Once you have collected the data that helps build your case – and have possibly gotten the redevelopment agency to pass a resolution to study food access in your community – you will want to advocate for changes in your community. This will involve talking to the media and to public officials.

This chapter offers general tips for advocating effectively with elected and appointed officials. The first set of suggestions focuses on one-on-one communications, the second on public testimony.1

**Communicating with Your Elected/Appointed Officials and Public Agency Staff**

**In Writing**

- Keep it short and simple. Present your opinion on the single issue at hand, and be brief. State your support/opposition upfront, as many officials simply tally advocacy correspondence without reading it.

- Write your letter as an individual, and preferably on letterhead (organizational or personal).

- Personalize your letter. Let the elected official or public agency staff know how the project will affect you and others in the community.

- Be as specific as you can about the details of the project (the site, if one is identified, and the type of project being proposed). Make sure you have a specific “ask” of the public official.

- Give your opinion in a brief, polite, and concise way. Use a respectful tone in your letter. It’s OK to disagree, but never attack him or her personally.

- Conclude your letter by urging the elected official or public agency staff to take action in support of your position, and thank him or her for taking the time to consider your views. Be sure to provide your name, and include your mailing address and phone number.

- If you are a constituent living in the legislator’s district, be sure to include this fact in your letter. Sometimes you may wish to contact a committee
head or other official who serves outside of your area. Be sure to explain how the issue affects you, and what your concerns are.

**By Telephone**

Phone calls are a great way to let your public officials know right away how you feel about an issue, especially on a time-sensitive issue such as a project under consideration for approval. Generally, you will speak with a staff person, not directly to the official whose office you are contacting.

- Before you call, write out a list of the points you wish to make.
- Call during business hours (Monday through Friday between 9 am and 5 pm).
- Don’t be intimidated. You are not “bothering” your legislator and his or her staff by calling. They receive dozens of calls each day from people like you.
- Identify, if possible, the specific project you are calling about.
- Be polite and brief. Even if the legislator you are contacting is known to disagree with your position, ask that he or she “consider other opinions” on the issue. Thank the person you are talking to for taking the time to hear your opinion.

**In Person**

Meeting with an elected or appointed official is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific project. Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a personal visit.

- Plan your visit carefully. Be clear about what it is you want to achieve and ask of the official.
- Identify potential developers, operators, and private equity investors in advance of the first public hearing to give added credibility to both the plan and the proponents.
- Make an appointment. Contact the appointment secretary or other appointment scheduler. Explain your purpose for meeting when you make your appointment.
- Be punctual and patient. If the official is late, or your meeting is interrupted, be flexible. If the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with a staff member.
- Be prepared. Whenever possible, bring information and materials supporting your position to the meeting. If you have a lot of materials, be sure to provide a one-page executive summary.
Be helpful. Officials want to represent the best interests of their district. Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the community.

Be responsive. Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information in the event the official expresses interest or asks questions. Don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know something. If an official wants information you don’t have or asks something you don’t know, say that you don’t know and then offer to get the information. Be sure to follow through!

If appropriate, offer a tour through the community to show officials what you want them to see. If they accept, repeat all of the above.

Be sure to thank officials for their service to the people. When it is appropriate, remember to ask for a commitment on your issue.

Providing Testimony at Public Hearings

Get to know the environment. If possible, attend at least one hearing of the body you’ll appear before prior to your calendared date. It will reduce your anxiety if you know how meetings are structured.

Bring community members, youth, food stamp recipients, physicians, and other content specialists with you.

Find out how much time you will have to testify. Different bodies provide different amounts of time; the allotted time may vary from one agenda item to the next (state law requires only that everyone providing public comment on a particular item be given the same amount of time.) Find out also how to get onto the speaker list. Some bodies require advance sign-up.

Keep in mind that the allotted amount of time may be different from what you expect, even if you’ve checked. If a meeting is running long, if a lot of people are there to testify on an item, or if an item is seen as non-controversial, the amount of time for testimony may be reduced. Be prepared to adjust.

If you have more material to present than can be presented in the time allotted, consider splitting the presentation up between several people, with each focusing on a topic (e.g., metadata, local data, a personal story). If you want to make sure your presentation happens in the order you feel will be most effective, make sure to put all of the names on the speakers list in order, and explain your intent to the clerk/secretary.
If there is opposition to your item, it may be worthwhile to have one speaker on your side who speaks toward the end of public comment to respond to any issues raised by opponents.

Don’t be repetitious. Nobody wants to sit through a hearing that is longer than it needs to be. If you bring supporters along, you may wish to ask them to stand or raise their hands, but don’t have ten people speak to the same points just because you brought them along. Do acknowledge the participants in your collaborative effort; it shows the strength of your coalition.

Practice your presentation! Make sure you are comfortable with your material and any visual aids you have. Be careful with PowerPoint; you may spend all of your presentation time trying to get a slideshow running that was working just fine half an hour earlier. Low-tech (flip-charts, posterboard) can be just as effective and is less subject to malfunction. If you are uncomfortable with public speaking, try to practice before an audience beforehand.

Provide any written handouts, maps, and such to the members of the body at least a week ahead of time. Some of them will read it in preparation for the hearing, but if you hand them the materials as you begin speaking, none of them will have time to do so. Bring extra handouts to the hearing in case an official requests another copy.

Many communities broadcast public meetings on local cable. Don’t become flustered by cameras.

Be prepared for a long meeting. Agendas are subject to shuffling. An item that you expect will be heard at a particular time may be heard hours later – or earlier. Hearings can go late into the night. Make sure your calendar is clear; you’ve lined up childcare; and you’ve brought water, snacks, and perhaps knitting or a crossword puzzle.

Be polite. Look the officials in the eye. Speak clearly. Thank them for their time. Address them by their honorific titles and their names (Supervisor Cortez, Commissioner Chang, Councilwoman Washington). When the bell signifies that your time is up, finish your sentence within four or five words, thank the officials, and move away from the podium. If you finish before the bell rings, thank them, ask for their support, and tell them you are available for questions. If none are forthcoming, take your seat.

Publicize your results!

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1 For information about media advocacy around public health issues, see www.bmsg.org.

2 Adapted from www.bayareacouncil.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLRK7MMlqG&q=242058 (last visited 6/15/06).