



TESTIFY!

Tell your government what you think



**SAMPLE PUBLIC
COMMENT
INSIDE**

January 2018



by Bronwyn Mauldin

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Testifiers:

Page 4 photo by Lonnie Webster at the High Country Press

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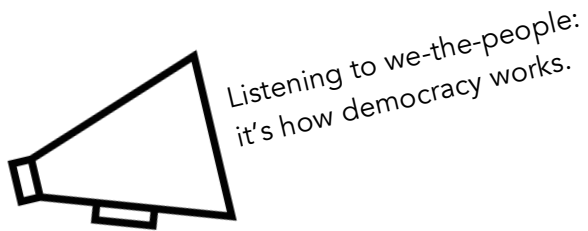
Page 11 photo by Mose Buchele at Statelmpact Texas

Bronwyn Mauldin is a novelist and a long-time political activist. She has a master's degree in public administration and has sat on both sides of the testimony table. She believes everyone should speak at a public hearing at least once in their lifetime.

In a democracy, when government bodies set out to pass new laws or make changes to rules or regulations, they give the public an opportunity to say what think about what's been proposed.

If you have an opinion about what they're thinking about doing, whether you support or oppose it...

Testify!



If you have a great idea for something government can do to serve the people of your community and make it a better place to live,

Testify!



A member of the public speaks her mind before the North Carolina State Board of Elections

Where will you testify?

Know your terms

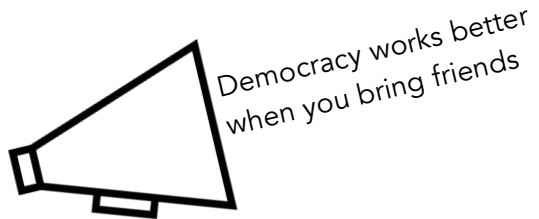
Public meetings of such august bodies as

- **City council**
- **County commission**
- **Board of supervisors**
- **School board**
- **State legislative committee**
- **State or federal regulatory agency**

When they want to change a law or a rule, they're required to discuss their plans in a public meeting. That meeting is called a **hearing**.

They're required by law and tradition to give members of the public an opportunity to say what we think.

The time during the hearing where anyone can speak is usually called **public comment**.



Get ready to testify

Don't wing it

If you want to testify about a law or a rule they're planning to change, find out its exact name and number.

What they are discussing or voting on might be called a

- **Bill**
- **Motion**
- **Resolution**
- **Regulation**
- **Rule**

Get the facts about when and where the hearing takes place, and what time they will hear public comment.

LEGISLATURE OF NEBRASKA
ONE HUNDRED FIFTH LEGISLATURE
FIRST SESSION

LEGISLATIVE BILL 420

Introduced by McCollister, 20; Blood, 3; Chambers, 11; Crawford, 45; Ebke, 32; Howard, 9; Krist, 10; Morfeld, 46; Pansing Brooks, 28; Wishart, 27.

Read first time January 13, 2017

Committee: Business and Labor

A BILL FOR AN ACT relating to labor; to amend section 48-202, Revised Statutes Cumulative Supplement, 2016; to adopt the Fair Chance Hiring Act; to prohibit public and private employers and employment agencies from asking for criminal history as prescribed; to harmonize provisions; and to repeal the original section.

Be it enacted by the people of the State of Nebraska,

Bill number

Committee that voted on it

Find out how long each person is permitted to speak. It's usually only a few minutes per person.

Write out what you want to say in advance to make sure it's clear and gets right to the point.

Practice several times. In front of a friend if you can. Make sure you don't run over your time limit.

Bring other people to testify with you. It will help you feel more confident. Plus, elected officials pay more attention to groups of voters!



Members of the public line up to tell the Las Vegas City Council what they think

Not quite sure what to say? Turn the page for a fill-in-the-blanks sample public comment....

Sample testimony to help you get started

Fill in the blanks:

Hello, my name is _____ (First and last name) _____ and I live in _____ (Your city, zip code, or relevant district) _____. I am here
to urge you to vote _____ (Yes or no) _____ on _____ (Name of the bill, motion or resolution) _____ because _____

(This is where you lay out your opinion of why it's good or bad and who it will hurt or help. If you have facts or statistics, use them here.)

This issue is particularly important to me because I am (or have) _____

(Now make it personal. Tell the story of how this affects you, your family, friends, or other people you care about.)

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Testimony tips

How the pros do it

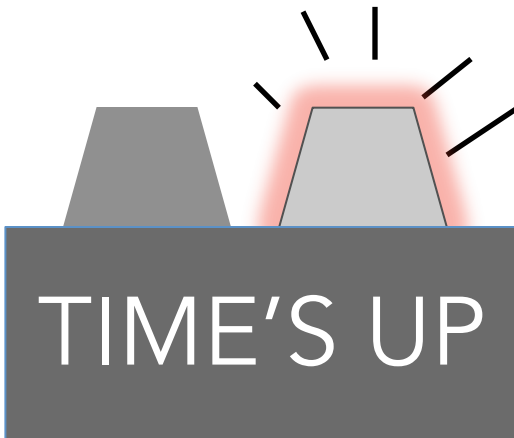
Dress like you respect the process.

Bring a copy of your testimony with you. You don't have to memorize it. Most people read theirs.

When you arrive at the hearing, find out where to sign up to give public comment. It could be a paper form or online system. You might have to stand in line.

Obey the time limits. There will probably be some kind of signal or a buzzer to cut you off.

Stick to **one topic only** in your testimony, even if you have a lot of opinions about a lot of things.



