

Presenting at Public Hearings

Effective Communication on Matters in Planning

Sometimes, planning matters hit at our emotions by proposing changes to the community we love. For some, this might feel personal when going through the planning processes. It can feel challenging and stressful. When trying to communicate in such situations, it's essential that you take time to move from reacting to constructively and effectively responding to the matter.

Effective citizen participation in City processes creates a legacy and trusting relationship between you and the developers/councillors, which can lead to more efficient and better-quality planning applications and communities. This document will help you prepare to be a partner working towards better planning outcomes.

When does it feel personal?

We love where we live, so it's understandable to feel personally invested in the community. Change is also hard for most. It's okay to be uncomfortable, but before you voice your opposition, explore what aspects make you uncomfortable (e.g., added density, shadowing, declining property values, parking, fear of losing neighbours, etc.). From there, you and your committee should ask yourself what aspects of the project make you uncomfortable and which are planning arguments. In the examples given, only "setbacks" are something council can consider when weighing the feedback. Making sound planning arguments will help to remove the emotion from the presentation as using personal feelings will be disregarded and potentially erode your efforts.

What is your role?

As a community association, your role is to reflect the diversity of the people who live, work and play within your geographic boundaries: homeowners, renters, business owners, workers, etc. This is a challenging job, but when you write a letter or appear at a public hearing, you are responsible for ensuring you have done some due diligence. When did you know? Missing the engagement does not discredit the engagement that did happen. Being reflective comes in many forms and is scaled based on the size or impact of a project. If you are speaking on behalf of the community, you must consider all input and balance your response. Go in prepared!

If you are speaking as an individual, be clear that you are there as an individual.

Citizens are the experts on where they live, so if you can offer planning arguments and alternatives to improve the project, you are likely to receive questions from council and thus be more likely to have influence.

Who are the decision makers?

When an item goes to a public hearing, it's ultimately the elected officials (city council) who are the decision makers. It's also important to acknowledge that citizen participation is only "a piece of the whole pie" that City Council considers when making decisions about the City's future. Nevertheless, constructive and informed citizen input is critical to the planning process.

What is a public hearing?

Public hearings are a form of deliberative democracy. They allow citizens to provide input or expand on written submissions with councillors in a public forum. If you bring a physical written letter, be sure to bring copies for the councillors.

Public hearings – using your time:

At public hearings, individuals have a timed 5-minutes to speak. Council has all the background information; you do not have to re-explain the proposal.

It is essential to balance the positives and concerns while being mindful that suggesting improvements or solutions to an application will be the most impactful way to argue for changes. Discuss the experience with the engagement process. Unless based on solid planning arguments, taking a position to halt a project will be seen as disingenuous to the process.

After your five minutes, the councillors may ask you questions – this is where you can and should elaborate.

As an engaged citizen, it is important to be in “SINC” as you contribute to any civic matter, whether in writing or through presenting at a public hearing.

SINC – Succinct, Informative, Neighbourly, Consistent

What are trade-offs?

When talking about local issues, there will always be trade-offs. Trade-offs are compromises between the two parties of residents and developers. Aim and negotiate for better quality applications and planning processes. Using “I” speaker language like: *“I sympathize for...I find empathy with...,”* is an asset when talking about how an individual uses the space. It is an example of how people use the space! Both developers and residents would love win-win scenarios, but unfortunately, not all situations can be “win-win.” What are the priorities for your community that you can prepare when negotiating with developers?

Building a relationship with the developer provides an opportunity to build trust over time. Trust leads to better trade-offs, which results in better development in your community. You can be in a good negotiating position for better win-win scenarios if you know the priorities in your community.

How to prepare for a public hearing

Using good planning arguments can persuade decision makers. So, while you're preparing, think about and make notes on the following:

- What is the context? (Who are you speaking on behalf of? Talk a bit about your community and the context of the area in question.)
- What is good about the project/process to date?
- What was the experience with the engagement process?
- What is the planning argument(s) you are presenting,
 - What are the evidence and logic?
 - What are possible solutions/mitigations/alternatives to address the planning argument?
- What are the next steps or actions you would like council to consider?

Know if the public hearing is a land use amendment/change in lease, license, occupation (LOC) or a development permit (DP) hearing. City council will only take certain feedback based on the type of public hearing. (i.e., if you bring DP matters to an LOC hearing, then City Council cannot consider those arguments).

What is "Good" Planning?

Some well-acknowledged principles have been widely accepted as bases for good planning. Good planning will:

- ☐ Protect and promote the health, safety and welfare of the public and the users of new developments.
- ☐ Protect the public interest* when managing growth and development, including consideration of ecological and environmental impacts, culture, heritage and community impacts of new developments.
- ☐ Evaluate the physical and use impacts of a proposal while attempting to minimize the negative impacts and maximize the positive impacts.
- ☐ Encourage public participation in planning decisions, inform the public of proposals that would affect them, and solicit and consider their opinions and recommendations.
- ☐ Create and maintain sustainable, environmentally attractive, and livable communities that maximize the infrastructure.
- ☐ The City of Calgary implements the rules and policies and provides the technical review while input from affected parties is considered as they relate to Good Planning Practices.

**Public interest: the common good or welfare of the general public.*

What are “good” planning arguments – land use argument?

Land use changes or amendments follow the Land Use Bylaw (LUB). The “appropriateness” argument of a land use change is great to acknowledge! But City Council has the right to change the policy with a majority vote when deemed appropriate for the greater public interest. For a more effective approach, identify specific parts of the Land Use Bylaw and the proposal that would negatively or positively affect the greater community.

What specific parts of the Land Use Bylaw can one talk about? Keep in mind that the CPAG staff are mandated to discuss city-wide transportation policies, parking and with the applicant of the Land Use Bylaw.

They want to know about the specific issues that are currently being faced within the area (e.g., if there is already a significant parking problem).

- ☐ Will the proposal have an undue adverse impact on the adjacent neighbours and the community?
- ☐ Is the *use* allowed under the proposed designation?
- ☐ Is the purpose of the *use* appropriate to the proposal?
- ☐ Does this proposal achieve the intent and expectations of the approved policies?
- ☐ Does the Height follow the LUB?
- ☐ Does the Massing (Parcel Coverage) follow the LUB? – Of the intention of the building, will it shadow the adjacent landowners?
- ☐ Does the Density follow the LUB?
- ☐ Does the Orientation follow the LUB?
- ☐ Does the Setbacks follow the LUB?
- ☐ Are the Landscaping Requirements following the LUB?
- ☐ Are the Parking Requirements following the LUB?
- ☐ Does the Waste Management follow LUB?

The City would be more influenced and your argument would be stronger when voicing solutions and alternative recommendations to alleviate concerns.

What are “good” planning arguments - development permit arguments?

Development Permits are related to the contextual area of the development proposal.

Arguments that hold more weight are those of design arguments and some planning arguments.

- ☐ What are the layouts/considerations to...?
 - Lighting
 - Parking
 - Landscaping
 - Signs
- ☐ What are the external materials for the building?
- ☐ How does the building appearance look?
- ☐ Does it match well with the community context (i.e., connection to the public realm)?
- ☐ Are there any impacts on the adjacent residents and neighbours?
 - Privacy
 - Light glare
 - Shadowing
 - Retaining mature vegetation
- ☐ Are there policies that were not considered (e.g., Heritage Guidelines)?

Arguments that are not considered by City Council:

- ✗ The characteristics of people who may be using the proposed development (e.g., renter or occupied)
- ✗ The economic benefits or losses (e.g., tax revenue to The City or loss of revenue to existing businesses, potential change to individual property value)