



Heal the Bay

POWER OF THE PULPIT: How to Speak Effectively at Public Meetings

Prepared by Matthew King, Communications Director

Know the rules

Before you get to the hearing or meeting, do your research. Be aware of protocol – such as turning in a speakers request card and time constraints. It's usually about two minutes, but time varies.

Always write out comments beforehand

Even if you know the subject you are speaking about well, don't wing it. You can read from a prepared statement if you are more comfortable. If you prefer to speak without notes, at least make a brief outline on a card to keep you on track. Don't ramble.

Speak to your audience

Will the panel relate more to you as a member of the community or as an expert in the topic area. Do they seem more likely to be swayed by emotional testimony or factual analysis?

Get personal

Tell the committee what the personal stakes are for you and your community on a given topic. Even if you focus on economics, make sure you discuss the human aspect of the issue. It's more powerful if you make it clear that you have strong connection to issue, such as stating you are a young mother who takes her kids to the beach so that's why you are worried about ocean pollution.

Be brief and to the point

You probably have many concerns, but you focus on your top 2-3 points. That's all you will have time for and all any panelists will be able to remember or process. Don't overwhelm them with detail.

Practice beforehand

Many people try to wing it and fail miserably. They ramble on, go off topic or get cut off. Make sure you practice and time yourself beforehand. Ask your friends for their honest opinion about your tone and comments.

Provide concrete suggestions

The committee members are not miracle workers. Just don't complain, offer some possible solutions to the problem you are outlining. Explain how community can help.

Visuals or props can be helpful

A picture is worth a thousand words. If you have striking images, objects or important documents make copies and provide them to the committee.

Recap

When your testimony is about to end, make sure you leave enough time to repeat your top point one more time. Leave on a strong closing statement that sums up your concern rather than being cut off. Tell decision-makers specifically what you want them to do.