

On a Local Level

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City, village, or town governments make many of the decisions that affect you most directly. Learning how to get involved in making these decisions, though, can be difficult. The following four suggestions can help you make a difference.

- 1) **Learn the issues.** Many of your daily political complaints are the stewardship of the city government. Potholes, zoning, local job options, even things as simple as what color local businesses can be painted are under the jurisdiction of local governments. You probably are already familiar with the city government issues most important to you. But just because a local issue is one you care about, does not mean the local government does. If you are interested in getting involved, and do not already have issues that concern you, learn what's going on. Ask yourself how you want the city to develop over the next several years, or read the local section of the newspaper. If there is a way you want to make a difference, or if you are still looking for issues that interest you, attend a city council meeting.
- 2) **Attend city council meetings.** Most local governments have a council that meets regularly to make decisions. Find when the meeting is held. This information can be found on your city website or at city hall. At city council meetings, you will be able to learn about what issues the city government is currently concerned about. You will also meet like-minded people who want to make a difference in the community. By saying hello and asking questions, you may find there are issues others are passionate about, you find interesting as well. If you have an interest in speaking up at a future city council meeting, pay attention to the personality of the council members. To whom do they respond positively? What types of arguments are those people making? How do they present themselves? If you are ready to make your voice heard, the next step is to speak up at a city council meeting.
- 3) **Speak up.** There are two main reasons to speak up at a city council meeting. The first is if an issue is coming before the city council that you find important, and you

have an opinion that you feel they should consider. Pay attention to the upcoming agendas, and notices in the paper for special sessions devoted to a single issue. Come prepared, often times many people will speak on these issues. You want to sound reasonable and persuasive. The second reason to speak up is if the city council is not even considering an issue you think is important. Many city councils have time dedicated for anyone to speak briefly about any issue. Use this time to present the issue. Even if they do not immediately take action, those who can fix the problem are now thinking about it. In either of these situations, use the information you gathered about the city council members to tailor your remarks to them. If there is an issue of more substance that you wish to discuss, or if your city council does not have an opportunity for open speaking, you will need to get on the agenda.



- 4) **Get on the agenda.** Each city government operates differently, so there is no single way to get on the agenda. The most reliable approach, then, is to ask. When you attend city council meetings, look for who is taking notes or reading the minutes from the last meeting. Most likely, this is the city clerk. After the meeting, approach this person, they should be able to tell you how to get on the agenda.

Attending and speaking up at city council meetings may open up additional opportunities to make a difference in your city. Many cities have citizen councils to provide feedback. You may even get the bug to seek political office yourself. Regardless of the level of participation you want, knowing more about getting involved in local government can help you make a real visible difference.

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