to testify about

- Give your first and last name and identify yourself. Ex. “My name is Robert Jackson, and I am a concerned Portland resident/a landlord/member of a non-profit or advocacy group.”
- Tell them what you’re testifying about. Ex. “I am testifying on how the lack of affordable housing and services has made it difficult for me to find a sustainable housing solution” or “I am testifying about how the current Fair Housing ordinances affect the rental market.”

### 2. Tell your story

- Pick an event or issue that you have worked directly on, or that you have been affected directly by, that you are comfortable sharing with the public.
- Tell what services caused this event or issue and how it impacted you.

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## **3. Explain why you felt the need to testify**

- Tell why you wanted to share your story and what you want the advisory body to take from your story.
- What would have helped prevent negative experiences or increase positive experiences?

## **4. Give suggestions for solving the issue or problem you have raised**

- What do you think the advisory body should do to make sure others do not have the negative experiences you did or that they have the positive experiences you did?
- What do you think will be helpful in dealing with the issue or problem you talked about?

## **5. Thank the members of the Advisory Body/Council**

- Thank the chair of the committee if you know their name and the advisory body at large.
- Tell them you hope they consider your testimony and the solutions you have suggested. Ex. “Your consideration of these matters and solutions is very much appreciated.”

Written testimony should be no longer than one page (or 530 words) and limited to one topic of conversation.

# How to Make a Difference at a Planning Commission or City Council Hearing

by Amanda Fritz, Portland Planning Commission member 1996 – 2003

<https://districtfourcoalition.org/tips-tricks-for-city-council-testimony/>

(refer to link for more detail)

1. Provide information, in plenty of time and in useful formats.
2. Be polite and respectful, both to the decision-makers and to any opponents.
3. Plan your testimony and use your time wisely.
4. Say what you want the decision-makers to do, clearly and repeatedly, and why.
  - ***Make a specific request, make it clearly, and say it at the beginning and end of your testimony.*** Countless times, I've listened with pen poised, waiting to write down the main issue of concern. At the end of the person's testimony, all I've been able to tell is that the person cares very much about the issue and feels something is wrong. But I can't tell what they see as the problem, and/or what they want me to do about it.

# How to Make a Difference at a Planning Commission or City Council Hearing

- ***Identify the problem and propose a solution to it.*** It doesn't have to be a specific solution, in fact sometimes it's best to leave the details to be figured out later, but remember, you're trying to help the decision-makers do what you want. ***Tell them what you want!***
- ***Explain why they should vote your way - what facts or values support your case, not just how many people support it.*** One person can make a huge difference if s/he can persuade a decision-maker there's a valid core principle.
- ***Don't assume the decision-makers understand the issues and what to do about them.*** Explain why, as well as what you want them to do.

**5. Know the rules and quote them.**

# How to Make a Difference at a Planning Commission or City Council Hearing

## 6. The Rule of Three - *Tell them, tell them again, tell them what you told them.*

Don't have everyone saying exactly the same thing, though. If you're organizing a group, give them talking points/issues to cover, not a set speech. This is especially important when submitting letters - petitions or form letters are almost worthless. Tell how it matters to you for your own personal reasons. Three people on the same topic makes it A Real Problem. Thirty testifiers on the same topic makes it A Big Problem. A hundred speakers almost always send the project back to the drawing board. But a hundred signatures on a form is just a sheet of paper with many names - the decision-maker doesn't know what they were told before signing.

# How to Make a Difference at a Planning Commission or City Council Hearing

- 7. Organize diverse participation with more than a single constituency.**
- 8. Use Meeting Mechanics to your advantage.**
- 9. Use Personal Contacts to your advantage.**
- 10. Be gracious in victory and defeat - use to prepare for Next Time.**

The one thing I suggest asking testifiers to consider is not only what should not be cut, but things that could be done more cost-effectively and/or areas where fees could be increased without impact to underserved/underrepresented communities. I don't recommend asking for suggestions on where to cut, as it's always easier to suggest cutting a program you personally don't use and don't know much about.



## How to Make a Difference at a Planning Commission or City Council Hearing

**Donna Cohen, a North Portland activist, provides trainings on giving testimony in her Civics for Adults classes at public libraries.**

<https://www.civictinker.info/schedule>

When giving testimony, the single most important thing is to TIME your testimony for the allotted time. That is usually 3 minutes but when there are a lot of people testifying, it's often cut down to two minutes. That means, literally, writing it out and using a stopwatch to make sure you can deliver it in the timeframe.

Be civil and state your name. Some folks like to specifically address Council President and, then Councilors, overall, but I don't think that's necessary. At state legislature, it seems to be more of a practice [e.g. "Chair so-and-so, Committee members...blah, blah"]

## How to Make a Difference at a Planning Commission or City Council Hearing

Try not to target a particular Councilor for criticism. Praise one if you like what they did [that's relevant].

Be targeted; try not to cover too many points/topics. Personal stories/impacts are always helpful. And, of course, if you can say something you like, as well as something you want to see changed, that's a nice balance. Mainly, just be sincere, and clear, and you will be heard. It's a fantastic opportunity to communicate with elected officials.

# Effective Public Testimony

## How to Structure Your Testimony to Make Your Voice Heard

1

### INTRODUCTION

- **Greet the Councilors** and **Introduce Yourself** for the record with your name and (if applicable) title and organization.
- **Clearly State Your Position** - one line that lets them know your topic and desired result.



3

### CALL TO ACTION

- **Present Solution or Request**, e.g., "I urge the council to \_\_\_\_" or "Please support \_\_\_\_".
- **Explain Benefits** by outlining how the action will positively affect the community.



2

### FRAME the ISSUE

- **Describe the Issue or Problem** to provide them with relevant context, but avoid excessive detail. Get to the heart of the matter quickly.



4

### CONCLUSION

- **Reaffirm Your Request** and sum up your testimony. Reiterate your Call to Action.
- **Thank the council** for their time and consideration.



### TIPS!

- **PRACTICE!** Time your two minutes. Don't get cut off!
- **STAY FOCUSED.** Stick to one issue or message.
- **BE CONCISE!** Every word should serve a purpose.
- **BE RESPECTFUL.** Even if you have strong feelings.

# How to Engage with City Council

<https://www.portland.gov/auditor/council-clerk/engage-council#toc-register-to-provide-verbal-testimony-on-an-agenda-item>

- [Contact a member of Council](#)
- [Register to provide verbal testimony on an agenda item](#)
- [Submit written testimony on an agenda item](#)
- [Request a public communication spot](#)
- [Request interpretation or accommodation](#)
- [Public records information](#)
- “Take Action” page with resources & links for contacting local elected officials:  
<https://www.revitalizeportland.com/take-action>