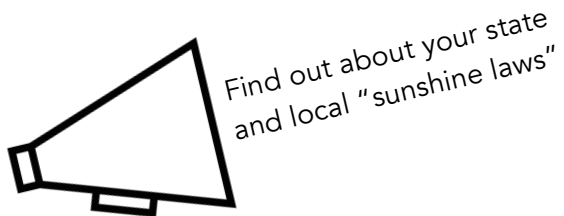
Giving public comment before representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency in Texas



Be civil and polite with both the words you say and how you say them, no matter how angry or frustrated you might be. They can throw you out if you behave badly or break the rules.

Never, ever threaten anyone, not even if you say it nicely. Threats actually make you look weak.

If you want to share an idea you have and there isn't a specific bill, motion, resolution, etc. being discussed, you can go to any public hearing and talk during the time designated for public comment.



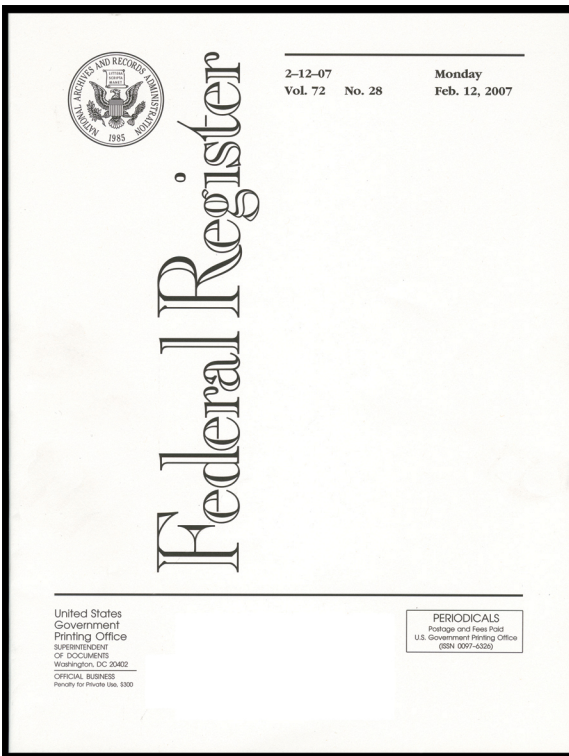
Testify in writing

Other ways to share your thoughts

If the public hearing is too far away for you to testify in person, send your comments to the officials in charge in writing.

In some cases, the government only takes public comment in writing.

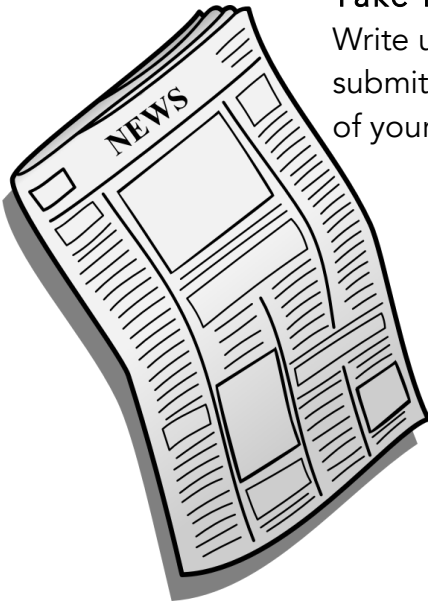
You can comment in writing by mail or email, or sometimes there's an online form to use.



You'll find lots of opportunities to give public comment in the **Federal Register**

When submitting your comments in writing, all the same rules apply:

- Be clear about what you want
- Keep it brief and to the point
- Reference the bill, motion, resolution, regulation, or rule by name and number
- Use respectful language, even if you're angry



Take it to the next level

Write up your testimony and submit it as a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

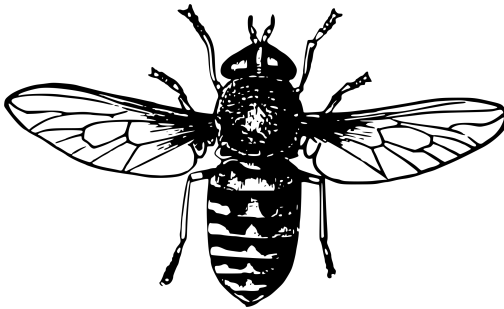
Gadflies

In their natural habitat

For nearly every legislative body or government agency that holds public hearings, there are a few people who show up at every hearing to give public comment. Some of them even comment on every bill, motion, resolution, regulation, and rule change.

Everyone has the right to do this.

However, it's not an effective way to make real change. Elected officials refer to folks who do this as **gadflies** and generally don't take them very seriously.

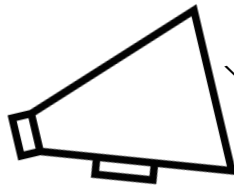


You'll be more powerful if you focus on a few issues that are important to you. Show up when the issue or bill you care about is being discussed, and stick to your issue when you testify.

Testifying is just the beginning!

*Other ways to participate
in the democratic process:*

- ✓ Call or write your elected officials
- ✓ Take a group to meet with an elected official
- ✓ Speak up at a town hall meeting
- ✓ Donate to advocacy organizations
- ✓ Give your time to an advocacy group
- ✓ Participate in a protest
- ✓ Donate to good candidates for public office
- ✓ Doorbell or phone bank for good candidates for office
- ✓ Sign up to work the polls on election day
- ✓ Volunteer for a local government commission or committee
- ✓ Run for public office
- ✓ Vote



You can't win at democracy
if you don't play the game.

#4 in the Democracy Series:

Protest 101

**How to Recognize Voter Suppression
in its *Habitat Naturel***

**How to Change the World:
Pocket Guide**

Collect them all!

Available wherever fine zines are sold.