

Making your voice heard

Do you want your local elected officials to listen to your concerns, opinions, compliments or complaints about ongoing issues? Do you want them to know about the impact of their decisions on local residents? Then I encourage you to provide public testimony at your local city council, county commissioners court, school board or groundwater district.

All governmental entities in Texas have an item on their agenda for the public to provide testimony at their open meetings. For the city of Boerne, the agenda item reads, "Public Comments: This is the opportunity for visitors and guests to address the city council on any issue." You just need to attend the meeting and follow the entity's procedure to sign up for testimony.

As you testify more, you will begin to develop a relationship with the entity and, specifically, your representative. (Make sure to introduce yourself prior to the meeting, if you haven't already met them.) As you provide more and more input, you may even find that representative calling you up for your thoughts.

If you are an expert in a particular area – say, environmental impact, urban planning or water issues – that expert opinion will



help the entity in its decision-making process. These elected officials aren't the "experts." You are.

All public entities must publish and post an agenda and links to supporting materials several days prior to each meeting. Although they schedule occasional "special-called" meetings, most of them hold meetings on a regular calendar basis. (For example, the Boerne City Council meets at 6 p.m. on the second and fourth Tuesdays of each month. See the end of the article for more.) You can find these agendas on their respective websites. (Google the entity name to find a link to the website and look for the tab for "agendas.")

Your testimony has even more impact if it's relevant to an item on the agenda. Discussions on new commercial or residential construction always draw a crowd of testifiers who want to share their opinions, positive or negative, on the new development. But you can testify on any topic you wish. The "meat" of any agenda item

is in the "supporting materials," so make sure to review these (if available) before preparing your testimony.

Generally speaking, public testimony happens toward the beginning of the meeting. (Although lately, Judge Darrel Lux at the Kendall County Commissioners Court have been allowing testimony on a later agenda item at the time that item is presented.) You don't have to stay for the entire meeting.

To prepare, find the website of your desired entity to learn its meeting schedule. Review the agenda and any associated attachments. Before the meeting begins, sign up to provide testimony. (Every entity has a slightly different way to sign up.)

At the beginning of your testimony, identify yourself and where you live. I find it helpful to write out my testimony in advance. If you do so, don't keep your head down and just read it – make eye contact and engage the members of the council or court. If you're not comfortable with public speaking, practicing your testimony a few times can help.

Keep your testimony succinct and get right to the point. Testimony is usually limited to three minutes, so you need to make your point quickly. Make sure you

express your concerns and how the entity can address those concerns. Consider posting your testimony after the meeting to a public forum.

Anyone can testify at any public meeting. Members of the board/court/commission are more likely, though, to heed local residents or their own constituents. After all, that's who votes for them.

Remember that these meetings are public. You will be filmed, live-streamed, and/or audio recorded, and you must give your name.

Local entities include: Boerne City Council (second/fourth Tuesdays, 6 p.m.); Boerne Planning and Zoning Commission (first Mondays, 6 p.m.); Boerne Historic Landmark Commission (first Tuesdays, 5:30 p.m.); Fair Oaks Ranch City Council (first/third Thursdays, 6:30 p.m.); Kendall County Commissioners Court (second/fourth Mondays, 9 a.m.); Cow Creek Groundwater Conservation District (second Mondays, 6 p.m.); Boerne ISD (third Mondays, 6:30 p.m.); Comfort ISD (second Mondays, 6 p.m.)

To learn more about how to get involved in your local community, visit www.kcdems.us

Laura Bray is the chairperson of the Kendall County Democratic Party.