

## STRATEGIES FOR WORKING THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS, v3.0

### 1. Fight to get your issues on public agendas.

*Nothing is more important in the public policy process than grasping the importance of this statement!* Agenda-based meetings are the vehicles through which local governments deliberate, move, approve, and enact policies.

Local government staffs produce agendas for public forums. If your issues are not dealt with effectively on the agenda, your concerns will be relegated to a usually ineffectual question and answer period—and often forgotten as soon as the meeting is over. If your concerns are not dealt with effectively on the public forum agendas, it is unlikely that they will be dealt with effectively by the legislative body during the approval process.

Local government councils and boards deliberate, revise, and enact public policy at meetings defined by formal agendas. It is possible to stop or cause reconsideration of proposed policies by public testimony alone, but it doesn't happen very often. The inertia of staff advocacy and general public indifference usually combine to smother last minute objections.

Fighting for discussion of your vital issues on *every* appropriate agenda is a battle worth engaging! Getting your issues on agendas won't guarantee the outcome you desire, but failing to get them on agendas will almost certainly guarantee they will have little or no influence on the deliberation and approval process.

### 2. Take and keep the initiative.

Battles can be won by a strong defense, but no war has ever been won by defense alone.

### 3. Prioritize your issues.

Everything you believe in is important, but your issues are never of equal importance. If you insist on pursuing your issues as if they were of equal importance you are, in effect, saying, "My way or the highway." You can count on being directed to the highway. You need to be constantly recalculating the tradeoffs you are willing to make in order to get as much as you can from the process—always with a long-term view.

### 4. Conditions and questions are usually more effective than direct opposition.

The "just say no" approach makes you vulnerable to the "obstructionist" label, which can prejudice the process strongly against anything you have to say.

For most policies, there is some combination of modifications that would make the proposed course of action acceptable, if not desirable. The preferred approach in these cases is to offer support conditioned on realistic modifications. Coincidentally and alternatively, there may be valid, taxing questions that should be answered before the process moves forward. Press these hard, but always in the spirit of reaching mutually acceptable accommodation. You can't be an obstructionist when you support the process and simply pursue a broader based solution. (Of course, nothing can stop someone from making the accusation.)

The time may come when "just say no" is the only principled approach. When it is, use it, but understand that it is probably the first step toward litigation or capitulation.

## **5. Keep your eye on the prize.**

Never lose contact with what it would take for you to concur and be sure that no meeting or communication ends without an explicit reference to those factors.

## **6. Let no unsuccessful meeting or unacceptable statement go unanswered.**

The “last word” is the most likely to endure as the historical truth. Don’t let “them” have it.

## **7. Reserve leverage for must-win issues.**

The system can become insensitive to the over-use of leverage, be it a physical demonstration of public support or bringing the pressure of higher authority into the process.

Public demonstrations are very hard to generate and broad public mail or email is only slightly less so. The general public is jaded about the value of its input into the policy process and taking time to participate in a public demonstration can result in lost income. To get any meaningful public effort you need to show a strong cause and effect relationship to the public’s perceived needs. If you waste that energy when a critical issue is not at stake, it won’t be there when you really need it.

Bringing pressure from higher authority, e.g. councilmembers, county supervisors, or state/federal legislators, can be an effective tool, but they are mostly unwilling to try to direct staff action on specific issues. What you can hope for though is that they will ask staff to make this “problem” or this “irritant” go away. If they do, you have leverage. Staff does not want to fail in responding to the legislator’s request. They will be more amenable to change than before the call took place, but they will be irritated that you brought the pressure to bear on them. This tactic too must be used sparingly. Over-use will lead to deaf ears.

## **8. Numbers count; public policy is a marketplace of competing interests.**

The public policy process is not a marketplace of ideas; it is a marketplace of competing interests. As brilliant as any idea might be, if you are the lone proponent and you are up against a coalition of opposition, your idea will almost certainly die. The more people and interests you can get to express support of your issues the greater your possibility of success. The expansion of your vocal support base is more valuable than refinement of your arguments. To the extent possible, formulate your arguments in terms that will build alliances.

## **9. When you’re winning, stop talking.**

Once the opposition has conceded a point, do not provide additional justification. You have nothing to gain. Additional explanation only runs the risk of opening the door to additional counter-arguments. Savor your win and move on quickly to the next issue or closure.

## **10. Don’t make opponents humiliate themselves to gain your agreement.**

Press hard for the policies you feel are important, but do not expect anyone to ever explicitly admit they were wrong in any aspect of the process. Some people will back whatever ridiculous position they must in order to maintain their own image of self-respect.

**Leave your ego at the door. The policy succeeds or fails; not the participants.  
If the policy succeeds, all the participants win; if the policy fails, all the participants lose.**

**IT’S A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT**