5 STEPS TO SPEAKING
AT A PUBLIC HEARING OR TOWN MEETING

Just about every proposal needs a public hearing. 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 and is one of the critical advocacy steps to advance housing on Cape Cod. For housing issues, the Planning Board or the Zoning Board of Appeals usually conducts the hearing.

Following that, the legislative authority – which on Cape Cod is either Town Council or “Town Meeting”, where registered voters vote on proposals. 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 persuade their neighbors by speaking during the debate.

Public speaking can be intimidating, but it’s easier if you have a road-map. Here’s your 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.

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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 accessory dwellings easier to build (issue) because we need more 1-2 bedroom 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 accessory dwelling units may benefit young people looking for housing, but seniors will also benefit by having an additional revenue stream and 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