

How to Make Presentations at a City Council Meeting

By Alice Fix

The following comments are suggestions on ways to make a good presentation should you desire to speak at a city council meeting. Since so many communities are attempting to pass ordinances that negatively effect dogs, this information may come in handy. The rules for making presentations to a city council are the same no matter the topic. This discussion applies more about ordinances directed against a specific breed but is applicable regardless of what kind of inappropriate ordinance a city is attempting to pass.

Be Honest! Be Organized! Be brief! Be Respectful and Be Helpful! The council members are mortals too.

- They want to help.
- They want to look good.
- They are overwhelmed with issues and wish someone would help them.
- You will become their angel if you can make them look good and provide them with a solution to their perceived problem and/or concern.

Therefore, if you are against a given proposal, present a positive alternative instead of just saying no.

Typically City Councils will give each speaker a limited amount of time (often just 3 minutes) to speak - and they do time each speaker. When your time is up, the Council is ready to move on to the next speaker and will cut you off. Be sure to time your speech so that you can say your message within that time frame.

Arrive early to the meeting. There will be a sign-in sheet for anyone wishing to speak on an issue. Make sure to print and sign your name so that you have the opportunity to present your thoughts. Typically they follow the order in which you sign in. Make sure that you sign in early enough on the list because no one else will be allowed to speak should they run out of time. I have found that the best position is somewhere around the 8th to 10th person. That way you can either eliminate the points that other speakers already may have made, or allows you the opportunity to re-emphasize their importance, as well as to permit you to be able to hit on the points that no one has mentioned so far.

Dress appropriately. The more professional you look, the better your chances of being heard!

Concerning your speech, the following are some specific steps to take:

Step 1) Be organized, individually and together.

The council does not have much time and they have families that are waiting for them to come home. It is best to find a like-minded number of individuals and band together. Meet on two separate occasions before the scheduled event - the first meeting is simply to

introduce one to the other(s). The second meeting is to plan the presentation and its strategy. –It is SO easy to lose focus and/or to start a gripe session. Don't gripe and complain at the second session - ORGANIZE! If it is just you alone, work the same way. If you must gripe, do it the first night and get it out of your system. Then the next night, organize your talk within the allotted time frame.

In a group setting, it works best to allow each person to make separate points. Do not repeat each other. That just takes up part of your allotted time, and doesn't add to your message. New thoughts are better than repeated ideas.

I recently witnessed this tactic and thought it was a good idea: A husband and wife team couldn't get their presentation down to the allotted time. They made sure to sign in together. One gave the first half of the speech and the other gave the second half. I would not recommend making a habit of doing this, but under certain circumstances it can work.

Step 2) Learn the council member's current stance on all issues.

90 percent of their mind is decided. Their prejudices rule. If they are all against you, don't sweat it - you can embarrass them with Letters to the Editors of the local newspapers. Know where they stand before the meeting.

Learn the names of each council member. One ploy is to call each member before the meeting and ask them frankly how they feel about each issue. Be polite. Listen without comment no matter how outrageous you might consider their position. If they say "Pure Breeds are fire-breathing maniacs and should be sent to the lowest level of Hades" just say, "Thank you for the information and have a nice day." Your only purpose is to ask them their stance.

If, and only if, they ask for your opinion, tell them what you think in 1 minute or less; i.e.,

- 1) You sympathize that dangerous dogs should be regulated-
- 2) You want to help them in their endeavors -
- 3) You trust your dog around all others -
- 4) Thank them for their time -

Step 3) At the meeting

- Be polite. Be polite. Be polite. Smile, smile, smile!
- Be honest.
- Be organized.
- Be brief.
- Be respectful.
- Be helpful.

Finish by thanking Council for the opportunity to present your case and for their kind attention to your comments.

- If you have a certified service dog, bring it! They cannot by law exclude you from public places. Yeah! Know your dog and make VERY sure it has NO incidents at the meeting. If you think fools may try to provoke your animal, bring a friend to run interference so as to thwart their efforts.
- Have your speech printed up with sufficient copies, one for each council member and extras for the audience. If you happen to get cut off, or should you forget a particular point, they still have a copy of your speech in their possession. ALWAYS try to give them something to take away. They may not read it, but then again they might.
- You have organized your group (it is always MUCH better with more than one person). You each have an allotted amount of time.- It is perfectly OK to read from cards or a printed paper.
- It is permissible to have a friend read for you if you are too nervous, have a speech impediment, or are otherwise unable to personally present your material.

Facts to present:

- 1) Agree that some dog attacks are fatal, but emphasize that most are from large dogs. Bring proof that most fatal dog attacks are from large dogs (excepting the notoriety of the "pit bull" or whatever breed. (Note: You should NOT specify a specific breed or should use the phrase Pure Breeds. Keep the focus on dogs in general. See "Facts" below for data sources).
- 2) Agree that legislation is helpful.
- 3) Point out that IRRESPONSIBLE owners of dogs are the issue. (Focus on the responsible party - the owner NOT THE DOG!)
- 4) Agree that legislation making owners responsible is the ideal solution.
- 5) State that breed-specific legislation does not protect against attacks and maiming by other animals. By specifying certain breeds one is setting himself up for additional problems.
- 6) Bring your suggestions to them:
 - Education about animal care - (education is key for any and all successful campaigns).
 - Spay-neuter campaigns judiciously contrived and applied reduce the total number of animals
 - Encourage or require obedience classes
 - Follow-up spot checks on large animals or those with a history of being aggressive
 - Institute harsh legislation for recognized irresponsible owners (significant fines of up to \$ 1,000 or 1 month's salary, whichever is the greater amount.

SAY "THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME, PATIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING!"

Step 4) Facts. Honest facts.

Print these out and have them available as handouts. This information can strengthen your speech.

Be honest. Be organized. Be brief. Be helpful. Be respectful and gracious.

As stressed earlier it is very important that you have sufficient copies of your speech. You personally do not give your printed material directly to the council members. Just before you speak, there will be someone seated by the speaker's stand who will distribute your speech to the council members.

Upon arrival and after having signed in, observe the audience carefully for any news media that might be there. Give each newspaper and T.V. reporter a copy of your speech. Introduce yourself and stress that you would like for them to have a copy of your speech so that you can be quoted accurately. If you are representing a group, insure it's identity is known to the media. You can distribute the extra copies of your speech to members of the audience, but be sure to save some copies for after the meeting, at which time additional news media personnel may be identified. Be sure to include your name and address on the speech so that council members and all other interested individuals can contact you about your position.

Please speak clearly, succinctly and distinctly. Your ideas will not be interpreted correctly if the audience and council members can not understand what is being said. Do not get mad or lose your cool. **DO NOT LOSE CONTROL!** It is important to come across intelligently and logically, as someone who has done their homework and who believes fervently in the integrity of his position.

If you don't get the results that you wish for at the council meeting, you can always send a "Letter to the Editor" to all the local papers. Remember that the newspapers have a limited amount of space for such correspondence. State your case briefly and logically. Be short and to the point.

If City Council decides to pass a bad ordinance despite your efforts, then you have the option of campaigning to have the council members defeated at the next election.