

# Daily Journal

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PERSPECTIVE

## MUNICIPAL MATTERS

## Presenting at local government meetings 101

By Derek P. Cole

In law practice, our service to clients sometimes requires us to appear in venues where we haven't practiced before. Suppose a client asks you to attend a city council meeting to present his or her position on an important local issue. If you've never appeared before such a body, what can you expect and how do you prepare?

As a practicing city attorney, I sit through many hours of public meetings. I've probably seen just about everything from the podium — good, bad and everything in between. For lawyers who find themselves appearing for the first time before a local hearing body, I offer the following tips, based on my experience, on how to effectively present in a local government meetings.

*First, get to know your audience.* You wouldn't go to court without trying to learn something about your judge, such as how he runs his courtroom or how she's ruled in similar cases. Your approach to appearing before public bodies should be no different. Take time to get to know the officials who will be deciding your matter. In the author's experience, local officials usually are very upfront about what's important to them and how they feel about key issues. Many officials have personal websites and social media accounts in which they freely share this information. You can also gather information about their positions through simple Google searches or searches of local newspaper articles.

*Second, send a letter in advance.* Public officials usually receive packets for their upcoming meetings a few days in advance. For each agenda item, they receive a staff report, a document for the pro-

posed action (such as a resolution, ordinance or contract), and all other documents related to the item. In my view, it is critical that you communicate your views in writing in time to be included in the agenda packet. It has been my experience that officials spend a great deal of time reviewing agenda packets for their meetings. When they come to meetings, they often have clear preferences for how they intend to vote. If you haven't expressed your views to them by the time a meeting starts, you will miss perhaps the most critical opportunity to persuade.

*Third, respect public officials' time demands.* Most public meetings require officials to vote on several agenda items covering a wide range of subjects. At the same time, many people in the audience attend because of their interest in only one agenda item. When that item is called, it is understandable for these audience members to want the decision-makers to dwell as much as possible on the item. But busy public officials generally want to give all agenda items the attention they're due. Wise speakers recognize this. Recognizing that officials are already well-versed in an item because of their advance review of agenda packets, they limit their presentations to a few key and important points. If you can finish your presentation before your allotted time expires, consider that a success.

*Fourth, respect the agency's rules and procedures.* Most agencies limit each speaker's time at their podiums to three or five minutes. And they give speakers one opportunity to speak. Consider these ironclad rules. Consistent with the above point about the time demands officials face, recognize that if you attempt to speak beyond

your allotted time, or you demand to speak a second time, whatever you say is unlikely to persuade, if you are even allowed to continue speaking. (Most chairs or mayors will not let you do so.)

*Fifth, keep your presentation focused.* A corollary to the last point is to give a streamlined, straightforward, and succinct presentation when it's your turn at the podium. While members of the public are given more latitude in this area — which is only fair; public officials do not expect laypersons to speak with the polish of trained lawyers — professionals are held to a different standard. Prepare for your presentation the same way you would for court. Write out an outline of what you intend to say and practice giving your presentation in advance.

Recognize also that agency staff will usually have made a detailed presentation about your item after it is called. When you come to the podium, you can expect the hearing board members will be very familiar with your item. Don't waste the few minutes you have to speak on details that have already been well covered. Focus instead on the key points you want the decision-makers to understand. If you need to put facts into the record, take care of that in advance through a letter (see point above).

*Sixth, use presentation software intelligently.* In some cases, you may be allowed to exceed the usual three-to-five minute time limitation to address a public body on a unique issue. If given this opportunity, resist the urge to use PowerPoint or similar presentation software to guide your presentation. So often, speakers who use such software wind up clinging to their prepared presentation rather than connecting with the decision-mak-

ers. If you need to show graphical material or pictures, software like PowerPoint can be an effective aid. But if you do use such software, recognize that public officials can simultaneously process what's on the screen and what you convey to them orally. Simply repeating what is on your slides is not effective.

*Finally, be professional.* Criticizing government is our birthright as Americans. Many choose to exercise this right toward hearing bodies through invective, insults, finger-wagging and sometimes hostile comments. The Constitution guarantees these means of expression, of course. But they are almost never effective. As a professional, you can be critical without being offensive. If you anticipate a hearing body will reject your position, keep your composure and firmly and tactfully make the points you need to preserve the record for a reviewing body or court.

Ultimately, you should approach presentations before local government the way you would in any other matter — with preparation, professionalism, and a sincere desire to persuade.

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