

Step-by-Step Tips for Providing Effective Verbal Comments

This booklet provides an introduction to submitting verbal comments at public meetings. Providing verbal comments on proposed government actions (which include not just actions by the government, but also actions it permits or licenses) is a way to influence decisions on issues you care about. In this booklet, you will find an overview of the process for providing public verbal comments and suggested tips and techniques for delivering thorough and convincing comments.

What is a “verbal comment”?

When a federal, state, or local government agency undertakes a major action or makes an environmental decision, the agency will often hold public meetings to inform citizens about the process and to seek input on it. At most of these meetings, members of the public will have an opportunity to make a formal **verbal comment** and to enter that comment into the public record. Just like with written comments, the acting agency will be required to respond to the comment before finalizing its decision.

Why submit a verbal comment?

As with written commenting, verbal commenting is an important way to make your voice heard in decision-making. Public comments can strengthen an environmental decision by providing the acting agency with new facts or perspectives. Providing verbal comments also gives you an opportunity to meet face-to-face with individuals involved in the decision.



TIPS FOR PREPARING YOUR VERBAL COMMENT

- **Familiarize yourself with the issue.**
You don't have to be a technical expert to comment, but it is helpful to have a good understanding of the topic on which you're commenting. Gather background materials to familiarize yourself with the scope of the issue (for example, similar agency decisions, relevant laws, or relevant scientific information).
- **Define your objectives.**
What do you hope to achieve through your comment? Are you trying to support or stop a particular action, to ensure that the decision or document is in line with your organization's policies, or to correct factual errors or data gaps? Develop your comment in a way that best supports and clearly articulates your objectives.
- **Pick one to three key points to emphasize.**
Be sure to make your points clear, and avoid getting bogged down by less important details. Remember that you typically will have only a few minutes to speak, so keep your statement concise.
- **Be able to state what you want and what you like, as well as what you don't want and don't like.**
The agency could choose to revise parts of a document that you agree with—so it is a good idea to note the sections you support. You should also be prepared to suggest a possible solution or alternate course of action.

Before the Meeting

- 1. Find out when and where meetings will be held.**
Contact decision-makers for information about upcoming meetings. Keep an eye and ear out for newspaper notices, flyers, and radio announcements, and especially for online or email notifications – meetings are advertised most frequently online.
- 2. Prepare your comment.**
See “Tips for Preparing Your Verbal Comment” (to the left) for more information.
- 3. Encourage others to attend the meeting with you and to give comments.**
It is helpful to decision-makers to know that an opinion is shared, and the more often they hear it, the more likely they are to remember it.
- 4. Use notecards and practice your statement.**
You do not need to have it memorized, but it's a good idea to rehearse beforehand. Often you have only a few minutes to provide remarks, and you don't want to run out of time before making your most important point.
- 5. Print written copies of your statement to bring with you.**
You may have an opportunity to leave copies with meeting officials or to enter them as part of the record.

At the Meeting

1. Introduce yourself to people before the meeting starts, and write down their names.

You may meet people with similar views who want to coordinate the next time, and people involved in the process that you can follow up with later. In particular, you should keep an eye out for meeting officials – they will be more likely to remember your comment if they meet you in person before or after.

2. Sign in, and if necessary fill out and submit a speaker registration card.

Often there will be follow-up materials sent to the addresses on the sign-in sheet. In addition, some meetings require people to fill out speaker registration cards in order to give a verbal comment.

3. Give your statement.

While making your comment, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- o **Clearly introduce yourself.**

State your name, where you are from, and any other information that may be relevant to your comment, such as your occupation.

- o **Explain why this issue matters to you.**

The ability to add a personal touch to your message is one of the major advantages of verbal commenting. You may find it helpful to tell a personal story, or you may want to explain what brought you to the meeting.

- o **If you represent others, say so.**

There is strength in numbers – meeting officials are more likely to heed your comment if they know you represent a number of people who all share the same opinion.

- o **Be calm, polite, and respectful.**



Public Speaking Tips

- **Speak slowly and clearly.** Don't trail off at the end of your sentences.
- **Don't read everything from your notes.** Although it is helpful to have notecards, reading directly from them will decrease your effectiveness.
- **Make eye contact with the people to whom you are speaking.** Remembering to do this will also keep you from reading from your notes.
- **Repeat your main points at the end of your statement.** Hearing your main points more than once will help people remember them.



Other Opportunities to Voice Your Opinion

In addition to submitting verbal comments at official public meetings, there are often other informal opportunities to provide verbal input into the decision-making process – such as a one-on-one or small group meeting. In such situations, it is important to be able to describe your concerns and opinions clearly and concisely, just as you would if you were giving a formal public comment.

Informal opportunities to voice your opinion may include:

- **Meeting with government officials** who are involved in decision-making.
- **Talking to the press** to raise awareness about the issue.
- **Speaking at community meetings** or **meeting with citizen groups** to rally support for your position.

For More Information...

A Citizen's Guide to the NEPA: Having Your Voice Heard (Council on Environmental Quality)

Although not specific to verbal participation, this guide describes how individual citizens can participate in federal environmental processes under the National Environmental Policy Act, the major environmental law in the United States.

URL: energy.gov/nepa/downloads/citizens-guide-nepa-having-your-voice-heard