



Effective Activism 101
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Public Policy & Advocacy - Consulting, Program Design, & Training



5 STEPS TO SPEAKING AT A PUBLIC HEARING OR TOWN MEETING

Sure, “decisions are made by those who show up”, but decision-makers are influenced by who speaks up. If you’re a voter in town, you have every right to have your say. But how do you make sure you’re persuasive?

Just about every proposal needs a public hearing, regardless of where you live in the United States. At that stage, public comment is encouraged before the committee reviewing it makes a recommendation to the “legislative authority”. Speaking at a public hearing is an excellent opportunity to advance or kill an issue in its infancy.

In your local community, the legislative authority may be a City Council. In small towns across New England, registered voters act as the legislative authority and vote on proposals previously vetted at a public hearing, such as the town’s budget and local bylaw changes at something called “Town Meeting”. Not to be confused with town hall meetings held by Member of Congress to hear from voters, Town Meeting is a direct democracy holdover from the Puritan days when you could pack the entire voting population of a town into one hall and arrive at decisions about how the town should be run. Voters have the opportunity to persuade their neighbors by speaking during the debate.

That tradition of public speaking at Town Meeting shaped the political culture of New England and it can change the political culture of the rest of the country too. Public speaking can be intimidating, but it’s easier if you have a road-map. Here’s the [Learn to Lobby](#) guide to giving testimony at public hearings or Town Meeting:

1. Know Your Audience:

Make sure what you’re going to say has value and doesn’t anger or frustrate your audience. The value of your speech is to show you’re one of many who share this view and to get decision-makers, whether they are a town board or town meeting voters, to come over to your side.

To that end, if someone has already made your point, don't repeat it word-for-word. People get fidgety when they hear the same thing over and over again, particularly fellow voters at Town Meeting. Earlier in the process, at those public hearings (where less people show up) you can simply say, "I agree with what has been said about xyz" and add a new point or simply tell your story.

Keep in mind that public testimony usually isn't a two-way conversation. You may ask a question of decision-makers, but the structure of public comment usually doesn't allow for a response.

Don't be combative or overly emotional. Your **credibility** as a community member depends upon your ability to keep calm and reasoned.

Keep it brief. No one wants to hear a soliloquy. Therefore, you need an Elevator Speech. (If you were in an elevator with the decision-maker, how could you get across your message in the time it takes to get from the top floor to the lobby?)

2. Identify yourself:

Both the decision-makers and the stenographer will want to know your full name and at least your street name or precinct. In some cases, you may be asked to write down your address.

3. Say what you're going to say:

Give them a one-line preview, such as "I support (your position) the proposed bylaw to change zoning requirements to make duplexes easier to build (issue) because we need more attainable year-round housing (why it's important).

4. Say it:

- "Frame" the issue showing how it will benefit a broad base of people. For example, more duplexes benefit young people looking for housing, and also the local economy will benefit from having employees live locally.
- Talk about what problem it will solve or what gain it will create.
- Address any false information.

5. Be seated:

- Reiterate your point
- Thank them for listening
- Have a seat

Pro-Tips:

- Bring the crossword
- Meet-up with friends beforehand
- Look at agenda & watch the meeting at home until just before the issue comes up
- Get your hand up right away

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Town Meeting 101

Q: *What's the best way to be prepared for town meeting?*

- Make a plan for town meeting: put it in your calendar, invite friends, post on social media #engagecapecod
- Look up the warrant ahead of time. If your town hosts a pre-town meeting event (or Selectboard meeting where they do a run-through), try to attend and ask questions ahead of time.

Q: *Becoming civically involved is overwhelming. Where do I start?*

- Go to town website: look at committees for something that interests you
- Find a cause (potholes, playgrounds, wildlife)
- Keep an eye out for public notices (in the newspaper, at town hall, or on the town calendar)
- Like your local community newspaper's Facebook page and sign up for the town's e-newsletter
- Attend your town's Citizens Police Academy
- Peruse the town's Annual Report

Q: *Say I'm not ready to get on a committee but I still want to get involved. What are some baby steps I can take?*

- Volunteer on a political campaign (#engagecapecod)
- Bring a buddy to town meeting. The Secretary of State offers this [guide](#) on how it works.
- Ask your Town Clerk if there are any short-term town sub-committees
- Join your local civic association
- Find out if your selectmen/town councilor has a monthly coffee hour

- Join the town's Citizen Advisory Committee

Q: Say I've found a cause or committee I'm interested in. What steps should I take?

- Look for stories about the committee or issue in your town's weekly newspaper
- Public Meetings: watch it in person, online or on tv, or read the minutes
- Contact the chairman or the administrative assistant for the committee
- Have coffee with a member of the committee

Q: How can I figure out what kind of time commitment a committee is? And how do I know what the proper way to conduct myself in these settings is?

- Talk to chair of the committee
- Learn [Robert's Rules of Order](#)
- Familiarize yourself with the state's [Open Meeting Law](#)

Q: Are there any Mentoring & Education Resources out there?

- [League of Women Voters](#)
- Town [Democratic](#) or [Republican](#) Committees
- [Toastmasters](#)
- [State Ethics training](#)
- Participate in [CCYP](#) professional advancement, leadership development, and mentoring events, programs, and workshops
- Attend [CCYP's Annual Shape the Cape Summit](#)
- Watch the [CCYP Shape the Cape Podcast Series](#) when it launches!
- Don't forget to talk to your Town Clerk!
- Learn to Lobby's [5 Steps to Speaking at Public Hearings or Town Meeting](#)



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ELEVATOR SPEECH CHEAT SHEET

SPECIFIC ISSUE DETAILS:

Bill/Program Title: _____
[Formal Name, like An Act]

Status: _____
[Insert name of committee/where the bill is in the legislative process]

Specific Request: _____
[Write/call your rep/senator, sign petition, etc.]

ELEVATOR SPEECH:

Hi, my name is _____ from _____.

I'm here/calling/writing to talk about _____
[Brief Description of Issue]

The reason this is important is because _____
[State problem that needs solving]

This bill/amendment addresses that issue by _____

Here's why this is important to me: _____
[Use storytelling about your personal connection to the issue]

I'm hoping you'll support it because: _____
[Use local statistics or other stories from the district]

I'm asking you to: _____
[Make a *Specific Request* – Send this letter, sign this petition, etc.]

Do you have any questions I can answer?
Thank you for your time and consideration.